

The Althea Gibson Narrative and Race, Class, and Gender in the Twentieth Century America

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Abstract

African American narratives are rooted in identity, and identity is rooted in history. While reading and analysing the autobiography of an African American sportswoman from mid-twentieth century as an African American narrative, this paper will critically analyse the autobiography of Althea Gibson, the pioneer African American athlete and her rise from the impoverished childhood in Harlem and breaking the colour barrier in her sport and her travails as an “outsider” in the lily-white sport of tennis in mid-twentieth century. It will be read through theoretical frameworks of (black) feminism reading, and critical race theory, and specifically in terms of the intersectionality of race, class and gender in the context of racial segregation in mid-twentieth century America. Althea Gibson's autobiography is used as an example for black sport autobiography as literature that can be used to examine modern sport in relation to its broader social-political contexts, and in voicing a certain kind of counter-hegemonic ways of knowing and telling- of challenging assumptions.

Keywords: *African American, Autobiography, Racism, Gender, Sport, Society*

It seemed a long way from 143rd street [in Harlem, New York], shaking hands with the queen of England was a long way from being forced to sit in the colored section of the bus going into downtown Wilmington, North Carolina.
(Gibson, *I always wanted to be somebody*, p. 139)

The pioneer African American woman athlete Althea Gibson (1927-2003) wrote two autobiographical books. The above lines quoted at the opening of this

paperis taken from her autobiography *I Always Wanted to be somebody*, published in 1958. The line encapsulates the story of her life, the remarkable journey of a poor black girl from the streets of Harlem, surviving the barriers of race, class and gender to become the champion at Wimbledon, the most prestigious tournament of the lily-white sport of tennis in the mid-twentieth century. There are two important images in the quoted line- one, a memory of the past, another, a moment in the present. Having made 'to sit in the colored section of the bus' in Wilmington (North Carolina) and 'shaking hands with the Queen of England' at Wimbledon (London) is a journey across landscapes of racial history in America and the world. The memory of Wilmington is the reminder of the history of the Jim Crow exclusion of the blacks from sharing public spaces with the whites, and Wimbledon, the venue for her moment of glory, ironically was also the site of race-based and class-based exclusion for much of the twentieth century, till Althea interrupted that tradition altogether.

The term 'Jim Crow' refers to a set of laws passed in many states in the United States, predominantly in the South, that placed severe restrictions on the rights and privileges of African Americans after the end of the Reconstruction era in 1877. (Marsico, p. 8) Being African American is closely associated with the experience of racism, white supremacy, slavery, and the continuance of second-class/subordinate citizenship due to the Jim Crow laws. According to the

Jim Crow Encyclopaedia, Jim Crow can be defined as a caste system of enormous social and economic magnitude, and indeed, what slavery was to the generations after the Civil War, Jim Crow is to the generations following the Civil Rights movement (Brown & Barry, p. 19)

In this paper, while presenting a brief critical biography of Althea Gibson, passages from her autobiography *I Always Wanted to be Somebody* will be examined to illustrate how black athlete's autobiography is literature that can be used to examine modern sport in relation to its broader social-political contexts, and in voicing a certain kind of counter-hegemonic ways of knowing and telling- of challenging assumptions. Althea's life narrative is seen as a framework to understand the cultural and political world in and around it. This paper will explore the intersection between the popular institution of sport and the tool of autobiography- an athlete's account of her life and experiences in and outside of their sports field, and the usage of certain language and rhetorical patterns to tell her narrative.

**The Althea Gibson Narrative and Race,
Class, and Gender in the Twentieth Century America**

Althea Gibson's ancestors came from the dark history of slavery. Her great grandfather January Gibson's mother was only sixteen when she was brought to the USA by a slave ship in the early nineteenth century. She was sold to a slave owner who fathered January and later he (January) and his mother were abandoned by the biological father and owner. (Gray & Lamb, p.4) This was a general practice that slave owners often had sexual relationships with black women they owned, and once they gave birth to a child, the woman and child were abandoned or sold away to another slave owner. The time of Althea's birth in 1927 in Silver, South Carolina, in a family of sharecroppers, was the period of the start of the Great Depression in America, and it hit the black community in the South severely. A high percentage of blacks lost jobs and black farmers were unable to sustain their livelihoods. The Gibson family was one such who suffered the worst and had to join the mass exodus of blacks from rural South to Northern cities. Thus, in 1930, when Althea was three, the Gibson family left the cotton-field cabin of Silver and moved to an apartment in New York City's rough block – Harlem to avoid the meager life of sharecropping as well as the racist climate of the Jim Crow in the South.

Life in Harlem with four siblings and parents in a small apartment was anything but comfortable for Althea. Used to living in poverty and deprivation since birth, she learnt to deal with loneliness at home and the segregation of the all-black school by escaping to subways and by making the back alleys of Harlem her home. She was a street urchin who liked roaming the streets of New York more than she liked going to school or spending time in the suffocation of home where her father was often abusive to her. In the alleys of Harlem, she discovered paddle tennis, a game similar to tennis but played on a smaller area with a wooden paddle. She loved it and soon excelled in it as in many other sports she played later in her life. "When other girls were putting on lipstick, she was playing sports," and generally with boys, and she often got a "whipping for it from her father" (Hillman, p. 48). In her lonely and troubled childhood which was marked by race and poverty, just when she found some joy in sports, she got "whippings" as girls were not expected to play sports in streets with boys. "Daddy would beat me, too, and I'm not talking about spankings. He would whip me good, with a strap on my bare skin," she wrote in her autobiography (p. 8). In one incident when after her father unleashed beatings on her, she had to seek refuge at the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. (p. 20) Thus,

from an early age, her subversion of traditional gender role, marked her life narrative along with her experiences due to her race and class. Although she never termed her father's mistreatment of her as 'abuse', there is a distinct lack of emotional connection to her biological parents in her autobiography which cannot go unnoticed.

At the age of nine, Althea won her first medal of any kind, in a competition of paddle tennis in her own block in Harlem, proving that she was cut out for sports, however, it was only when she was thirteen when Buddy Walker, a Harlem society musician, noticed her natural athletic abilities, and invited her to learn lawn tennis. Tennis would change her life. In her words, "I was living in a never-never land through the courtesy of the City of New York, that I was introduced to tennis. My whole life was changed, just like, and I never even knew it was happening" (Gibson, p. 25). Walker inspired Althea to try tennis, because in tennis, she would meet "a better class of people and have "a chance to make something out myself." (p. 27) Here's a clear distinction between playing stickball and paddle tennis, games played on the streets, and generally associated with lower class. Lawn tennis, on the other hand, was recognised as a sport of sophistication and played by "better class of people" in the black community. Tennis clearly offered Althea a potential of social mobility in her own community of African Americans. At that time, in United States, tennis was played in two separate "segregated" worlds, country clubs of upper class and upper middle class white people, and then, upper class blacks who had their own clubs and parks. Overall, "tennis was "a rich man's game. The black folks who started playing tennis were mostly teachers, doctors. The so-called elite blacks tried to play tennis because it was a social thing to do." (Djata, p. 25) Elite level sports were marked by class distinction that except boxing and to some extent baseball, poor blacks, and poor whites for that matter, had practically no chance to join the sports clubs.

However, the black club owners, players and coaches in the 1940s transformed tennis by opening doors for players of humbler backgrounds, and Althea became one such beneficiary. At this point, tennis offered Althea the chance of social mobility in the black social hierarchy and dream of earning recognition for a poor Harlem girl. Althea was invited to learn and practice tennis at the Cosmopolitan Club, which was an exclusive all-black club with its set of membership guidelines. The club attracted 'the highest class' of Harlem

**The Althea Gibson Narrative and Race,
Class, and Gender in the Twentieth Century America**

residents –professionals, intellectuals and society types, the kind of people whom W.E.B. Du Bois described as the “Talented Tenth” in his essay of the same title, where he argues that a group of educated, “exceptional men” with their commitment to the social service of the community will save the negro race from the worst. (*The Negro Problem*, p. 31)

Early on, Althea's brash “tomboy” (ish) personality (p. 48) inadvertently challenged the cultural image of a girl as being mild and feminine; the class-conscious culture of Cosmopolitan Club did not appreciate it. But most people didn't know that Althea didn't belong to their 'class', and only a few knew that she was so drawn to 'the theatre of the streets' spending most of her off-court time as a rebel kid on the streets of Harlem. Within a year of learning and honing her skills as a tennis player, Althea was a champion at the blacks-only ATA (American Tennis Association); she was soon defeating virtually everybody she played, winning her first tournament in 1942. Once she proved herself to be the best player in competition for multiple years, she became part of a historical 'plan' thought out by her mentors, Hubert A. Eaton and Robert Walter Johnson, two doctors, to prepare Althea to make a cross-racial breakthrough. They, in fact, thought that Althea might possibly turn out to be the Negro player they had been looking for. In Althea's words, “Eaton and Johnson were getting ready to change my whole life” (p. 37). They thought her talent was too great to be wasted by limiting her to just the segregated leagues where she had virtually no equals. She could do something similar in tennis to what Jackie Robinson did in baseball- breaking the color barrier. Robinson's breakthrough in Major League Baseball in 1947 is twentieth-century America's most important event in fighting the Jim Crow in sport. Althea had the potential to de-segregate tennis. But the task at hand was even more difficult than Jackie Robinson's

For context, it is important to remember the impact of racial segregation on tennis in the USA. When tennis was formally organised in the United States in 1881 with the formation of United States Lawn Tennis Association, blacks were barred from participating in tournaments and other activities run by the organization. These policies were in sync with the Jim Crow laws of racial segregation which continued these discriminatory practices till the 1960s. Blacks (referred to as 'negroes' till the 1960s) created their own organisation ATA (American Tennis Association) because they could not play white tournaments. Tennis was long considered the territory of the privileged whites

owned country-clubs, and just like Jim Crow laws in the society, tennis functioned on the class based and racial segregation structure since its arrival in USA in late nineteenth century. Althea and her black mentors, Dr. Eaton and Dr. Walter Johnson, hoped and planned that she could one day play in America's national championships where no black man or woman had been allowed or invited to play. What chances would an underprivileged black girl have, saddled with the triple oppression of being *Underprivileged*, *Black* and a *Girl* to stop the segregation in her sport?

In fact, most of the major American sports, baseball, football, basketball, and ice hockey, remained largely segregated until the 1960s. Of the theories that were used to keep blacks without access to elite sports through segregation policies, one was the anxiety that if given a chance, they just might dominate it. On the contrary, another theory warranted how the competition was structured on the premise that the white man would win anyway. bell hooks writes in *Outlaw Culture: Resisting representations* that though, of course, this competition was structured on the premise that 'the white man' would win and where this did not happen, blacks were formally excluded from competing against whites, such as the so-called 'color-line' that was drawn in boxing after the success of Jack Johnson (hooks, p. 31) For much of the 19th century, the large percentage of American blacks, who were concentrated in southern plantations, sports were limited to contests among slaves. Slave owners staged boxing, track events. Until the end of slavery, however, playing organized sports was less a dream than a fantasy for most American blacks. (Entine, p. 140) Playing elite white sport, like tennis or golf, was beyond their dreams.

Althea was thirteen when she started playing tennis. She had lived a street urchin existence till then. So the company of the people with rigid ideas about what was socially accepted was shockingly new to her. They were probably stricter than white people of similar positions. It even made her uncomfortable for a while, at times ashamed of her 'cocky' 'wild' carefree personality (Gibson, p.29). Her first coach tried to smooth out her rough edges and tone down her cockiness to make her suitable for the tennis ladies. Initially, she hated this insistence on discipline to be a fine lady player, because she preferred practicing against male players. It took her awhile to realize that female competition could be equally challenging as playing against boys which she mostly had done so far:

After a while I began to understand that you could walk out on the court

**The Althea Gibson Narrative and Race,
Class, and Gender in the Twentieth Century America**

like a lady, all dressed up in immaculate white, be polite to everybody, and still play like a tiger and beat the liver and light out of the ball. (p. 29)

“Everything was white. The balls, the clothes, the people, the socks, the shoes, everything!” This is how Billie Jean King, a great women's champion of the 1960s and 70s, sums up the years when she started playing tennis in the early 1950s (American Masters: *ALTHEA* 2015). King, of course, is a white American. Her description also sums up the barriers Althea had to fight and overcome to be able to compete against all-comers in the United States in the late 1940s and 1950s.

The superiority of white race was established on sports like tennis, golf, horse-racing, etc, and rationalised by the theory that blacks were more suitable to physical sports like baseball, football, basketball where running, jumping and throwing were the only activities involved, whereas sports where intelligence, skills and finesse were required, blacks naturally didn't possess these traits. A similar connection can be made with regards to how South Asians have disrupted cricket. Vijay Amritraj, the former Indian tennis player, has stated that as a race, Indians are also handsomely endowed with hand-to-eye-coordination, which is why so many (Indians) excel naturally at sports like cricket, squash, and tennis (Amritraj & Evans, p. 116). This statement essentially counters the long-standing dubious theory that rationalized white race's genetic pertinence to own and excel at these sports. As far back as the late nineteenth century it was suspected that tennis was "too sophisticated and intellectual" for young blacks, women in

particular: one can imagine that Althea as a black female athlete encountered all the barriers faced by black male athletes and then some, because of her gender.

The plan by Althea's mentors was obviously to prepare her to break the color barrier in tennis, however before that, it was also important that she became emotionally and academically mature to take on that task. It was decided by them that she should move to North Carolina and finish her unfinished high school, get a degree, and at the same time not let go of the dream of tennis achievements. It was important for her to be mentally tough to face the racism of the white establishments and the mental challenges of task. In Wilmington, North Carolina, although she enjoyed going to school and studying, she also discovered and experienced racial discrimination in a more direct form. She

compares the South with New York and finds the latter as “a strange country” where terrible things were done to Negroes just because they were Negroes, and nobody was ever punished for them. Even though she personally did not encounter any terrible form of racial violence there, but she met with indignities of discrimination on a daily basis. There were bathrooms with ‘Whites Only’ signs; restaurants, where whites would be seen eating at the corner, and blacks were not allowed to eat. “They didn’t mind taking your dime, no matter how black you were – but you had to take it out onto the street. You couldn’t eat it in the store.” (*Gibson*, p. 46) In buses, whites would sit in front and colored in rear; at movie halls, she hated having to make do and sit in the balcony. There were a number of public courts in Wilmington, but no Negro could play on them. Althea learnt to conform to such rules and programmes because she had come to Wilmington for getting a degree and to improve her game on the side. However, she hated every minute of the South’s segregated public life and the unfriendliness in the air due to segregation laws. She made up her mind that once she finished her degree, she would go to live anywhere else but the South; at least not as long as Jim Crow laws were in existence (p.47). The school experience in Wilmington was not great either: due to her unfeminine appearance and her passion for playing sports like basketball and baseball, that too with the boys, she was not liked by the other girl students of the school. Althea calls herself the “worst tomboy” they had ever seen (p. 48). Even among blacks, the standards of femininity are unsparingly normative, proof that race/racism/racial deprivation does not automatically cancel or correct the problems caused by patriarchal culture or misogyny.

Apart from regular school, Althea continued tennis practice in Wilmington, and during the summer she played in different cities in a dozen tournaments, remaining an unrivalled champion in the ATA competition and becoming known as the queen of black tennis. By 1949, many people believed that she had the potential to make history by competing in tennis’s most prestigious tournament – the US Nationals at Forest Hills. Eaton and Johnson had done all they could do to prepare Althea for the next level – to play the USLTA. With her complete dominance in black tennis for many years, Althea became ATA’s choice for the big push to Forest Hills which hosted America’s biggest championships. However, there were unwritten barriers to black participation in USLTA, and the USLTA sanctioned, only in the exceptional case, non-white participation. Althea’s dominance in ATA in the late 1940s encouraged ATA

**The Althea Gibson Narrative and Race,
Class, and Gender in the Twentieth Century America**

officials to finally present a black woman player to the USLTA who would be difficult for them to deny was worthy of interracial competition at the highest level of tennis in America. Althea offered an opportunity, a hope, in the history of Negro tennis as well as in the history of sport in America, how through her presence she could potentially integrate tennis. This development was a critical moment.

Only in March 1948, after several years of lobbying by the ATA, Reginald Weir a five-time men's ATA champion gained entry into an indoor tournament in New York, thus becoming the first African American to compete at a USTA tournament (*A Hard Road to Glory*, p. 61). The racial policies of USLTA finally had begun to soften, however, the ATA, wanted Althea to make the biggest leap now - to play the biggest tournament - the national championships of "white" America. They lobbied for Althea aggressively, after Jackie Robinson's great leap in Major League Baseball in 1947. After Robinson's feat, the struggle to integrate other top-level sports, especially amateur sports still had to undergo a lot of difficulties. Unlike sports like baseball, football and basketball, which were generally team sports that were played in large stadiums, the segregation policies in individual sports like tennis and golf were far stringent due to their location in country clubs and similar spaces. Also, it was more difficult for Althea than Jackie Robinson given the profit-driven professional baseball league was more open to black male talent due to the stereotypical association of black men with physical force. Tennis was not only a country club sport; it did not have a professional tour where men and women could make financial gains. In 1949, the ATA officials managed to secure Althea two invitations into two USLTA tournaments, where she represented herself and the African American women well by reaching quarterfinals in both (Lansbury, p. 92). In both these tournaments where she competed as the only Negro in otherwise all-white draws, she made her presence felt by progressing to the quarterfinals. In 1950, she made a bigger stride by reaching the final of an indoor tournament, and it was anticipated by all of the African American community, that she would definitely be playing America's national championship with whites, as her biographers would later note, "Althea would make it easier for the sons and daughters of slaves to take part by stepping onto the court at Forest Hills" (Gray & Lamb, p. 42).

However, acceptance didn't come promptly. In Althea's case, this is an

understatement of her life story. Despite having done well in the few events she was invited to play in the early 1950, she had hoped to be certainly invited to play the important tournaments in the summer including the US Nationals. But nothing happened. The USLTA acted as though Althea wasn't there. She was like a “wallflower” (Gibson, p.62). Since she wasn't invited to play the summer events, the chance of proving herself by doing well in them and offering her candidature for competing in the US Nationals was non-existent. If she wasn't given a chance to play, how could she ever prove herself? It seemed to Althea that nobody at the USLTA was ready to understand this. The intervention of Alice Marble, a former white tennis champion, at this juncture, helped to advance Althea's fight for equal opportunity. In fact, Marble's intervention was very pivotal, not only as an ally, but also for her public critique of segregation in sport as a white female champion from within the tennis establishment. She wrote a letter which appeared in the July 1950 issue of *American Lawn Tennis* magazine. She addressed the subject of racial prejudice and called out the blatant racism in USLTA. She noted that a black American (Althea) was not allowed to participate in the US Championship championships for no reason other than bigotry. She wrote:

I think it's time we faced a few facts. If tennis is a game for ladies and gentlemen, it's also time we acted a little more like gentlepeople and less like sanctimonious hypocrites. If there is anything left in the name of sportsmanship, it's more than time to display what it means to us. If Althea represents a challenge to the present crop of women players, it's only fair that they should meet that challenge on the courts, where tennis is played. (Marble, 1950, p. 14)

In her letter, Marble argued that whether Althea can achieve championship status, or she will fail to live up to her potential, can only be seen if she is given a chance to prove herself. But if she is refused a chance to succeed or to fail, then there is an ineradicable mark against a game which prides itself as the game of “gentlepeople”. Marble deployed the class-based idea of “gentlepeople” to critique the hypocrisy of the tennis establishment. This is an interesting inversion of the ways ideas of 'ladies and gentlemen' were often compatible with racism. Right after Marble's letter appeared, Althea tried to enter a tournament in New Jersey, but she was refused. She was quite discouraged by this point. However, suddenly positive news came in. A club in South Orange, New Jersey

**The Althea Gibson Narrative and Race,
Class, and Gender in the Twentieth Century America**

accepted her entry and invited her to play a major-league grass court tournament, which was only second to the Nationals in importance. Althea had found the opportunity to show her game which would be sure to be accepted at Forest Hills. After playing tournaments in New Jersey and doing well there, the big news from USLTA came in August 1950 that Althea had been accepted as one of the fifty-two women to play at the national championship in New York. She had been accepted for her ability, and that was all she had asked for (p. 68). Finally on August 28, 1950, three years after Jackie Robinson had broken the color barrier in baseball, Althea became the first black player - male or female, to compete in the national tennis championship of America. In the words of journalist David Eisenberg who watched her play, she was the "lonely and nervous colored girl" at Forest Hills. (*The New Gibson Girl*). She beat Barbara Knapp of England in the first round as journalist Lester Rodney reported this moment in these words:

No Negro player, man or woman, has ever set foot on one of these courts. In many ways, it's even a tougher personal Jim Crow-busting assignment than was Jackie Robinson's when he first stepped out on the Brooklyn Dodgers dugout. (Gray & Lamb, p. 58)

The color barrier was thus officially broken in tennis by Althea. She became the Jackie Robinson of tennis although for a long time she was not recognised for what she and her mentors had achieved in that moment. The magnitude of Althea's feat will be realised much later in coming decades - even today, the vanguard role of women as pioneers in most sports is scarcely recognised in everyday conversation about the sport. She opened doors for Arthur Ashe, and Venus and Serena Williams in the coming decades. Althea made journeys a bit easier for the coming generations of blacks in tennis. In 2004, Venus Williams wrote in the Afterward of Althea's biography, *Born to Win*:

Although some of the challenges that she faced still exist, it's much easier for all of us who have come after her. I am grateful to Althea Gibson for having the strength and courage to break the racial barriers in tennis. She knocked down walls, which gave us more freedom to concentrate on the game. (Gray & Lamb, p. 216)

In March 1951, she made another breakthrough, in the heart of America's racial segregation, the South, by becoming not only the first black player to compete in a major tournament, in Miami, but also by winning it. With her encouraging

performance at Forest Hills and win in the South, Althea left for England to play Wimbledon, the most prestigious tournament in the world for the first time in the summer of 1951. With Althea's entry at Wimbledon in 1951, another dent was made in the world of prejudice. The sight of a black girl playing on the hallowed grass courts of Wimbledon had not happened in its seventy years history. Althea, a girl from Harlem, changed that. She debuted on the Centre Court and won her first-round match. Though she would lose in her third round match that year, after her successful first appearance at Wimbledon, many sports writers noticed Althea's potential, and as John Walters predicted, "Give that girl (Althea) a year or two and she will become one of the world's foremost amateurs and one day she will wear the championship slippers" (Gray & Lamb, p. 71).

However, the story of Althea's life from there, for the next four years was full of setbacks. From 1952 to 1955, she was a top-ten player, but without any major victory. Realising that she wasn't achieving her full potential as a tennis player, she decided to focus on getting a college degree and securing a future. It is important to remember that in contrast to the present, Althea made no money playing tennis since she played in the amateur era. For a single black woman, it was very important to look out for financial security even while playing tennis nationally and internationally as an amateur. In Althea's account, between the years 1951-54, while graduating in Florida on a scholarship, when she had no remarkable success at the USLTA events she was allowed to play, she focused more on having a career away from tennis. Tennis was not a professional sport then, and being a black woman, her chances of her making it to pro tour someday and getting sponsorships were non-existent. By 1955 she wasn't even playing tennis that much anymore. She thought she wasn't good enough for international level competition. In 1954, after graduating from Florida A&M University, she accepted a job in the physical education department of Lincoln University in Missouri. She taught there as a professor for two years. Despite being a professor, she faced segregation there as well as gender-based discrimination. Once when she went bowling, she was told she could not bowl at that place: "No colored allowed to bowl there. This is for whites only" (p. 84). When she complained to the owner of the place, she was told that she would not be allowed to bowl there anymore as some of the whites complained about her using the place.

**The Althea Gibson Narrative and Race,
Class, and Gender in the Twentieth Century America**

Construction of gender in American society is another aspect of being black female athlete that Althea's autobiography draws our attention to. Althea was a tall, lean and athletic woman who played every sport well. Not only the racquet sports which are traditionally considered suitable for females, but she played basketball, she pitched on the baseball field, and played outfield for the faculty softball team. She was the only woman player on the team at Lincoln University. In fact, she played on the men's golf team and women's tennis team. She wanted to play on the faculty basketball team during her stint at Lincoln, but the men didn't let her join the team as a player. The head of the Physical Education department told a reporter that he had to look twice or thrice at Althea to convince himself that she was a girl. "She played all the games so well. You couldn't tell she was a girl the way she pitched" (Gibson, p. 85). While the head of the department might have said this either in jest or as a compliment, this comment reveals the deep-seated biases against black female athletes that not only include racism, but also misogyny and body shaming.

Althea was also a victim of the historical rejection of the black women as ideal feminine; because she introduced an aggressive style of play in women's game, she was assumed 'manly' therefore in 1957, she was reportedly forced to take a gender test to test if she had an extra chromosome. (Rhoden, *NYT*, 9 April 2007) There is no account of any other white female athlete having to undergo such a gender test in amateur tennis, and Althea was the first one to undergo such a controversial and humiliating test. According to *Sports Illustrated*, during her match at Forest Hills in 1950, "among the spectators were hecklers shouting, "Knock her out of there" and Beat the nigger!" (Clay & Lamb, p. 63).

After the prolonged wait and struggle to reach Forest Hills, Althea's failures on the tennis court in the following three years compelled her to re-evaluate her priorities. To many observers it seemed that her heart was not there. She considered retiring from the sport after playing the US Nationals 1955. But amidst all this, she got an invitation from the U.S. State Department which became the turning point in her career. She was invited a tour of South Asia and South-East Asia as a goodwill ambassador in December 1955, where she travelled to India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Burma and Thailand playing exhibition matches.

It is important to contextualize Althea's participation in this global tennis tour in Cold War cultural diplomacy. Goodwill scholarships presented women's

importance to American propaganda and cultural diplomacy programs as limited to their roles as wives and mothers on the home front. Female tennis players as goodwill ambassadors could be projected as a new progressive image of American women outside the traditional role of wives and mothers. In fact, goodwill tours at the height of the cold war were basically exhibition journeys to showcase the popular and influential aspects of American womanhood. Alice Marble and Dorris Hart, two popular white champions, had played that part in the past, and Althea's selection, in particular, would project a message to the third world that American black women were highly skilled, independent, influential and respected figures in America. According to Ashley Brown, these sportive peregrinations enabled players to enhance their skills, travel the world, and vie for titles while serving their country. Still, players were subjected to the gendered and racialized politics, pressures, and restrictions faced by American women at large (Brown, 2015).

Meanwhile, Althea's selection for the goodwill tour was a win-win situation for America, as it helped it project an image of diverse and inclusive America for the newly *de-colonised* Southeast Asia. The tour benefitted Althea as well. A new Althea emerged during this tour as it not only psychologically helped her as a person; it also reintroduced confidence, excitement and hunger back in her tennis game. Reception in India during the goodwill trip was very positive and unique. In India, she won all-India women's singles at New Delhi, and the Asian championship at Calcutta. It was important for her to interact with non-white people in the third world, the newly independent nations. Because she was a Negro, the Asians not only were particularly interested in her, they were also especially proud of her. (Vadukut, 2015) Apart from playing exhibitions, Althea, played a number of tournaments in Asia and Europe and swept through the competition winning more than a dozen titles in India, Ceylon, Egypt, Sweden, Germany, Italy, England, and then won the French Championships, thus becoming the first black player, male or female, to win a grand slam title (one of the four biggest championships). She lost early at the Wimbledon in 1956, but won the doubles title.

In 1957, Althea returned to Wimbledon, and this time, won the singles crown at the biggest and the most prestigious of all trophies. It was exactly a decade after Jackie Robinson had made baseball history. Althea made an impossible tennis history - a black woman, rose from poverty, and lifted the Wimbledon trophy -

**The Althea Gibson Narrative and Race,
Class, and Gender in the Twentieth Century America**

the Venus Rosewater dish, the most celebrated trophy of the elite white world of tennis. What were the odds? She remembers the magnitude of that moment in the following words:

It seemed a long way from 143rd street, shaking hands with the queen of England was a long way being forced to sit in the colored section of the bus going into downtown Wilmington. North Carolina. Dancing with the Duke of Devonshire was a long way from not being allowed to bowl in Jefferson City, Missouri, because the white customers complained about it. (Gibson, p. 139)

To sum up her journey to the conquering the lily-white world of tennis in 1957, after winning Wimbledon, Althea went on to win the US Nationals too, at Forest Hills in September, winning which had a special significance. It was the national championships of her country, something she had to wait for many years just to be allowed to compete in because of her skin color. She was presented the trophy by the vice-president Richard Nixon. Finally, the best player in tennis in America was a black woman. This occasion is even more significant because it was also in the same month of September 1957 in which, despite virulent opposition from pro-segregation groups, nine black students desegregated Little Rock Central High under national guards.

What a journey, Althea! What is more, is that, it was only the first half of the story!

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Rajendra Parihar

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*The author uses 'bell hooks' as her pen name.