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I am a Black Woman--and Beautiful!
African American Women in Alice Walker's Short Stories

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I declare that I have worked on this thesis independently, using only the primary and secondary sources listed in the bibliography.
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INTRODUCTION

In the 1970s, flourishing era of African American female writing began. Hazel Carby describes this explosion of women's writing on the American literary scene as “black women renaissance” (qtd. in Gurel). After long silence, writers such as Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor or Alice Walker offer the insight into the world of African American women.

The works of Alice Walker contain many autobiographical elements. She underwent an illegal abortion, worked in the Civil Rights Movement, she was active in the fight against female genital mutation. She married a white Jewish lawyer and they were the first legally married interracial couple in Mississippi. Her personal experience markedly influenced her writing. The women in her works are full of passion and love of life despite all the suffering they have to undergo. This love makes them beautiful. That is why I borrowed the famous sentence written by Langston Hughes for the title of my thesis. In the essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” Hughes stresses the beauty of all African Americans when he writes: “I am a Negro—and Beautiful!” Walker invented a new term to describe a beautiful self-confident black woman – a womanist. She explains the difference between feminism and her new word:

I don't choose womanism because it is 'better' than feminism […] Since womanism means black feminism, this would be a non-sensical distinction. I choose it because I prefer the sound, the feel, the fit of it; because I cherish the spirit of the women […] the word calls to mind, and because I share the old ethnic-American habit of offering society a new word when the old word it is using fails to describe behavior and change that only a new word can help it more fully see. (qtd. in “What Is Feminism? What Is Womanism”)

Regardless” (qtd. in “What Is Feminism? What Is Womanism”) A womanist can appreciate herself. She is able to fight for better life and to enjoy beauty of life. It is a woman who is able to love the world around her.

Walker elaborate the theme of a woman's search for her personal beauty in many of her works. My thesis focuses on the African American female characters in the short stories of Alice Walker, especially in You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down (1982) and the Way Forward Is with a Broken Heart (2000). African American women have a very difficult status within American society. They suffer from double-oppression; they are black people and women within a white and male supremacist society. The female characters in these stories experience development in the field of their self-cognition and self-understanding, which is crucial for their ability to accept themselves and acquire self-confidence. I want to look at this development from two perspectives. the first one is the importance of reconciliation with their past full of humiliation and of gaining positive relationship with their own body. The second perspective is the effort of African American women to find their personal beauty though they live in a society in which whiteness is considered to be the finest.

The result of African American women's endeavor to know themselves is a positive attitude toward their womanhood and their blackness, that means their roots, culture and past. African American women often struggle between the feeling of companionship with white women and companionship with black people. These women are often forced by circumstances to prefer one or another. This problem is reflected in the relationship between black and white women. On the one hand, they feel mutual closeness because of their common enemy – the patriarchal society. On the other hand, there are tensions between them caused by the inequality of black and white women. I will demonstrate African American women's inner fight between their blackness and womanhood on the theme of interracial rape. The raping of white women by black males is a part of black men's effort to humiliate the white race and in this way threaten its supremacist status within American society. African
American women see this injustice and feel disgust because of the violation of white women's bodies but they also realize that revealing this phenomenon could harm all, also innocent, black males and so all black people.

This thesis is the insight into the world of many African American women in Walker's stories. Some of them are terrified by their past, some experience gender and racial discrimination or they are trapped between the desire to help women and desire to improve the status of black people. Some of these women have to cope with men's cruelty, some have to face various forms of humiliation but all of these women have one thing in common. They finally realize their beauty and find the courage to fight for their right to be treated like beautiful people.

Apart from Alice Walker's collections, I used many secondary sources which provided me with useful information about the historical and social context of the Walker's short stories.

2. I AM BLACK

2.1. Reconciliation with the Past

Alice Walker's female characters often have problems with the acceptance of their own body. They are not able to perceive its beauty. For many women, their body is the reminder of the suffering and humiliating during the slavery. Their womanhood and their sexual attractiveness was the reason of innumerable rapes. Descendants of enslaved women often feel the shame and pain of their mothers and grandmothers. These women are incapable of love toward their bodies, which is a great obstacle on their way toward self-acceptance and self-realization. This chapter deals with the process of reconciliation of black female characters with their bodies and sexuality. The first step on their way to self-respect is
a necessary look to the past, revealing all painful pictures hidden in the subconscious of these women and their effort to accept them, become reconciled with them.

During slavery, the wholeness of a black woman was broken. Her identity was often limited only to her body as the means of achieving the white master's pleasure and satisfaction of his sexual desires and the body used to multiple slaves and the master's property. Browne-Marshall writes in her article: “the Black female, woman or child, was forced into sexual relationship for the White slave master's pleasure and profit.” A black woman was not only forced to offer her body to her white master whenever he desired, but also to have sexual relationship with slaves in order to become pregnant and in this way multiply slaves and the property of a master, whom Browne-Marshall calls “a breeder of slaves.”

Alice Walker's short stories deal a lot with the physical and mental suffering of enslaved women resulting from this sexual abuse. In “Uncle Loaf and Auntie Putt-Putt,” Auntie is telling the story of a little black girl, her grandmother, raped by her white master who “had raised her for it”, raised her for being raped (The Way Forward 113). The woman is being persuaded from her childhood that the main reason of her existence is to satisfy her master. While trying to defend herself during the rape, the girl hears the master's words: “Act natural, act like it's real good” (113). The man forces her to believe that being raped and doing what she is asked to do is natural, is her obligation. Her body is his property and he can do anything he wants with it. It is her duty to obey the master's orders “and she would have to try to do it, or he would beat her”(113). The girl has to forget about her feelings and desires to avoid punishment, to avoid beating. She is forced to learn how to behave 'properly'. She has to suppress her soul for so long that she finally loses it. She has adopted the role of a slave, of a slave who serves and ignores her own desires. She “never knew how to act outside of her 'place' as a slave”(114). The status of a slave is the only status she knows and it was problematical for her to behave differently.

The women's children, conceived during the acts of rape, are reminders of her
humiliation. Auntie explains her grandmother's inability to love her children: “You had a feeling of her thinking she'd somehow gave birth to snakes. Every time I look at them, she would say, I hear him say: Lay down. Spread. Suck on my tongue. I will tell any woman old enough to know what I say, that I have spent years of my precious life, gagging” (115). Feeling love towards these children is impossible for her. Looking into their face means refreshing her memories full of terror and pain. They are the proof of the white man's cruelty and make it impossible for the raped woman to forget.

Auntie's grandmother cannot get rid of fear of men, her memories of rape, of her hatred and despair caused by the multiple violation of her womanhood. the pain is deep inside her and she feels bitterness and horror at every moment she feels a man's body. Sex does not mean an expression of affection to her. It is associated with the cruelty of men, not with their gentleness and endearment. Her body was abused so many times that she can only hardly use it to express love or to accept physical manifestation of love from a man. Her body, her body and a man's body, was the reason of her suffering. This pain, the feeling of humiliation is not only humiliation of the raped woman but also the pain and humiliation of her daughters and granddaughters. The mother of Auntie Putt-Putt did not have a personal experience with rape and despite this she is incapable of making love with her husband with pleasure. Auntie describes her mother's fear of men:

When my mother was nearly thirty she married my papa. But she had inherited that standoffish quality from her mother, who thought laying down with a man was worse than lying under the wheels of a cart. I don't think, she ever would have gone to bed at night if Papa hadn't come to her, taken her by the arm, and dragged her off. She dreaded going to bad and wouldn't go, until forced, thought she'd married Papa of her own free will and seemed to really care for him in her own cool, don't touch me right now way. (115)

This woman is able to love her husband with her mind but not with her body which is
associated with humiliation. Despite the fact she was not abused personally, she can feel terror, pain and anger of her mother. Deborah Horvitz discusses the problem of transmission of humiliation of enslaved women from generation to generation: “Representing the fact that the reverberations and sequelae of white men's rape of black women during slavery and into the post-bellum era remains traumatic for African American women, even writers who are separated from slavery by many generations”(5). There is a connection between the feelings of women who were abused during the slavery and their descendants who can feel the shame and anger of their mothers and grandmothers. This painful heritage is difficult to get rid of.

Also Auntie Putt-Putt understands sexuality as a man's weapon that limits her freedom, he can use it to humiliate her and to show his superiority. It is a field where she does not know how to defend herself, where she feels uncertain and vulnerable. Auntie Putt-Putt loves her husband but still feels discomfort and fear of his manhood, his potential sexual desire, which could harm her. His passivity, after he has grown old, means freedom for her. Her fear of him is dribbling out with his decreasing physical power: “Sitting at his ease was how she wanted him. His sitting there, daring to do nothing, was what assured her a sense of freedom” (126). Neither Auntie Putt-Putt is able to overcome her hatred and fear of physical contact with a man, to find her way back to her womanhood, to reconcile with her female body and live in harmony with it. She prefers to keep distance from her husband until her old age.

Auntie Putt-Putt is telling the stories of her ancestors being raped to Little and Big Sister who are inevitably influenced by them. Little sister has always tried to escape from the influence of her aunt's memories but she, as many women in her family, considers sex to be in “a place near the end of her needs - the influence of Auntie Putt-Putt stories?” (117). Even after finding a lover and despite her capability of loving him both mentally and physically, the question of sex is very delicate for Little Sister. Instead of staying with her after making love with her, her lover is leaving and she feels as if she has “been robbed”
She offered him both, her body and her heart and got only body from her lover. She feels robbed because taking her body without giving her love is also a kind of rape.

Both Little Sister and Big Sister have the stories of their aunt in their minds. The history and memories of this black woman stay in their hearts and have a big impact on their understanding of themselves. Big Sister decides one morning to go and find Uncle Loaf's and Auntie Putt-Putt's house. She believes that seeing this place could help her: “I will be liberated somehow from the sad stories Auntie Putt-Putt used to tell. If I revisit the place where my unconscious was trained to fixate on the dark, I will become well” (118). It is an important step toward her freedom from the mental imprisonment inherited from her female ancestors. Physical imprisonment of enslaved women had turned into the mental imprisonment of their female descendants. They have to return to their past which is not an easy task, requires courage and can be painful.

Is is exactly what Little Sister feels: “a familiar terror of the past. She could never return to the past and survive. She knew that. To be a nineteenth-century black woman; to be an eighteen-century one. How they stood it? To be a slave. a slave, whose every move was planned by someone else. Not to love where you wanted, who you wanted” (125). This terror of her past, of the pain of enslaved women is deep inside Little Sister and scares her. She does not believe she can relieve of its consequences. Scrutinizing it just deepens the pain. She tries to persuade Big Sister about the inefficiency of their journey: “It is impossible, this effort to go back and be released from the past. Useless. Let's go back, before the rattlesnakes smells us” (120). Little Sister is afraid of all the dangers which can threaten their journey and considers their effort not worth of taking risks. Her lack of interest and unhelpfulness cause a feeling of anger in Big Sister. She needs Little Sister's assistance and support, she “cannot go it alone, cannot lead” (120). Searching for her roots means searching for her own identity. Big Sister needs to feel that she is not alone in this fight. Finally, they find Uncle Loaf's house, the symbol of their past, and are “jubilant with success” (126). The focus on the bodies
of the two sisters at the end of the story is not accidental. They feel freed from the sad stories of their aunt and their bodies are not enemies any more.

2.2. Pride in Blackness

The female characters in Walker's stories reach self-confidence through accepting their past. There is a close connection between their physical beauty and the pride in their roots and culture. The beauty of a black woman without her cultural background would be impossible and meaningless.

Saran in “a Sudden Trip Home in Spring,” is considered to be very attractive and debonair by her white friends. She can hear a lot of remarks about her prettiness: “Look at her [...] isn't she beautiful? Such eyes, and hair, and skin [...] so graceful [...] like a proud gazelle” (You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down 125). These compliments have no value for Sara and she does not take them seriously. She realizes that this admiration of her is only the result of her special status - being the only black girl in the white community, which gives her the air of exoticism and mystique. She is attractive because she is different. She knows that in Georgia “she would be just another ordinarily colored girl” (127). The white girls can perceive Sara's charm and glamour but do not understand its source and do not feel the necessity to search for it. Sara understands the notion of beauty differently from her friends. For her, the source of personal charm is crucial. It is the past, the roots and culture of a person. She believes that nobody can see or understand her real beauty without the knowledge of her background: “How could they ever know her if they were not allowed to know Wright, she wondered. She was interesting, 'beautiful', only because they had no idea what made her, charming only because they had no idea from where she came” (130). African American culture is not taught at schools and it is difficult for white girls to acquire the knowledge necessary for understanding Sara better. They know nothing about one
of the most famous African American writer Richard Wright who represents whole African American culture in this story. Not knowing his work, not knowing the world Sara comes from, her friends can never understand her, see her as she really is. They cannot see what she considers to be worth of admiring in the first place. It is the pride and dignity of her people, their unbreakability, their resistance to the repeated cruelty in the white supremacist society and their willingness and energy to fight. It is exactly what Sarah sees in her grandfather's face and realizes that this is the beauty which really matters and has high value. The story ends with Sara's words: “I shall soon know how to make my grandpa up in stone” (137). She wants to eternalize that beauty of the pride in being black.

In Walker's later work, *the Way Forward is with a Broken Heart*, there is implied a woman's need of explicit expression of her pride in being African-American, pride in the culture she comes from. Tatala in “To My Young Husband” wants to demonstrate her inseparability from her background by wearing African dresses. She remembers the summer when she met her husband: “I think of the tiny, sexy dresses I wore. Dresses that said 'Africa' in a seductive whisper” (18). Afro-American women had to suppress their own self for a long time and after getting freedom they can finally show who they really are. Tatala perceives it similarly: “Everything that was historically repressed in me has hungered to be expressed, to be recognized, to be known” (26). This woman also has Native American ancestors. Her grandmother was a Cherokee. She writes in a letter to her former husband: “Our Child has never known her mother without arrowheads, without Native American jewelry, without photographs of Native Americans everywhere one could be placed” (36). Tatala describes herself as “an African-AmerIndian woman with a Native American in her soul” and highlight the necessity of her understanding of her “tri-racial self”, its acceptance later changed into the pride in her roots (36). This woman realizes the importance of explicitly expressed love toward her background. This love makes her beautiful.
3. I AM BLACK IN THE WHITE WORLD

3.1. White is Beautiful

The full humanity of African Americans has often been in doubt. Various theories about beastliness and innate subordination of blacks were used as justification of slavery. In his work, *Slavery not Forbidden by Scripture* published in 1773, Richard Nisbet argues that black people are “much inferior race of men to the whites in every respect” (qtd. in Wesley 543). Thomas Jefferson’s *Note’s on Virginia* deals with the question of black’s intellectual subordination. Jefferson claims that “in imagination they are dull, tasteless and anomalous” (qtd. in Wesley 544). Moreover, Africans Americans were often compared to animals. In his article, Wesley mentions an anonymous writer who “considers the Negro as among a ‘genus’ listed as follows: ‘1st Negroes, 2nd Ourang-outang, 3rd Apes, 4th Baboons and 5th Monkeys” (544). These opinions about animal nature of African Americans often served as an apology for severe treatment of slaves by their white masters. Black people were being permanently persuaded about their obligation to obey white people due to their lower status.

African Americans were influenced by the ideas of white people about racial inferiority of blacks, which often resulted in African American's hatred of their color and their desire to become white. William Blake's poem “the Little Black Boy” is a portrayal of an African American boy for whom whiteness is the symbol of perfection:

My mother bore me in the southern wild,
And I am black, but oh my soul is white!
White as an angel is the English child,
But I am black, as if bereaved of light. (qtd. in Gubar 12)

The little boy believes that being white means being valuable. Thanks to their majority and dominance, white people have the power to create the reality where white means good. They
are the 'right-ideas-makers' or ‘right-image makers’, as Carolyn F. Gerald calls them.

The opinion about the ugliness of the black color and the beauty of the white color remains valid also after the Emancipation Proclamation. Whiteness has been associated with beauty and innocence whereas blackness has been considered to express baseness and wickedness. Carolyn F. Gerald writes in her essay that people in the United States understand “white as the symbol of goodness and purity; black as the symbol of evil and impurity”. The idea of white being good and black being evil is deeply rooted in American society and has become a part of everyday life. It is displayed in many cartoons which show black people's desire to get rid of vicious blackness. This theme is discussed in Susan Gubar's work: “Back in the nineteenth century, illustrations of countless European and American soap commercials sold cleanliness and godliness by portraying blacks (often toddlers) attempting a race change by trying to wipe away the dirt and grime of blackness, as did many pictures in children's books” (21). People in the United States are inevitably influenced by the opinions of the society they live in. They are pressured into the belief about black inferiority from their childhood. Even in books for children blacks are shown as funny creatures desiring to acquire whiteness.

During the era of the Harlem Renaissance, a whole group of black artists tried to break the idea of necessity to adopt at least white behavior when it is impossible to have a white color of skin. They tried to demonstrate the beauty of blackness. Langston Hughes writes in his essay “the Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain”: “I am a Negro--and beautiful!” This sentence became a motto of the movement. It was very difficult to win over the inveterate idea in people's minds of black being ugly. bell hooks remarks: “What did it mean to have this period of radical questioning of white supremacy, of black is beautiful, only to witness a few years later the successful mass production by white corporations of hair care products to straighten black hair?” And she continues: “And again to hear reported on national news that little black children prefer playing with white dolls rather than black dolls?” (Talking
It is difficult to destroy the continuous effort of African Americans to approach white perfection and visual appearance and persuade them to find the beauty in themselves as they are.

African American women have to find their value despite the fact that they lack what is considered to be very precious in terms of beauty – the right skin color. A contemporary photographer Carrie Mae Weems demonstrates the self-hatred of black women in her artistic work. Her photograph Mirror Mirror shows an African American woman who, due to the prevailing opinion that black is ugly, does not see her own personal beauty. The woman in the photograph asks: “Mirror, mirror on the wall, who's the finest of them all?” And the response is: snow white you black bitch, and don't you forget it!!!” (Gubar 16). These rough words express a black woman's feelings of disgust about her body and her belief that white is the only color associated with beauty.

3.2. Blackness Plus Femaleness Equals Bottom

African American women have not only the “wrong” color of skin but also the “wrong” gender. They are black females in a white male supremacist society. The status of black men is much better, as Gubar asserts: “whiteness (like maleness) confers power as well as privilege, whereas blackness (like femaleness) conveys subordination as well as dependency” (13). A man has the advantage of being a man in a male dominant America. He at least has the power of masculinity if not the power of the right skin color. He is much nearer to the aim of his way toward equality than a black woman. His struggle is only a half struggle in comparison to the struggle of a woman who needs to fight not only against racial prejudices but also against the inferiority of women. A black man has a better starting point because he can profit from his manhood.

The hatred of blackness and a man's forgetting his color of skin as part of his effort
to acquire a better status in society is a theme discussed in Walker's story “Coming Apart.” The desire of black men to be white has a big impact on the men's attitude toward black women and white women. A lot of men prefer relationships with white women because they are the symbol of success, an “American winning image,” their ticket to a better society (You Can't Keep A Good Woman Down 52). Tracey A. Gardner explains a black man's reasons for loving a white woman: “By loving me she proves that I am worthy of white love. I am loved like a white man. I marry the culture, white beauty, white whiteness. When my restless hands caress those white breasts, they grasp white civilization and dignity and make them mine” (52). A black man can use a white woman to be nearer to whiteness, to the top. She helps him to forget about his blackness associated with suffering. In his autobiography a Man Called White, Walter White writes: “There is magic in a white skin; there is tragedy, loneliness, exile, in a black skin” (qtd. in Gubar 14). When a black man is with a black woman “he is ashamed of how she has been treated and how she has been powerless” (52). The humiliation of a black woman is his humiliation. She is a reminder of his pain during slavery. She has the lowest status in the society with a white man on the top and a black woman at the bottom. The black man does not to be there with her. He tries to break the only connection between him and the shame and humiliation of the past, which is blackness. For men, it is easier to identify themselves with manhood and forget about the color of their skin which is the only obstacle between them and the life of respect and dignity. Blackness is something they try to disregard.

The black man in “Coming Apart” realizes that his wife lives in extremely difficult conditions but he refuses the fact that it is because of her color and associates her only with her sex. With this step he removes himself from the problem of black's inferiority. The narrator writes: “he considers his wife to be still black, whereas he feels himself to have moved to some other plane [...] he is detached himself from his own blackness in attempting to identify black women only by their sex” (48). Because of his blackness, he cannot be more
than white men, but he can be more than women. He likes reading pornographic magazines where women are depicted as beings willing to fulfill every man's desire and men are portrayed in a position to enjoy women's submission. Seeing women playing their inferior role ensures him that he is not the weakest member of the society. Sometimes, white men also use humiliation as a means of retaining their superior position. B. Wells suggests a cause of white men's heartless behavior towards black men as well as white women:

I believe that this obscene, inhuman treatment of Black men by white men, has a direct correlation to white men's increasingly obscene and inhuman treatment of women, particularly white women (because they are greater threat for men than black women) in pornography and real life. White women, working towards their own sexuality, have in a sense become uppity niggers. As the Black man threatens the white man's masculinity and power, so now do women. (51)

After slavery was abolished, the white's superior status was threatened. White people's fear of black men has increased. the law which guaranteed them the place at the top has lost its validity and they have used a means which they still had- lynching. Later, white men have been afraid that women as well can reach their status. They use pornography as a way to humiliate women. Women are portrayed as objects which have an only task – to serve men. Also the man in “Coming Apart” understands sex as the means of degrading white women: “when he is not thinking of fucking white women [...] he is often thinking of ways to humiliate them [...] it is not surprising that he has himself confused fucking them with humiliating them” (51). He assumes that humbling white women can ensure him better position. He can become more than them.

The man in the story does not understand that acceptance of degradation of black women in pornography means acceptance of degradation of black men. There is a big difference between portraying black and white women in pornography. According to the narrator of the story, “the pornography industry's exploitation of the black woman's
body is qualitatively different from that of the white woman [...] where white women are depicted in pornography as 'objects', black women are depicted like animals. Where white women are depicted at least as human bodies, if not being, black women are depicted as shit” (52). The man's hypothesis that his wife is humiliated only because of her womanhood is negated. The main reason for the more degrading portrayal of black women in pornography is their color. It is the color which is also part of him.

3.3. Confronting Stereotypes

Many stereotypes about African American women which exist in the US nation endanger their possibility to reach equality not only between black women and men but also between black and white women. One of many stereotypic opinions is that black women do not want to be free and that their role of serving beings is convenient to them. What the female characters in Walker's stories consider to be even more appalling and alarming is that black women are often those who support these wrong pictures about black feminity. In “Coming Apart” two black singers are singing: “free me from my freedom, chain me to the tree...shoot me with your love” (45). The lyrics of the song cause feelings of shock and depression in the heart of the main character. It seems unbelievable to her that a black woman can sing about her desire to be somebody's prisoner after so many years of suffering due to the absence of freedom.

In “A Letter of the Times, or Should This Sado-Masochism Be Saved?”, the teacher tries to demonstrate during her lessons in a mixed-race class how all the stereotypes about black women's acquiescence to be enslaved in any way are untrue. She writes in a letter to her friend:

I wanted to teach my students what it felt like to be captured and enslaved. I wanted them to be unable, when they left my class, to think of enslaved women as exotic,
picturesque, removed from themselves, deserving of enslavement. I wanted them to repudiate all their racist stereotypes about black women who were enslaved: that they were content, that they somehow 'chose' their servitude, that they did not resist. *(You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down 120)*

The teacher understands that it is essential to show young women that blackness is not associated with the desire to serve and whiteness with the desire to rule.

The relations between black and white women are very complicated and fragile. For white women, black women are a remembrance of whites' cruelty and stir up shame in white women's hearts. For black women, white women are a remembrance of their humiliation in the past. The idea of being enslaved is very distressing for a black woman as well as the idea of being a cruel mistress is for a white woman. The teacher comments on the attitudes of the girls in the class: “Some black women found it extremely difficult to write as captured and enslaved women. They chose to write as mistress or master. Some white women found it nearly impossible to write as mistress or master, and presumptuous to write as enslaved” (120). It is very difficult for the girls to think about their possible status if they had lived in the past. Thinking, writing, and discussing help them to insight into the minds of other women in the class. Step by step, they come to realize that black women want to be free and white women do not want to break that freedom despite all the delusory images the society is full of. These images often make forgetting stereotypes impossible and the effort of people who try to free society of their influence useless.

Most of the girls from the class watched a TV programme about sado-masochism in which two lesbians declared to be a mistress and slave. The white woman played the role of a mistress and the black one who was standing there “smiling and silent” all the time was her slave and, according to her “mistress,” enjoyed serving her. The teacher's reaction reveals disappointment and disgust: “All I had been teaching was subverted by that image [...] because two ignorant women insisted on their right to act out publicly a 'fantasy' that still
strikes terror in black women's hearts. And embarrassment and disgust, at least in the hearts of most of white women in my class” (121). The women in the programme used the freedom of expression without taking the consequences into account. During the era of big racial tensions and efforts to diminish them, they presented themselves in a way which is a nightmare for white as well as for black women. Their revelation was useful for nobody, on the contrary, it was harmful, brought back the picture the society should rather forget, and encouraged friction between blacks and whites. One of the students has a very similar feeling: “I feel abused. I feel my privacy as a black woman has been invaded. Whoever saw that television program can now look at me standing at the corner waiting for a bus and not see me at all, but see instead a slave, a creature who would wear a chain and lock around my neck for a white person - in 1980 - and accept it. Enjoy it” (122). The desire of the black women to be free was impugned by the programme.

To be stereotypical means to judge the whole group according to the behavior of one of its members whose one bad quality is often associated with the whole group. When one black enjoys being enslaved why should the other black not enjoy it as well? The idea of the willingness of black women to be inferior comes to the mind of all the people who heard a black lesbian declaring that it was pleasure for her to be a white's slave. the danger here is that she can be perceived as a representative of all African American women. But the teacher emphasizes that black women do not want to be slaves. They never wanted to be slaves: “We will be ourselves and free, or die in the attempt” (123). And she continues: “I would advise all black and white women agressing against us as 'mistress' and 'slave' to remember” (123). She highlights the responsibility of all women to break the stereotypes and their power to create the new image of women - women who love not only their own freedom but also the freedom of people around them, women who do not want to serve neither want to rule others.
4. RACE VERSUS GENDER

4.1. Black and White Women

Relationships between black and white women are often full of tension because of their different cultural background and their inequality in the past. The story “Blaze” from The Way Forward Is with a Broken Heart reveals the main reason for the complicated relationship between black and white women. The distrust and suspicion in their hearts are the consequence of the influence of their surroundings and upbringing. They are often taught from their childhood that there is a basic difference between their statuses and they cannot escape the impact that the society they are growing in has on them. The Little Sister's mother works in a white people's house and often takes her daughter with her. Little Sister has developed a beautiful friendship with Blaze, the daughter of the proprietor of the house. For both girls it was "a time of mutual trust and happiness. And an unawareness of inequality, only the enjoyment of mutual sweetness” (130). Their different background and race does not matter to them. Their youth, inexperience and lack of knowledge about social rules make their relationship pure. They were not born with prejudices. These are created later due to the impingement of society. One day, Blaze was not Blaze anymore. She became “Miss Blaze” because her parents came to a conclusion that there was a necessity to show explicitly that their daughter is higher on the social scale. It was not Blaze who decided that there must not be equal relationship between her and the black girl. She lives in a society which made this decision for her. Little Sister's confusion changed into anger toward Blaze: “she blocked any feelings except rage and contempt for Blaze” (130). She tried to delete Blaze from her memories and in this way forget the shame she felt. She at least could avoid the situation when she would have to demonstrate her acceptance of subordination by calling Blaze miss. Her mother “because she needed to work, was not able to escape 'Miss' Blaze” (131). Little
Sister is full of disquietude and anger because of her mother's acceptance of her inferior role and she disapproves of her mother's respectful treatment of Blaze. Many white women speak about the mutual love between them and black women:

   [...] white women were talking about their closeness to the black women who had nurtured them. Each time she read such a story, she encountered her rage afresh. Embittered by the possibility, the probability, that their black servants had nurtured them, as one particularly sincere writer wrote 'unconditionally'. It was a love compelled by forced circumstances and forced familiarity [...] (132)

Little Sister can suppose that her mother treats Blaze so well only out of duty, because she has no choice if she does not want to lose her job. However, she fears the possibility that her mother could love Blaze:

   Perhaps she was enraged because she had hoped love between maid and miss was impossible. That was obviously what every little girl whose mother was a maid hoped. For how could you compete with the little girl who had everything, could buy everything, including your mother? And had been buying your mother for centuries.
   [...] The pain was because you felt she loved against her will. Because 'If you can't be with the one you love,' as the song went, 'love the one you're with. (132, 133)

The society she lives in tries to persuade Little Sister that white girls are more beautiful, more clever, and deserve more respect and love. Little Sister is afraid that Blaze can use the power of whiteness to steal her mother's love. Moreover, Little Sister realizes that the situation would be much easier for her mother if she learned to love white people. Being with them every day would be much more bearable if Little Sister's mother had a good relationship with them. the choice to love white people is not a free choice. Little Sister's mother is forced by circumstances. It is the best alternative from the restricted number of possibilities she has.

   After Little Sister has grown up, she works in a white collective. Her situation is much better than that of her mother a few years ago. White women respect her, “assure her they
recognized her the value not only to them, but to the world” (133). However, the feeling of being forced by circumstances to like white women remains.

4.2. Interracial Rape

Black people's relation to whites is very complicated and so is the black women’s relation to white women. Whites have often been members of black civil rights movement and have tried to help blacks to reach equality. On the other hand, lynching and many acts of cruelty support feelings of anger and hatred toward whites among black people and a belief that blacks are more human. In 1963, members of the Ku Klux Klan killed four black girls when they placed a bomb near the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. In “Advancing Luna- and Ida B. Wells” from the collection You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down, the African American woman who is the narrator of the story comments on this event: “I thought black people superior people. Not simply superior to white people, because even without thinking about it much, I assumed almost everyone was superior to them; but to everyone. Only white people, after all, would blow up a Sunday- school class and grin for television over their ‘victory,’ i.e., the death of four small black girls. Any atrocity, at any time, was expected from them” (Walker 88). The woman knows that not all white people deserve her disdain but whiteness is associated with so much cruelty that she can hardly trust any of them.

For a fuller understanding of the narrator, her relationship with Luna, a white woman fighting for black civil rights, is of great importance. Luna is raped by Freddie Pye, her co- worker in the movement. the rape of white women is understood as a revenge of black people upon whites. In his collection of essays Soul on Ice (1968), the Black Panther activist Eldridge Cleaver describes his satisfaction about interracial rape: “Rape was an insurrectionary act. It delighted me that I was defying and trampling upon the white man's law [...] defiling his women – and this point, I believe, was the most satisfying to me [...]”
American writer LeRoi Jones wrote: “Rape the white girls, rape their father” (qtd. in Walker 92). He encourages black men to rape white women because they believe that through the humiliation of white women they humiliate also their fathers and in this way they can achieve victory over whites. According to bell hooks, “men of the dominating group sexually violate the bodies of women who are among the dominated. The intent of this act was to continually remind dominated men of their loss of power; rape was a gesture of symbolic castration” (Yearning 57). Some black men believe that raping white women is a demonstration of their power and of the weakness of white man who are not strong enough to defend their women. White men's inability to intercept raping is the proof that they are not powerful enough to retain their dominant position. The phenomenon of rape as a means of fighting for equality supports the “images of black men as rapists, as dangerous menaces to society” and strengthens the stereotype of black men as creatures only hardly taking control of their sexual appetency (Yearning 61).

The former slave Ida B. Wells who is mentioned in Walker’s stories was born in 1862. She fought for racial equality and spent her life “protecting, and trying to protect, black men accused of raping white women, who were lynched by white mobs, or threatened with it” (Walker 93). The power of white women is too big and blacks are often helpless in their effort to prove their innocence. Onwucheka Jemie describes the helpless situation of innocent blacks: “When a white woman invites you to love, you are doomed. If you accept and it is found out, as it will sooner or later, she will cry rape, and you will be lynched. If you refuse, she will in humiliation and revenge cry rape, and you will be lynched.” Ida B. Wells tries to solve this problem through her writing and public speeches. Thanks to her work the narrator of the story believes that black men are often victims of false accusations: “You made it so clear that the black men accused of rape in the past were innocent victims” (Walker 94). But Luna is the proof of the existence of rape as revenge or act of rebellion among black people.
The African American woman understands that Luna has acquired a special power by being raped by a black man: “her power over my life was exactly the power her word on rape had over the life of black men, over all black men, whether they were guilty or not, and therefore over my whole people” (Walker 95). After the rape, Luna has a reason for fear of black people and her potential opinion that black people are savage creatures would be well-founded. This can be very dangerous because it justifies all the suffering white people cause to innocent blacks. The African American woman feels disgust because of the injustice committed against white women. She is terrified that her own people use the violation of women’s bodies as a means to acquire equality. On the other hand, she declares that the real victims are black women because they are “raped mentally”. They are full of fear which can cause suffering deeper than that of white women: “Who knows what the black woman thinks of rape? Who has asked her? Who cares? Who has even properly acknowledged that she and not the white woman in this story is the most likely victim of rape? Whenever interracial rape is mentioned, a black woman's first thought is to protect the lives of her brothers, her father, her sons, her lover” (Walker 93). The African American woman is trapped between two responsibilities; the responsibility for the improvement of women's position in society and the responsibility for her own black people. Supporting one group can be understood a betrayal from the point of view of the other group. bell hooks discusses the problem of black women's fear that fighting for women's issues can be understood as a betrayal by black males and, vice versa, that too much focus on achieving racial equality can weaken women's fight for their rights:

[...] women who work to resist racism are not supporting feminist movement. Since black liberation struggle is so often framed in terms that affirm and support sexism, it is not surprising that white women are uncertain about whether women's right struggle will be diminished if there is too much focus on resisting racism, or that many black women continue to fear that they will be betraying black men if they support feminist
African American women often assume that they have to prefer their womanhood or their blackness, that they have to choose. According to bell hooks, “black women are often compelled to answer the question - which is more important: feminist movement or black liberation struggle? - women's rights or civil rights? - which are you first: black or female?” (Talking Back 124).

The African American woman in the story also wants to find an answer to this question. It is a very difficult situation for her. She realizes that writing about interracial rape can be very dangerous because the opened revelation of the existence of this phenomenon can be used against her own people. the crime of one person can be associated with the whole group. That is why Luna did not shout during the rape and why she told nobody about it but the African American woman. Luna realizes that her fight for black people's equality could be threatened by accusing one of them of behavior unworthy of a man deserving to have better status. She makes the decision that black civil rights are of greater importance than her right as a woman not to be violated. The African American woman has to make a similar decision. She tries to figure out whether writing the truth will be a treachery of her own race or whether it is her obligation to reveal the truth and fight against the violation of women. Finally, she chooses the truth although it can threaten innocent blacks. She wants to be sincere toward herself. She has to choose between her people and her own soul and she chooses her soul. Frankness is essential for her: “I cannot write contrary to what life reveals to me” (Walker 93). After reading Ida B. Wells' autobiography, she feels remorse: “Please forgive me. I am a writer” (Walker 93). She knows that her writing can destroy the effort of Ida B. Wells to protect innocent black men. She loves her own people, she loves her own race and she realizes that writing about this problem can be a treachery of what she loves because it can harm all black people no matter whether they are innocent or not. But her role of a writer and her love for the truth are more important for her.
5. CONCLUSION

Black female characters in Alice Walker’s short stories often consider themselves not to be good and beautiful enough which holds them back on their way towards happiness. There are two main reasons for their lack of self-confidence, their self-undervaluation and inability to love their body. The first one is the past of the African American people. African American women were often forced to accept the inferior position and fulfill all the commands of their white masters regardless of their own feelings. The constant suppression of their needs and desires resulted in the loss of their identity. The second reason is African American women's existence in a society where being white and being a man means to be privileged. Thanks to their dominance, white people are those who create the reality in which whiteness is associated with all the good qualities whereas blackness is a sign of evil.

African American women are bound by their inferiority complex which does not allow them to think and behave freely. They can get rid of it only if they go through the process of learning who they really are, if they realize their human value and find the beauty of their blackness as well as the beauty of their womanhood. The first necessary step to be done is to overcome the feelings of shame and fear caused by their bad treatment in the past and to realize they did not and do not deserve to be subordinate. The effort to forget the past can have devastating consequences. Pain driven into the subconscious cannot be healed. It remains in women's hearts like a ghost without any concrete form. The only way of winning over this pain is to know it and to know its reasons because when the pain a concrete form it can be more easily overcome. Meeting with the past can be very difficult and requires courage. Little and Big Sister decide to visit old Uncle Loaf's house associated with all the terrifying stories told by Auntie Putt-Putt. This reopening of the memories full of horror can
be very painful but it is inevitable for finding self-respect. It is easier to fight against the pain when it is known. Only after their reconciliation with the past can African American women find the beauty which is contingent on their self-esteem. the pride of their roots, their dignity give Tatala and Sara the real beauty, beauty which comes from inside.

Moreover, African American women have to realize their prettiness despite the fact that according to the beauty criteria in the society they live in, whiteness is the main prerequisite. The crucial thing is to understand that their bodies are not uglier than those of white women. They are just different and this difference makes them unique. This is a very difficult task because of the many stereotypes existing in the white male dominant society. The woman in “Coming Apart” sees that African-American women are depicted as the lowest members of the society both because of their race and gender. She is upset because even black women often support stereotypical opinions about themselves by expressing their willingness to be subordinate. The teacher in “A Letter of the Times, or should This Sado-Masochism Be Saved?” stresses the responsibility of all women for overcoming stereotypes. African-American women’s effort to reach equality can be easily destroyed by impetuous words or deeds which can create the wrong image not only about the speaker but also about the whole group which the speaker comes from; in this case it is the group of African-American women. The teacher adverts to the threat that the society can consider the opinion of one woman to be the opinion of all women and all of them should take this responsibility into account.

African American women can realize their right to be treated equally and find the strength to fight for it only if they overcome the traumatic consequences of the past and if they do not allow white society to persuade them about the inferiority and ugliness of blackness. As Frances S. Foster observes: “Establishing themselves in a historical and social context helps obliterate the sense of inferiority foisted upon Black women through a 400-year American defamation campaign. The Black woman is now revealed as a person with a strong, noble, and beautiful heritage.” African American women can find
self-confidence and become equanimous only if they know who they really are and learn to love their identity of a woman as well as their identity of a black person.

Blackness and femaleness are often in contradiction, which is obvious when studying relationships between black and white women. the friendship between Little Sister and Blaze did not survive because of the different social status of the girls. Little Sister feels uncomfortable in the company of white women. She perceives friction in their relationship caused by their different cultural backgrounds. the relationship of the African-American woman and Luna in “Advancing Luna-and Ida B. Wells” is intricate as well. As a woman she feels solidarity towards Luna but as an African-American she is not able to have affinity for a member of the society which has caused so much suffering to black people.

Alice Walker's African American female characters often find their beauty after the long and painful process of self exploring. Only women with self-confidence can make free decisions as did the woman in “Advancing Luna” when she decided to write about interracial rape despite all the possible negative consequences. Walker often refers to the importance of free expression of one's ideas in writing which is impossible without the courage to reveal everything sincerely. Tatala in “To My Young Husband” meets a writer who calls herself shameless (The Way Forward 39). The writer wants to show everything, including the darkest sides of her personality. Through writing, a woman can learn a lot about herself but she needs to overcome the fear of discovering evil inside her. Shutting the eyes to the cruel truth in order to escape pain is not the right way. the strength of a woman consists in her knowledge of her fortes as well as her weaknesses. bell hooks describes her own experience with writing: “To become a writer I needed to confront that shadow-self, to learn ways to accept and care for that aspect of me as part of a process of healing and recovery [...] In some ways writing has always functioned in a therapeutic manner for me” (Remembered Rapture 11, 13). Walker also believes in the healing power of writing: “I think writing really helps you heal yourself. I think if you write long enough, you will be a healthy person. That
is, if you write what you need to write, as opposed to what will make money, or what will make fame” (qtd. in Bradley). For African American women, writing can be a means of learning to understand confusion inside them; it can be the soul's remedy which helps to remove all the pain from women's hearts.

The healing power of writing is strongly portrayed in Tatala's life. She gets a diary written by a woman whose husband did not allow her to write. Tatala is terrified by the thought that she could be in a similar situation. As she says: “I feel somehow embarrassed, reading Dianne's diary [...] At first, I wouldn't even open it; I was almost afraid. Afraid of what? of seeing the writing self, my own, that might not have become” (46). She knows how important the free expression of one's thoughts is and the idea of not having this possibility scares her. bell hooks stresses the necessity of black women's writing: “No black woman writer in this culture can write “too much.” Indeed, no woman writer can write “too much”. Considering the centuries of silence, the genres of writing that have been virtually the sole terrain of men, more contributions by women writers should be both encouraged and welcomed” (Remembered Rapture 30). According to bell hooks, African-American women have much to offer to their readers. Unlike male writers, they have not had so many opportunities to express their ideas in literature. They can bring new views of life.

I will finish my thesis with the words of Alice Walker: “We see that everything that is truly needed by the world is too large for individuals to give. We find we have only ourselves. Our experience. Our dreams. Our simple art. Our memories of better ways. Our knowledge that the world cannot be healed in the abstract. the healing begins where the wound was made” (the Way Forward 199-200). A black woman, as an individual, has not the power to change the world. She can change only herself. When her inner world, her soul, is everything she has, it is even more important for her to understand what is inside her and to reveal it to the world. the best way of expressing who she is is to show her dreams and what she believes in. Reality often restricts individuals and kills their identity. In dreams,
people have freedom to be anything they desire to be. To know the dreams of women means to know women themselves.

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