

**Through close readings not to blur the truth: what does literature allow?**

**Através de leituras atentas para não cobrir a verdade: o que permite a literatura?**

**A través de una lectura atenta para no tapar la verdad: ¿qué permite la literatura?**

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**Abstract**

The present study considers the literary production from the American author Alice Walker; whose representations bring questions that submerge from human social practices. The aim in this paper is to express the possible reflections that literature promotes from the text *The right to life: What the white man said to the black woman?*, which is written and pronounced by Walker. Methodologically, the analysis is organized based on this narrative and it is built from the scope of theoretical studies, especially from those that consider the literature written by black women in the twentieth century and that are linked to sociocultural criticism. The results show that the literature, in addition to being the space and time for reflection, allows that the tensions between the oppressor's discourses and those who suffer domination can be identified. Walker confronts history, denounces and questions the dominator's responsibility while she shares her literary art in the collectively way.

**Keywords:** Literature and humanity; Social conflicts; Women's lives.

**Resumo**

O presente estudo considera a produção literária da norte-americana Alice Walker, cujas representações trazem questões que submergem das práticas sociais humanas. O objetivo deste trabalho é mostrar as possíveis reflexões que a literatura promove a partir do texto *The right to life: What the white man said to the black woman?*, escrito e pronunciado por Walker. Metodologicamente, a análise organiza-se a partir dessa narrativa e do escopo de estudos teóricos, especialmente os que consideram a literatura escrita por mulheres negras no século XX e que estão ligadas à crítica sociocultural. Os resultados apontam que a literatura, além de

ser o espaço e tempo de reflexão, possibilita que as tensões entre os discursos do opressor e de quem sofre dominação sejam identificadas. Walker confronta a história, denuncia e questiona a responsabilidade do dominador enquanto, de modo coletivo, compartilha a sua arte literária.

**Palavras-chave:** Literatura e humanidade; Conflitos sociais; Vidas de mulheres.

## Resumen

El presente estudio considera la producción literaria de la estadounidense Alice Walker, cuyas representaciones traen interrogantes que se sumergen desde las prácticas sociales humanas. El objetivo de este trabajo es mostrar las posibles reflexiones que la literatura promueve a partir del texto *The right to life: What the white man said to the black woman?*, escrito y pronunciado por Walker. Metodológicamente, el análisis se organiza en base a esta narrativa y el alcance de los estudios teóricos, especialmente aquellos que consideran la literatura escrita por mujeres negras en el siglo XX y que están vinculadas a la crítica sociocultural. Los resultados muestran que la literatura, además de ser un espacio y tiempo de reflexión, permite identificar las tensiones entre los discursos del opresor y los que sufren la dominación. Walker se enfrenta a la historia, denuncia y cuestiona la responsabilidad del dominador mientras comparte su arte literaria colectivamente.

**Palabras clave:** Literatura y humanidad; Conflictos sociales; Vidas de mujeres.

## 1. Introduction

É fácil cobrir a verdade com um recurso linguístico simples: basta começar sua história a partir de "em segundo"! Basta iniciar com essa expressão para que o mundo inteiro se vire de cabeça para baixo. Inicie com "em segundo" e as flechas dos índios começam a ser as criminosas verdadeiras e os fuzis dos brancos, as vítimas perfeitas! (Barghouti, 2006, p. 201-202)<sup>1</sup>.

Following the example from Mourid Barghouti writing, in *I Saw Ramallah*, it is necessary to return to the history and it is essential not to blur the truth, but to identify the real responsible for the global tensions and tragedies. Relationships of power and domination have

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<sup>1</sup> It is easy to blur the truth with a simple linguistic feature: just start your story from "second"! Just start with this expression and the whole world will be turned upside down. Start with "in second" and the Indians' arrows become to be the real criminals and the white rifles, the perfect victims! (*Translation from the author of this article*).

always been around civilization, legitimizing some people as if they were better than others, granting voice to them, rights and expression, while others hover in the condition of not being and having no identity. By representing these and other issues, literature and its aesthetics become the means by which the conflicts that have marked the cultural universe are disseminated. This kind of art also invites reflection on human practices and grants visibility to cultural asymmetries, ethnic, historical and ideological that haunt the contemporary context. When reflecting on the role that literature plays in society, it is interesting to recall Todorov's explanation:

Somos todos feitos do que os outros seres humanos nos dão: primeiro nossos pais, depois aqueles que nos cercam, a literatura abre ao infinito essa possibilidade de interação com os outros e por isso nos enriquece infinitamente. [...] Longe de ser um simples entretenimento, uma distração reservada às pessoas educadas, ela permite que cada um responda melhor a sua vocação de ser humano<sup>2</sup> (Todorov, 2009, p. 23-24).

And with this human vocation, it is possible to recognize the participation of each human in history, in the situation of African American women in the United States during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, whose racism defined them. This study considers Alice Walker's literary production and it aims to show the possible reflections that literature promotes, based on the text namely *The right to life: What the white man said to the black woman?* (Walker, 2002).

Considering the research problem that is to identify how literature problematizes and causes reflection about the global problems, such as racism and prejudices, the methodological proposal is organized based on this Walker's narrative that is part of her literary productions. The methodology finds support for analysis in critical literature, especially the literature written by black women, in the twentieth century.

It is from literary narratives and public debate that the Afro-descendant Alice Walker draws attention to the consequences of violence against black women. The author questions the right to life and she seeks to interconnect memories, considering the cultural heritage of

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<sup>2</sup> We are all made of what other humans give us: first our parents, then those around us, literature opens up this possibility of interaction with others to infinity and therefore enriches us infinitely. [...] Far from being a simple entertainment, a distraction reserved for educated people, it allows everyone to better respond to their vocation as a human being (*Translation from the author of this article*).

black men and women, the sounds and voices from those who lived in the agony of the past and she also considers the ones who need to be remembered in the contemporary.

In the context of Walker's studies, this writing considers that black literature does not enunciate other people or thematizes them, but this literature places itself as a subject and it is enunciated politically. Thus, black literature incorporates the voice and the experience lived by its narrators and it brings meanings in its writing that are proper and contextualized, like: history, culture, language and identity discourse.

## 2. Methodology

To start from the beginning is to search for understanding history and understanding that America was not discovered, because everyone knows that natives lived in America, with their histories, cultures and languages. To start from the beginning is to try to understand that there are humans who have been captured, have been separated from their families and have been silenced. In this writing, starting with a narrative that takes over the lives of these humans, means respecting the oppressed people and identifying the oppressor responsibilities for what this person has done throughout the history. The methodological proposal is organized from the text, that is *The right to life: What the white man said to the black woman?* (Walker, 2002).

Considering that the object of this study is a text, it is important to highlight that the research methodology in literary studies is produced from a text. In this way, Durão (2015) explains that it is possible to produce new knowledge from the interpretation of the literary text, since the knowledge produced brings a specificity to the study that is related to the analyzed object.

This five-page from Walker's literature begins with a straightforward question and it consists of the title from a Walker's speech, a narrative in support of the National March for Women's Equality and Women's lives, in Washington DC, in May 22nd, 1989 (it was announced thirteen years before the referenced publication). This study proposal considers some fragments from this narrative to explain expressions that denote tensions experienced.

The support for the discussion is based on this Walker's narrative, which is articulated and dialogued with literary and sociocultural criticism from Walker (1982), Collins (1999),

Homans (1997), Fanon (2008) and others. The paper has the aim of being discussed and analyzed from circumstantial points considered in the text under study. In this way, it considers Walker and her literature, placing like

[...]um caminhar de mão dadas, uma visita para conhecer e reconhecer, formular questões intrigantes, instigar à memória e até atentar ao esquecimento, criar e mergulhar em futuras criações artísticas na perspectiva de sentir e de compartilhar tudo e nada e, se possível fosse, tudo simultaneamente, em escuta curiosa e paciente, legítimo diálogo<sup>3</sup> (Martins & Vianna, 2019, p. 199-200).

In the perspective of reading the truths through Walker's writing and, thus, from this research that seeks to reflect and interpret her literature, it also seeks to establish some relation between creator and the creation, because the author "é realmente um criador, mas num sentido muito diferente do que a hagiografia literária e artística entende por isso"<sup>4</sup> (Bourdieu, 2004, p. 179). The author is able to introduce and impose "a representação do mundo contemporâneo"<sup>5</sup> (Bourdieu, 2004, p. 179). Thus, this study aims to build some view from the past to reflect by here and now, showing a closed reading about the truth.

### 3. Discussion and Results: Walker's literature denounces violence

Although Alice Walker was recognized for works such as the novel *The Color Purple* (1982), which won her the Pulitzer Prize and was transformed into a film production by the award-winning filmmaker Steven Spielberg, the art of this author is found not only in novels. Tales, testimonies, interviews, poetry and speeches are also intense narratives by Walker, like this text in study, which is a public literary discourse namely *The right to life: What the white man said to the black woman?*

In this narrative Walker uses interrogation to summon the white man to look at what he has done, to resume the banishment present in history and to force him to reexamine his

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<sup>3</sup> [...]like walking hand in hand, a visit to know and recognize, ask intriguing questions, instigate memory and even pay attention to forgetfulness, create and dive into future artistic creations in the perspective of feeling and sharing everything and nothing and, if possible, all simultaneously, in curious and patient listening, legitimate dialogue (*Translation from the author of this article*).

<sup>4</sup> [...]is really a creator, but in a very different meaning than literary and artistic hagiography understands (*Translation from the author of this article*).

<sup>5</sup> [...]the representation of the contemporary world (*Translation from the author of this article*).

acts and responsibilities, not only in the light at four-hundred-years slavery, but also to recognize racial segregation and unresolved clashes that characterize the relationship between blacks and whites. By articulating the question several times, she registers the white man's need to repair the segregation he promoted. Thus, the author asks: *What can the white man say to the black woman?* In this interrogative movement, Walker reports the cruelty and wounds of racism in a speech that, when pronounced, becomes collective:

For four hundred years he ruled over the black woman's womb. Let us be clear. In the barracoons and along the slave shipping coasts of Africa, for more than twenty generations, it was he who dashed our babies' brains out against the rocks. For four hundred years he determined which black woman's children would live or die. Let it be remembered (Walker, 2002, p. 08).

The author asks the oppressive white man to remember about the accomplished plans that involved the children's lives. In this Walker's scriptures references are made about sexual abuse committed by white men, such as the abuse suffered by the young character called Celie, in *The Color Purple* book (Walker, 1982). Celie was sexual abused and later, when she gave birth to her children, these children were removed from her. In this way, Walker judges the white man for this separation between mothers and children and she also explains that the same man placed the children "on the auction block in cities all across the Eastern half of what is now the United States, and listened to and watched them beg for their mothers' arms, before being sold to the highest bidder and dragged away"(Walker, 2002, p. 08).

The wounds that racism has produced in society are expressed in Walker's writings and productions. In the novelist's words there is a protest against the right that has been denied to black women and also there is an accusation against white men because of the violence from them. This oppression persists in societies and it is currently incorporated as prejudice. Violence wears another guise, which can be identified in human behavior and in the constitutive elements of capitalism.

In *Black Feminist Thought: knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment* book, the author Patricia Collins (1999) affirms that race is a factor that takes major force in political, economic and social definitions throughout history. The activist also says that it is necessary to think reflexively about the silences and commands of the social structure based on capitalism.

Walker calls attention to black women's resistance and identity, the need for the black women to recognize themselves and find their own voice. This protest by Walker goes into the direction of what Fanon (2008) explains, since he clarifies that when blacks are able to reconstruct their own identity as a black person, retaking their cultural condition, language, values and believing in themselves as a capable being, then the blacks can free themselves. In this way of becoming resistant, Walker brings issues that involve overcoming suffering. In this study, especially when Walker insists on the recurrence of the question *What the white man said to the black woman?*, she writes to those men, but she correspondingly reminds to all black women to be strong and to be in a collective way to face them.

Then, the Walker recuperates her own speech on behalf of the children and the rights that were denied to them. In *The right to life: What the white man said to the black woman?* she points out that black children died in the holds of ships and, if they arrived alive in America, they would be treated with odiousness, as illustrated in the following fragment:

[...] you have treated all dark children with absolute hatred. 30,000,000 African children died on the way to the Americas, where nothing awaited them but endless toil and the crack of a bullwhip. They died of a lack of food, of lack of movement in the holds of ships. Of lack of friends and relatives. They died of depression, bewilderment and fear (Walker, 2002, p. 10).

The irrational hatred that existed is evident in every line of Walker's significant narrative, which in addition to criticizing the state that institutionalized racism, also questions what the white man did to the ancestors. In this context, Margaret Homans explains in her article "Racial Composition" Metaphor and the Body in the Writing of Race, that Alice "Walker mentions her claim to embody the 'ancestors' whose blood runs in her veins" (Homans, 1997, p. 85). In denouncing racial and gender oppression, the separation of people from her own family, the humiliation and silencing of the black community, Walker points out what the American political structure has promoted for many years.

The events described from the question, *What the white man said to the black woman?*, Encourage a movement to raise awareness about the sad history of thousands of human beings and the non-right to life of southern black persons. More than an invitation to reflect on the brutality of socially legitimate events, the narrative suggests to the white man that he should be embarrassed of what he did: you should "be ashamed to attempt to speak for the unborn children of the black woman. To force us to have children for him to ridicule,

drug, turn into killers and homeless wanderers is a testament to his hypocrisy” (Walker, 2002, p.11).

Along the way of this reflection, literature is justified, as it is capable of reminding humanity of the oppression already suffered by the black people, a submission that must be abandoned so that human relations can be respectful and ethical. Walker's text it is possible to identify the author's proposal to the white man, so that men must tell the black woman:

[...]your children have the right to life. Therefore, I will call back from the dead those 30,000,000 who were tossed overboard during the centuries of the slave trade. And the other millions who died in my cotton fields and hanging from my trees. I will recall all those who died of broken hearts and broken spirits, under the insult of segregation. I will raise up all the mothers who died exhausted after birthing twenty-one children to work sunup to sundown on my plantation. I will restore to full health all those who perished for lack of food, shelter, sunlight, and love; and from my inability to recognize them as human beings (Walker, 2002, p. 11-12).

In the selected fragments for this analyze, it is possible to expression that Walker tries to make the interlocutor think and remember round the past in order to commit to the white man about the pains that can no longer be repeated. She is sarcastic and defiant in proposing that the white man declares his guilt and recognizes that he will replace the food for those who he left hungry; the love for those who he treated with hatred; the health of those humans who lost their lives. The author exposes the culpability that the white man has, considering he is the responsible for those acts. Walker questions this man, so that she waits for the following answer from him:

I will remove myself as an obstacle in the path that your children, against all odds, are making toward the light. I will not assassinate them for dreaming dreams and offering new visions of how to live. I will cease trying to lead your children, for I can see I have never understood where I was going. I will agree to sit quietly for a century or so, and meditate on this (Walker, 2002, p. 12).

The novelist ends her pronouncement and narrative with a complaint about the naturalization of racism and she also underlines the right that black women did not have: the right to be heard. Walker writes: “That is what the white man can say to the black woman” (2002, p. 12). And she ends by saying that they, women, are “listening” (Walker, 2002, p. 12). Regardless of race, being a woman implies experiencing confrontations that are feminine and



being a black woman intensifies these challenges and confrontations. Patriarchal and sexist history keeps in mind the inferior place that women have placed in society, pains, silences and shadows that are even more boring when we refer to the trajectory and life of black women.

Although under barbaric conditions, since the period when black women and women came to America, around 1620, on the ship Mayflower (Vanspanckeren, 1994), they play an important role in society, influencing with their ideas, questions, ethics, attitudes, diaries and writings, as the example of Walker's narrative: *The right to life: What the white man said to the black woman?*

#### **4. Final Considerations**

From the objective of the study, which was to show the possible reflections that literature promotes from what is tensioned and from the analysis of the narrative namely *The right to life: What the white man said to the black woman?*, it is identified that Alice Walker participates politically in society; and with her extraordinary literature, she contributes to giving visibility to the tensions that have marked the cultural universe. The author places herself with voice in history, in the place of being an enunciator and a writer who is on the side of silenced and oppressed humanity.

Even though the writing proposed from this study ends at the text limit, it continues to mean and to call men and women, white and black ones, in all cultures and across the globe to reflect on tensions that have marked the history and the human lives. What is it possible to grant with the discussion from this brief article? It is quite possible that the answer is: the recognition that the literature is one of the chronotopes for reflection and sharing and; with Walker, it is possible to do much more than analyze a shared and collective discourse. It is possible to remember and to invite everyone to social responsibility. This is a narrative that brings an alternative reading of history and it also helps to promote understanding of the human condition.

In the face of these conflicts that sadly marked and still mark the world, starting with the recognition of tensions and considering the implications of these happenings it is starting from the beginning. Then, at the end of this paper, it could not start or end "in second", or Gandhi would become responsible for the tragedies of the British (Barghouti, 2006); but what can be done is to bring the beginning right now, a fragment that it is "on the first page" in

Walker's narrative, a moment when the Afro-descendent activist declares: "I think of my work as part of a global responsibility as well" (Walker, 2002, p. 07).

The reflection that brings the literature as an object of study is necessary in the contemporary times, as this science is capable of dialoguing with other human sciences and, thus, it can promote awareness of the oppression suffered by humanity. Future studies are projected to include, not only narratives by Alice Walker, but also by other Afro-descendant writers, in order to consider Brazilian studies and to identify how the oppressive and racist organization operates in some more societies.

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**Percentage of contribution of each author in the manuscript**

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