

The Contrast between the Public and the Private Good: The Robbing of Feminine Identity and Dignity in Alice Walker's "The Abortion"

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Abstract—The African American feminist author, Alice Walker has been very vocal in demanding equality and rights for women. Her short story "The Abortion" presents a contrast between the public good of the African American community, that is, their general welfare, and the private miseries of the protagonist, Imani who is a member of that community. This paper is inspired by the influential French feminist, Simone de Beauvoir's statement in her book *The Second Sex* that the true public good is what ensures the private good, and seeks to show how the public advancement of the African American community shown in the short story stands in stark contrast to Imani's private indignity and identity crisis as a woman.

Keywords—African American, contrast, good, public, private.

The crisis of the autonomous identity of women and men's negligence of it has been a much discussed issue in the arena of critical thoughts for a long time. Feminists have often pointed out that men have robbed women of their self-identity by making women parasitically dependant on them. In the contemporary world, antifeminists often claim that the issue with women's identity or liberation is long gone and they have at their disposal a long list of proofs of the advancement of women, such as women's education, their joining various kinds of job outdoors and so on. These claims often raise the question whether women's liberation and autonomy are now a reality. Alice Walker's short story "The Abortion" sheds light on this issue drawing a parallel between women's condition in the public and the private spaces. Walker's analogy between the public and the private life of the protagonist, Imani shows that the public good does not necessarily mean the private good. The noted feminist of the twentieth century, Simone de Beauvoir, in her seminal book *The Second Sex*, also discusses the issue:

If we survey some of the works on woman, we note that one of the points of view most frequently adopted is that of the public good, the general interest; and one always means by this the benefit of

society as one wishes it to be maintained or established. For our part, we hold that *the only public good is that which assures the private good of the citizens...* (Beauvoir 1953, 26, italics mine).

So, even after the public, that is to say, the (so called) general good of women is ensured, her private good which Beauvoir deems to be the real good may still be illusive. Antifeminists often tend to claim that women's public good necessarily ensures their private good and as women have entered the phase of the public good the issue of her identity and dignity can now therefore be disposed of. Moreover, men show the tendency to assume a kind of knowledge of women which keeps them from the deep consideration of the condition of women. This assumption is based on another assumption—that of superiority. A superior being posits that it has all the knowledge about the inferior one and investigation into the mode of existence of the inferior being is therefore unnecessary.

The glaring example of the public good as opposed to private deprivation in "The Abortion" has been presented through the dichotomy between the eulogy for the African American girl, Holly Monroe at her memorial and Imani's personal distress. Holly Monroe was shot dead on her way

home from school. That such memorials are held on regular basis and eulogies are showered on Holly Monroe shows that there are noticeable attempts to ensure the public good for the African American community. But, on the contrary, throughout the short story Imani's private miseries—her loneliness, helplessness and deprivation—are evident and voiceless.

Further proof of the public good is to be found in the political success of the African American Mayor Carswell, the first coloured mayor who wins the "biracial support" (Walker 1985, 76) of his people. Imani's husband, Clarence is the legal advisor of Carswell and a devoted supporter of his, and he feels great pride in Carswell's success: "It was so important that I helped the mayor" (Walker 1985, 76). Both the men have achieved their success and, as Carswell represents the entire community, his success should include Imani also. But Imani's personal relationship with both the men is cold and one of indignity. When Mayor Carswell visits Clarence and Imani at their house, his attitude towards Imani is very derogatory—he does not look at her directly when she makes a comment or asks something, and even refuses to sit with her at the dinner table: "He assumed that as a woman she should not be interested in, or even understand, politics" (Walker 1985, 66) even though Imani understands "every shade and variation of politics" (Walker 1985, 66). Her knowledge of politics is downright denied by Carswell and even Clarence shows no sign of any objection to it. Mayor Carswell, who is working to give the African American community a better life, discourteously ignores Imani and undermines her intellectual ability. So, even though he is good for the public in general terms, his personal behaviour with Imani is objectionable. He is trying to get the African Americans freed from the fetters of racism while he himself is racist towards Imani. It is to be noted that Carswell himself receives similar treatment from white supremacists: "the mayor was already being called incompetent by local businessmen and the chamber of commerce, and one inferred from television that no black person alive knew what a city charter was" (Walker 1985, 67). It is this stigma that Carswell is working to erase, but at the same time he sees Imani's womanhood as a stigma. The latter stigma, which is deeply set in women's personal relationship with men, seems to be more tenacious than the former which is shown to exist in Carswell's public dealings with the white, because Carswell and his supporters are raising voice against the former while the latter remains unaddressed.

Imani's relationship with her husband is even more pathetic. Clarence is never seen in the short story to be careful of the feelings and emotions of Imani. He seems to have little interest in her. Even though they live under the same roof, Imani seems to live alone. The short story starts with reference to Imani's and Clarence's discussion about Imani's upcoming abortion: "They had discussed it, but *not deeply*" (Walker 1985, 64, italics mine). Clarence does not show the least concern in discussing a serious issue like his wife's abortion. He is, on the contrary, always busy with Mayor Carswell about politics which is associated with the public sphere of life. Imani even goes to New York for the abortion alone and on the morning of her departure he has a working lunch with the mayor and remains busy in conversation with him about "municipal funds, racist cops, and the facilities for teaching at the chaotic, newly integrated schools" (Walker 1985, 66-67). All these are certainly important for the public good but while attending to them he ignores his wife and just "ha[s] the time for the briefest kiss and hug at the airport ramp" (Walker 1985, 67). His role as the husband is greatly overshadowed by his role as the legal advisor to the mayor.

It is surprising that while working with the mayor for the betterment of the African American community, Clarence leaves his wife to tolerate the pangs of her pregnancy and abortion alone. He shows little concern for the physical and emotional challenges which Imani is going through because of the pregnancy and the prospect of an abortion. For example, in the first paragraph of the short story Imani is seen to cry but Clarence offers her no soothing words. And when Imani says to Clarence that she does not know whether she wants the child, he gets impatient. Despite being treated by her husband like this Imani does not hold him in grudge. She convinces herself that "He is the best human being she [has] ever met" (Walker 1985, 65) and she even "hates" herself after quarrelling with her. This may be because Imani has lost the ability to think in her own way and she just thinks about things the way that Clarence does. It means that she has lost her individuality or autonomous identity. This is an example of the identity crisis of women and men's robbing them of their very identity. The narrator also casts an ironic glance on Clarence when she, following Clarence's saying that they have a perfect child (Walker

1985, 65) repeating what Imani has just said, says: “Had she ever dreamed she’d marry someone humble enough to go around thanking the Good Lord? She had not” (Walker 1985, 65). But this same Clarence acts like a good and responsible citizen when he is with Mayor Carswell because he is more concerned about the public good of his community: “But Clarence was dedicated to the mayor, and believed that his success would ultimately mean security and advancement for them all” (Walker 1985,66). But in the context of his own household, words like “security” and “advancement” become ironical. This irony is symbolically reflected in the house in which they live also. Clarence is seen to go “down the hall—hung with bright prints—to the cheerful, spotlessly clean kitchen” (Walker 1985, 65). Such beauty of the house and “the bright yellow [tea] pot” (Walker 1985, 65) stand in stark contrast with the bleak marriage of Clarence and Imani. It is strange that Clarence is unable to understand Imani’s tears and her need for care but he is smart enough to deal with political and administrative issues with Carswell. Not only that, this smartness of him appears when he has to evade dealing with family issues with Imani. For example, again, when Imani says to him that they already have a child while wiping a tear from her eye, he ignores the tear and says with a relief that they already have a perfect child and Imani senses the “subterfuge” (Walker 1985, 65) of Clarence.

There are many evidences of Imani’s loss of self-identity or power to choose for herself in “The Abortion”. She does want the child that she is carrying in her womb but, as she sees her husband is not interested in the child, she reasons: “Another child would kill me” (Walker 1985, 65). Her choice of whether or not to take the child depends on her husband’s intention. It is not consulting her husband but merely deluding herself into believing that his choices are hers too. This is how the feminine world is dictated by the masculine. Women are not free to choose for themselves; they have to accept men’s choices. Imani, as she stays with Clarence tolerating his frigidity, also has to support Carswell because of a similar political reason: “for the present she must believe mayor Carswell, even as he could not believe in her” (Walker 1985, 66). Here again, there is a contrast between the public and the personal.

It is not that Imani has no inclination towards the abortion herself. She does sometimes think in favour of the abortion and reasons logically: “if she had wanted the baby more than she did not want it, she would not have planned to abort it” (Walker 1985, 66). But she also “[wants] him

[Clarence] to want the baby so much he would try to save its life” (Walker 1985, 65). Clarence does not want the baby and so Imani also chooses likewise.

Alice Walker does not present Imani as a woman who is typically highly enthusiastic or emotional about her child. Rather, Imani is “bored” (Walker 1985, 67) with her marriage and she expects the child in her womb to give her a distraction from this fact. Now, it can be understood that, given the way that Clarence treats her, she is naturally bored of her marriage. But she does want Clarence “to take care of her” (Walker 1985, 67), and her desire for Clarence’s “care” has been unequivocally mentioned three times in the short story, which betrays her emotional need which is suppressed because she never asks Clarence for this “care”. As the communication gap between them is clear, it can be inferred that her asking would not have been understood by Clarence. The boredom of Imani means that her position in the family has come to a point of stagnation. She sees no way out of this, while her husband is enthusiastically working with the mayor to ensure a better future for their community, that is, he is contributing to their community’s freedom from the stagnation which they are facing.

“The Abortion” throws light on the past of Imani. Imani’s first abortion had happened before her marriage when she was in college. At the time of the first abortion she is not seen not to ruminate much about it and the narration also uses quite simple language to describe it. As, at that time, she could make easy choices for herself, she felt that life then was not a “façade” and it was “life itself. Period” (Walker 1985, 68). The emphasis here is on an individual’s ability to choose for herself. Certainly Walker does not take any blind and rigid stance in favour of abortion but she, like many other feminists, focuses on individual freedom. She makes it clear in an interview:

The system favors men in the sense that ... they get to control things. ... So they just feel like that’s the way it is..... . But actually a woman has a right as they [men] would have a right. If you made a man pregnant and told him “... you’re pregnant and there’s nothing you can do about it. You’ll have to have whatever it is”. Men would revolt. ... You could have a baby, if you want one. But if you don’t want one, why have one (Nisha, 2019)?

So Walker wants women's opinions to be respected because without the liberty to choose for oneself one loses dignity, and Simone de Beauvoir, stressing the need for liberty of women, also says, "I am interested in the fortunes of the individual as defined not in terms of happiness but in terms of liberty" (Beauvoir 1953, 27). This liberty Beauvoir links with "the private good" which ensures individuality and dignity for women.

When it comes to the public good versus the private good of women, women's position in the society—whether they are free to take their decisions—should be taken into consideration. In "The Abortion", Imani's first abortion was performed without any strain on her psychology. But after her marriage, when she goes for her second abortion seven years after the first one, she bears in mind that "There [are] people who [think] she ha[s] no right to choose herself" (Walker 1985, 70). While her second abortion is being performed, Imani feels that she is just passing along an "assembly line" (Walker 1985, 69) and even though she feels pain because of the failure of anesthesia, the doctor continues with his job because "assembly lines don't stop because the *product* on them has a complaint" (Walker 1985, 69, italics mine). This again shows that Imani is reduced to a "product", that is, robbed of her human identity. One must notice that her second abortion is legal while the first one was illegal and the passing of a new law is associated with the public good, which has failed to ensure the private good for Imani—freedom from people's bullying opinion. To state it more clearly, even though the law legalizes abortion, the male-dominated society does not. This leads one to Beauvoir's assertion that "Even when [women's] rights are legally recognized in the abstract, longstanding custom prevents their full expression in the mores" (Beauvoir 1953, 19).

Walker's short story hints that Imani has suffered some decisions forced on her. She never wanted to marry. She just wanted to have "lovers who could be sent home at dawn, freeing her to work and ramble" (Walker 1985, 73). This indicated that Imani's marriage with Clarence might have been a forced one and the word "freeing" shows that Imani wanted to be free in her sexual relationship, which her marriage has made impossible. Even her pregnancy also seems to be forced upon her. That is why she feels that she can gain control over her body "only through violence and money" (Walker 1985, 69). Again, seeing the fatherly look on the face of the doctor after her first abortion, Imani realized "how desperately she needed this ... "fatherly"

smile" (Walker 1985, 68). This may be because of Imani's strained relationship with her father which has not been shown in the short story. So Imani suffers at the hand of both the men—her father and her husband. Moreover, she receives derogatory behaviour from Mayor Carswell. Imani's father and husband are associated with the private sphere of her life while Carswell is associated, first, with the public sphere of her life and then, through Clarence's relationship with Carswell, with the private sphere of her life too. In the private sphere she suffers while in the public sphere she does have importance but only as an anonymous part of the community and not as an individual.

After her second abortion Imani, as she thinks about Holly Monroe, feels that the fact that the latter's assassins tried to blame Monroe for provoking the assassination is "an extreme abortion" (Walker 1985, 71). Likewise, Imani could also be blamed for her abortions but her husband or the male-dominated society would not care to consider the hard circumstances that she has gone through. It is a convenient way to dump all the blame on the woman. As her identity and the limits of what she can do and say are defined by men, she could not counter the accusation. Suddenly, in the short story, Imani likens the suppressing of African Americans to the killing of the entire African continent: "They think they can kill a continent... and then fly off to the moon and just forget about it" (Walker 1985, 72). At the assembly for Holly Monroe, Imani likens herself to Monroe: "Holly Monroe was herself. Herself shot down, aborted on the eve of becoming herself" (Walker 1985, 74). The use of the word "aborted" clearly likens Monroe's fate to that of Imani. Neither Imani nor Holly Monroe could grow to be themselves. One is aborted by a bullet, the other by social custom and mores. The dignity and identity of both have likewise been aborted. As Holly Monroe has been killed publicly, the assembly held for her is also public and this assembly proves that Monroe's community has the scope to shout their demands publicly. But in the same society Imani cannot voice her pleas for self-identity because this is a private affair and detached from the public realm. The African American community in America is very much concerned that their "continent" should not be allowed to be killed but one African American woman, Imani, is inwardly suffering and the activities of Mayor Carswell or the assembly for Holly Monroe is irrelevant to that. Holly Monroe's twenty five classmates' trying to look like her is again a public show of their solidarity with her

but none shows such solidarity with Imani because none knows or even cares to know about her private pains.

Even at the assembly for Holly Monroe Carswell and Clarence talk loudly about politics ignoring Imani's gesture to stop. They rather leave the church. They seem to care neither about Monroe nor Imani. The two men's loud political talks again reflect their concern for the external, the public, and their leaving Imani and the assembly and Carswell's cold treatment of Imani at the assembly again shows a lack of concern for the private.

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