

Alice Walker's Womanism

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The present article attempts to give a glimpse into Alice Walker's concept of 'womanism'. She believes that 'Womanism' is different from 'Feminism'. 'Feminism' talks about women and their hardships as a whole, whereas 'Womanism' deals with the Black Feminism or Black American Women and the inhuman treatment that they underwent, by their own family and their own society around.

Alice Walker's novels deal with the human experience in general, especially human experience from the perspective of the suffering and downtrodden, the hurt and the oppressed. My focal point of study is the analysis of hidden realities of Black American Women and their experiences of repression and exploitation through Alice Walker's concept of 'Womanism' which she coined. Alice Walker through her powerful and oppressed female characters like Celie, Lissie, Margaret and Meridian has very strikingly portrayed the evils of patriarchal and slave-holding society. Walker through her concept of 'Womanism' wanted an honourable status for black women in her family as well as in the society, as she said:

The great value of a person can attain is
fully humanity, which is a state of one
with all things. (Kurien 186)

Traditionally men's lives have been organised and manipulated by patriarchy in all ages, all cultures and all countries by establishing values, norms, roles, gender perception and idealism that prescribes unequal means, methods and routes to achieve the so-called 'wholeness' for women. Men and women all over the world irrespective of their difference of nationality, race, religion or government are governed by more or less the same feelings and passions. Hence the inequality – existing between men and women, between classes, between haves and have-nots - has not remained just a matter of scholarly interest but over the years it also became everyone's concern. R.G. Subramanian says :

The problem of inequality existing
between nations and classes has
preoccupied various committed writers
and has been a part of their scholarly
endeavours. Morrison's and Walker's
works have championed the cause of

African – American women by bringing the reader’s attention to day-to-day injustice faced by them. (Irfan 131)

African- American women writers have always tried to assert the experience which they felt were distinct from the white women situation, since they had to battle on many fronts – against white patriarchy, against white women racialism and against the sexism of ‘Blackmen’. Initially black feminist writing used the form of the autobiography to explore the evils of a patriarchal, slave – holding society in which white women, while subjugated, were still as oppressive as white men. After emancipation, these writings articulated the sufferings of African – American women and the entire African – American community in a sexist, classical society. Later black feminism manifested itself in the tradition of ‘Colored Women’s Club’, that development is a psychological and social response to the evils of the large society.

‘Womanism’ as a theoretical perspective focused on the experience and knowledge bases of ‘Black Women’ recognises and interrogates the social realities of slavery, segregation, sexism and economic exploitation, examines without viewing them as a variation on or deviation of ‘black mate’ or ‘white female’s’ behaviour and social circumstance.

An important aspect of womanism is the fundamental focus on inequalities. As Ogunyemi (1985) outlines:

Black womanism is a philosophy that celebrates roots, the ideas of black life, while giving a balanced presentation of black women.” (Kalawole 24)

Throughout the years Western canon more especially, have been challenged by different minority group protesting their white, upper and upper – middle class, male bias, Groups such as the African – American, formerly colonised people, women, gays and lesbians have expressed their unhappiness with their status of second – class citizens. This writing focuses on one of the best known approaches to the issues, Alice Walker’s ‘womanism’.

Alice Walker is considered one of the most influential African – American writers of the twentieth century, because of her raw portrayal of African – American struggles and the injustice towards black women.

She was the first female novelist to win both the 'Pulitzer Prize' and 'National Book Award' for the novel *The Color Purple*.

Alice Walker coined the term 'Womanism', in her collection of essays entitled *In Search of Our Mother's Garden* (1983). She used the term, "Womanism" to refer to African-American feminism or the feminism of women of color. As she explains :

I just like to have words that describe things that correctly. Now to me 'black feminism' does not do that. I needed a word that is organic, that really comes out of the culture, that really expresses the spirit that we see in black women. And it's just... "womanish".(Rawat 287)

Walker defines it thus:

- (1) From womanish (opposite of 'girlish' i.e. frivolous irresponsible not serious.).
- (2) Also a woman who loves other women, sexually and/ non- sexually.
- (3) Women who appreciate and prefer women's culture and traditional universalist.
- (4) Womanism is to feminist as purple to lavender." (287)

Walker means through this :

- (1) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, "you acting womanish", i.e. like a woman. Interchangeable with another black folk expression "you trying to be grown."
- (2) Womanish is one who appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility and strength. Walker does not only mean through 'womanist' that women should love others, but more important they should also adore what is specifically female about themselves.
- (3) She also defines 'womanist' as she says, womanists love to struggle and beside loving their people (folk) themselves.
- (4) The two terms in her definition 'black feminism' and 'womanism', can be seen as interchangeable because both are concerned with the struggle against racism and sexism by black women. Walker says, 'purple – with rage, as 'womanism' is an empowered version

of lavender. Purple as a color could be a symbol of indomitable female spirit and an encoding of joyous vitality of female spirit.

(D'Haen T 18)

Alice Walker thought that the twentieth century black women writers all seem to be much more interested in black community... instead of finding the real problems of day-to-day living. She had "a commitment to write the authentic lives of real Black people...with an urgency to tell the specific stories of women." Alice Walker has stated in one of her interviews:

I am preoccupied with the spiritual survival, the whole of my people...I am committed to exploring the oppression, the insanities, the loyalties, the triumphs of the black women... for most fascinating creations of the World.

(Walker 75)

The black women in America are triple burdened and disadvantaged. They are black, female and economically under – privileged. This triple burden restricts them from a fuller and meaningful participation in American society mainly because they are confined to their race and the narrow enclosures of sex. As a result they suffer as blacks amongst the blacks, slaves of the slaves and are forced to occupy a very marginal place in the American social life.

Alice Walker's novels such as *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, (1970), *Meridian* (1976), *The Color Purple* (1982), *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989) and *Anthologies of Short Stories, In love and Trouble Stories of Black Women Down* (1981) deal with the life of African-American with special emphasis on the black women's life.

Walker's novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* is her first novel. Her concern in this novel is the black men-women relationship. In her interview, Alice Walker has stated about her aim behind writing this novel:

And I wanted to explore the relationship between men and women and why women are always condemned for doing what men do as expression of their masculinity. (Rawat 292)

We realise that all the major women characters in the novel such as Margaret, Mem and Joise are abused as whores by their own people, especially their men. Walker, therefore tries to tell their side of the story in the novel. Though apparently it is the life story of Grange Copeland, it is also the suffering, pains and hardships that black women-Margaret, Mem, Joise -face in their life. Their sufferings lead them to understand their situations to launch a struggle to gain a meaningful place in the black world. 'Margaret' was left behind, discarded and abandoned by Grange, to die a silent death, 'Mem' was killed at the gun point by her own husband, Browfield and Joise was driven out of her own home by her own father, a man who stood for religion. Thus just as the white man becomes a symbol of black man's oppressions, a black man becomes a symbol of the black women's oppression.

The Third life of Grange Copeland in Love and Trouble highlights the problems of black women in their day-to-day life. They are led to self-discovery and self-knowledge and ultimately attain regeneration.

Roselily, the heroine of *Roselily* marries a Black Muslim to realise that her husband's hand is no less confining than that of 'the clasp of an iron gate that prevents her from enjoying freedom. Similarly 'Myrna's' husband does not pay attention to her artistic temperament which ultimately suffocates her so much that she gets insane. In *Her Sweet Jerome*, we come across a black woman who goes mad because of the negligence of her husband.

Her *Love and Trouble* has nineteen stories that tell the tale of thirteen black women, who are:

mad, raging, loving, resentful, hateful,
strong, ugly, weak, pitiful and
magnificent, try to live with the loyalty
of black man that characterises all of their
lives. (306)

Similarly, Walker's *You Can't* is a collection of short stories. However, compared to Walker's previous women they are advanced :

They do what they want to do without
any compunction and whatever they do
with confidence and full trust in
themselves. (307)

Meridian is about the female protagonist who gradually awakens from her subordinate status as a black female, daughter, wife and mother to her own self and tries to become the maternal provider of the larger black community. Unlike Sula, Meridian never declares:

I don't want to make somebody else
(babies) but I want to make myself.
(307)

On the contrary, she experiences motherhood in the initial stages of her life and then decides to get rid of her own baby Eddie Jr. to seek admission in a college to find out her own path and identity. This new way and identity enables her to attain,

the highest point of power, property,
splendour, health, vigour etc. (307)

To begin as an ordinary black female and to end as a self-assured personal is not an easy development. To gain the glimpse of her self which is in full bloom she has had to undergo innumerable trials and tests. As a result she evolves:

Oppression to a revolutionary figure
effecting action and strategy to bring
freedom to herself and other poor
disenfranchised blacks in the South. (308)

Walker who has spent much of her literary career projecting womanist consciousness in her writing, inserts women into male role and portrays female strong tellers. The griot of *The Temple of My Familiar* is Lissie. The story of her life is the story of thousands of lives, race and gender. She has been my women; an African peasant sold into slavery by her uncle, subjected to the horrors of the Atlantic crossing, raped and brutalised; a Moorish witch burnt by the inquisition, a lesbian living in a pre-historic forest that covered the whole earth. The novel opens with an epigraph of Lissie:

If they have lied about me/
they have lied about everything. (308)

As Lissie is the reflection of a woman who is born time and again, she uncovers different types of atrocities committed on women.

Even *The Temple of My Familiar* begins with the introduction of Zede, a seamstress from South America and her daughter, Carlotta who escape the terrorism of their country with the help of Mary Ann, a wealthy white American woman hooked on drugs and political activism. Like Lissie, Zede is also a traveller in time, knew many generations on her own. However, it is through Zede we come to know about the situation of women, known in different centuries and continents. Zede in moments of sadness, calls her mind the memories of her past. She says that mothers used to teach about lovemaking and babies when they had come of age. All along the mothers also used to teach the history of their civilization, participated in rituals such as preparing food, collecting wood for fire, bathing, encircling around the fire, nursing tattoo, and the act of telling stories about the past. The novel unfolds the womanist meaning of freedom and the perpetual attempt by men as the history of the war between the sexes is dramatised through the stories told by Lissie.

Another couple in the novel is Suwelo, a history Professor and his wife, Fanny Nizngha, a women's studies teacher. Fanny is in love with marriage. Hence, she proposes to divorce her husband and compels him to live in a separate part of the house. She puts her ideas in the following words:

I will always love you. Probably...
But I don't want to be married. I
don't want to end our relationship. I
want to change it. Not to you, not to
anybody. But I don't want to lose you
either. (318)

Marriage for her means slavery. Hence she declares:

I've never felt free in my life. And I
want to. And to her 'freedom' means
never having (or being able) to
embarrass anybody. (319)

Thus Fanny is not against any sexual relationship between men and women, but against any kind of formal regimentation of that relationship. Fanny's temperament is purely womanist. She is devoted to put an end to the enslavement of black men. She plans to build a house the way M'skuta clan used to build. The house is in fact a paragon of equality of sex.

Walker's *The Color Purple* has elicited a wide range of both praise and censure. The novel explores the exploitation of the oppressed women, the exploitation, abuse and harassment commencing from childhood, leading to traumatic experiences and leaving psychic scars in victim through Celie's eye especially the letters she write to her God and latter to her sister Nettie. Celie writes to God to help her to survive the spiritual, emotional and physical abuse she suffers at her father. One such instance is when her father finds that Celie's mother is not allowing him to sex, he tries to find a substitute. Consequently, he makes brutal sexual attacks on Celie and dictates her:

You better shut up and get used to it.
(320)

Celie is subjugated to enforced rape. As a result, she becomes pregnant. Hence she writes about her plight and fate to the Almighty and the moment she becomes pregnant she writes :

I'm big. I can't move fast enough. By time I get back from the well, the water be warm. By time I get the tray ready the food be cold. By the time I get all the children ready for school it be dinner time. (www.ukessays.com)

Motherhood may be pleasurable to some women but for Celie, like Meridian, Mem, Josie and Margaret, it is a burden.

In one of her essays, "Living by the World," Walker has remarked, "there is no story more moving to me personally than one in which one woman saves the life of another and saves herself," a feat that "black women wish they were able to do all the time." *The Color Purple* reveals saving gestures of various types. (141).

Walker firmly believes that one of the chief reasons of women's exploitation has been the male's greed for possession. She tells us that because men were stronger, at least during those period when women were weak from child-bearing, began to think of wooing women and children... when man saw he could own one woman and her children, became greedy and wanted as many as he could get. Walker recapitulates the history of women since the day when human civilization began and describes how the society which was based on the egalitarian principles was transformed into society of dominance.

In short Alice Walker as an African – American womanist of letters places the predicament of black women in its historical perspective. Throughout her writings, she has tried to depict the life of these hopeless women. Her works are committed to expose the sexist tragedy of 'Black Women' and protest against their ongoing degradation. Walker's own words stand testimony to her determination:

I am preoccupied with the spiritual survival, the survival of the whole of my people. But beyond that, I am committed to exploring the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties and the triumphs of black women. (Walker 62)

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