

ALICE WALKER'S "THE COLOR PURPLE" AS WOMANIST NOVEL

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Abstract

Alice Walker is an African-American novelist, was awarded the Pulitzer Prize yet to be owing to her epistolary novel, "The Color Purple" is one of the best examples of a womanist text of all times. The Novel has become the feminism canon of contemporary western literature. It deeply reveals the erosion of patriarchic thoughts for black men and black women, and also shows the physical or psychological enslavement of black women were suffering from both race and gender discrimination at that time. Alice Walker sets herself to expose as well as oppose the patriarchal culture consciousness and gender order, and highlighted the strong female consciousness in "The Color Purple", Walker proposed the term "womanism", which is highly influential for the study of black women. Womenism focuses on the liberation of black women. The central thought of womanism gets rid of the exclusive feature of traditional feminism and has a vision of integral survival of all people, inclusive of men and women. Integral survival is literally a central idea of womanism, is widely demonstrated in Walker's novel "The Color Purple", she places herself within a tradition of black female creativity. In addition, the novel's, plot allows black females to hold in center stage in comparison to black males, and then pushes away whites-both male and female-to the extreme margins. The novel's theme and content are also in a thorough manner womanistic. It has strategically repudiated the bourgeois morality and replaces conventional marriage and heterosexuality with the sexual and loving relationship between women.

Keywords: Alice Walker, The Black Feminist, Womanist, The Color Purple, African-American Novel, Womanism, The Oppression, The Bourgeois Morality, Conventional Marriage, Heterosexuality, The Physical and Emotional relationship, The Triumphs of Black Women.

The term womanism denotes black feminism. Womanism may be defined as an awareness among black women that they have been mistreated in life and misrepresented in literature simply because they are black, female and poor; and a commitment to unite against the racist, sexist and classiest forces of American society, and assert themselves as intelligent, capable and sensitive human beings. White feminism has served the interests of the white women alone and has failed to address itself the black woman's experience of racism, sexism, and classicism. In male white American society, invisibility, ill-treatment, and marginalization have long been the common woes of women and black men alike. Nevertheless, the plight of black women has been much worse than that of white women or black men. While white women suffered for being female and black, black women have to bear the "double jeopardy" of racism and sexism.

As pointed out by Gerda Lerner: " Belonging as they do to two groups which have traditionally been treated as inferiors by the American society – Blacks and women – they have been doubly invisible. Their records lie buried, unread, rarely noticed and even more seldom interpreted. Victimization of the black women has extended from life to national mythology and literature. In Southern white literature, she appears as the strong, nurturing, uncomplaining mammy, while black male literature tends to perpetuate her stereotyped image as the tragic mulatto or the victim of sexual abuse. It undertakes to study her psychological growth, her society, and history, her relationship with her husband and children.

The Intellectual Roots of the term womanist can be traced back to Alice Walker's preface her book of essays, "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose".(1983) She coined and used the term to the black feminist possessed of strength and persistence which she holds to be prerequisite to personal development. A woman who loves other women, sexuality and or non-sexually". Chikwenya Ogunyemi describes a Womanist novel as one " in which fictional black women move from physical or psychological enslavement to independence and freedom.

Alice Walker's novel, "The Color Purple" written in the epistolary and autobiographical form, the slave narrative that has not only influenced and shaped Afro-American writing but also helped the Afro-American slaves to move from object to subject. It disowns the bourgeois morality and replaces the conventional heterosexual plot with black lesbianism. Generally speaking, it depicts the antagonism between black men and black women and the physical and emotional relationship between black women. Specifically, however, it is the story of two sisters, Celie and Nettie, who forced too far apart for thirty long years. During this interval, they keep writing to each other about their suffering and struggle. These letters and those written by Celia to God form the fabric of the novel. Celie's suffering ranges from her forced an incestual relationship with her step-father (Alfonso) to her merciless beating, sexual exploitation and economic enslavement in the hands of her husband (Albert referred

to as Mr__.) As a result of her incestuous past, she is thrown into a neurotic phase of self-censure and confusion and suffers from frigidity. Being a helpless psychological victim of incest, to begin with, she is incapable of any resistance and simply continues to ensure her lot and suffering.

But later her erotic relationship with Shug, a blues singer and husband's mistress, her emotional relationship with Sofia and Squeak (Mary Agnes), and Nettie's animating and emboldening letters revise her sexual instinct, improve her self-image and infuse strength into her enabling her to fight her way to lesbian identity and economic independence. Towards the end, she becomes an entrepreneur, and her violent husband is seen sitting at her side, calm and docile, learning the female art of sewing. The novel ends with the happy reunion of the long-separated mother and children (Celie and her children Olivia and Adam), and sister (Celia and Nettie). Thus following the tradition of a bildungsroman, Walker starts out introducing Celie as a confused and helpless victim of physical, sexual and economic oppression and then charts her psycho-sexual growth and economic freedom through lesbian relationship especially with Shug Avery, the blues singer. It is Shug Avery who makes Celie love her body and the immense pleasures that can derive out of her own without any male companionship. She makes her self-confident by directing her energy towards making pants for women and takes her to Memphis with her and makes her live independently without the help or support of her husband. Her economic independence and individual self-awakening make her husband look upon her with respect and long for her company as the wife. But Celie prefers just to be his friend and nothing more.

Womanism can be tracked in the form as well as the content of "The Color Purple". To quote Wendy Wall: "Letters become the surrogate body for Celie, an inanimate form that serves a dual purpose; it fends off pain by siphoning off her feelings of degradation, as well as allowing her express and thus feel the intensity of her emotions. Her self-division is imposed upon her by external circumstances; yet by displacing a part of herself on to this second body, she keeps intact that division. She compartmentalizes a suppressed 'self' through her letters. The letters become a tenuous skin of her body framing her internal thoughts in a realm separate from her outward actions.

"That folded a secret place which is at all times open to violent intrusion". The Color Purple is written in black folk English and rooted in the matrilineal tradition of Afro-American writing, at whose structural center is situated, Zora Neale Hurston.

Henry Louis Gates, Jr., identifies a lesbian relationship between Walker and Hurston at the authorial level: "Walker in effect, has written a letter of love to her authority figure, Hurston". In much the same vein, Linda Abbandonato describes the novel as womanist text, "a conscious rewriting of canonical male texts" and states: "By adopting the crazy quilt, the craft

of her fore-mothers, as the structuring principle of her fiction, Alice Walker places herself within a tradition of black female creativity". Further, the plot of the novel allows black females to hold center stage in comparison to black males and pushes whites-both male and female-to extreme margins.

The novel's theme and content are out and put womanistic. It strategically repudiates the bourgeois morality and replaces conventional marriage and heterosexuality with the sexual and loving relationship between women.

Womanism permeates through the novel in the sense of sexual and emotional bonding between black women against all patriarchal tyrannies. It can be seen not only in the intense mutual love that Celie and Nettie give full vent to in their letters, but also in one's readiness to sacrifice anything for the other. Celie's offering herself sexually to her step-father to save her sister Nettie from being raped by him provides one of the most touching examples of womanism in the novel:

"I asked him to take me instead of Nettie while our new mammy sick. But he just asks me what I'm talking about. He beat me for dressing trampy but he does it to me anyway."
(Letter7,p.9)

In fact, all the other black women in the novel show a similar persistent tendency to fall into a bond of mutual sympathy, love, and admiration. As an essential part of her womanist strategy, Walker puts this womanistic proclivity in the context of sexism, racism, and classism; and focuses it as the outcome of, and a conscious as well as unconscious defense against, the various types of oppression the black women have undergone. The shared sense of exploitation that draws and binds the women emotionally allows them the strength to fight the despotism of patriarchy. Such anti-patriarchal sympathetic bonding is mirrored in Nettie's concern about Celie's ill-treatment by Albert and his children: "you got to fight. You got to fight". It is also perceivable in Albert's sisters Carrie and Kate's instant falling for Celie: "One thing is for sure. You keep a clean house".

Kate even makes it a point to urge her brother to buy Celie New clothes and demonstrate with him for not lending her a hand with household work, though this only comes home to roost, and she has to pack up leave, saying to Celie: "You got to fight them for yourself". An example of empathy and sacrifice to the point of accepting rape, which parallels the case of Celie, is offered by Squeak, who ensures rape by the warden of the prison to get Sofia out of it. Womanism, in its non-sexual aspect – in the sense of sisterhood, affection and solidarity are discernible in the attitude of economic cooperation that exists among black women. To quote an example:

"I and Sofia work on the quilt. Got it to frame up on the porch. If the quilt turns out perfect, maybe I give to her if not perfect, maybe I keep." (Letter 28,p.56)

This elemental form of economic co-operation among the women, initially corresponding to mere seeds, later grows into black lesbian capitalism, represented by Celie's "Folks pants Unlimited".

As for the sexual facet of womanism in the novel, Celie's relationship with Shug provides a solitary example. Excepting her, all the other women are heterosexual, while maintaining a relationship of sisterhood, affection and mutual help among themselves. However, this should not lead one to overlook the importance of that the central treatment of Celie's lesbian sexuality has; not to ignore the fact Celie is lesbian in the absolute sense,i.e., both physically and emotionally. Her presence at the heart of the novel illustrates Walker's preoccupation with both the physical and emotional facets of womanism. Her attraction and relationship with Shug are overtly sexual, whereas she is drawn to the other women by emotion. Of this difference, she becomes aware when Albert brings the blues singer, Shug home in a sick state, asking her to nurse her, and she has the opportunity to look at her naked body while washing it:

" Cept for Sofia, and the plump and ruddy and crazy she feels like my sister. She says, Well take a good look. Even if I just a bag of bones now. She gave the nerves to put one hand on her naked hip and bad her eyes at me. Then she sucks her reef and rolls her eyes at the ceiling while I wash her.." (Letter 24,p.47)

From the very beginning, Celie feels that she is sexually dead to Albert, or to any other man for that matter, and cannot help picturing Shug or Nettie, As she speaks of to Shug, it is as if he were " going to the toilet"(Letter 35,p.74) on her. On the other hand, even a glance towards Shug makes her feel like a man, and she finds sexually exciting to turn her eyes over her body:

"Shug wearing a good dress that shows her titties near bout to the nipple. Everybody sort of hoping something break. But that dress strong". (Letter 36,p.76)

"All men for the eyes glued to Shug's bosom. I got my eyes glued there too. I feel my nipples harden under my dress. My little butter sort or perk up too. Shug, I say to her in my mind, Girl, you look like a real good time, the Good Lord knows you too." (Letter 36, p.77)

It may also be noted that she has her first sexual consummation with Shug and her erotic urges directed exclusively to her though Shug remains bisexual throughout her sexual life. As stated above, an essential part of her womanist strategy, Walker establishes a causal relationship between the black women's lesbian bonding and the sexism, racism, and

classicism of American society. Whether sexual or affectional, lesbianism is essentially subversive of the patriarchal social order, as it involves the assertion of female subjectivity. A patriarchal society tends to deny subjectivity of females, whether it is sexual or economic activity. In both realms, they are commodified and exchanged between men, as, in the novel, Celie is exchanged between her step-father and her husband.

Such exchange and compulsory heterosexuality operate to bind men together as well as helping uphold the system of patriarchy. The anti-female economy of patriarchy reduces women to slaves, while its sexism not only subjects them to male brutality, but also precludes female subjectivity in sexuality by nurturing the myth that sexual intercourse is not possible without phallus, that it essentially involves the penis penetrating the vagina, and that in it, the former is active and dominant and the latter is passive and dominated. This myth extends to male homosexuality as well, particularly as it was held by ancient Greeks and is recorded in Plato's symposium. In regard to male sexuality, the ancient Greeks approved of the one in the penetrating role and held the penetrated in contempt, an attitude that is equally characteristic of the period and society, to which Celie belongs.

Besides sexual and economic oppression, the black women in the novel also undergo racial oppression. As far as Celie is concerned, an inquiry into her personal history reveals, as she herself comes to know through Nettie's letter, that her father's murder and her resultant economic enslavement follow upon racial violence. If her father were not killed by the white merchants, she would not sustain rape and incest and economically would be no slave to anybody..

Being the central character and probably intended as representative of all black women, Celie is portrayed as a victim of a whole range of oppression. She is not treated as a human. Her husband does not even look her in the face: " He looks at me. It like he looking at the earth". She is beaten like a child because, as her husband instructs to his son, " Wives is like children. Not anything can do better than a good sound beating". (Letter 19, p.35) She is conceded little status as the subject in sexuality; her productive organs are controlled by men, and her babies are given away without her permission.

Harpo's heavy-handedness to his wife Sofia, which parallels his father's to Celie, and Nettie's commentary on the Olink people's discrimination against their women, constantly with Walker's womanist design, suggest the fact that gender oppression is not limited to the Afro-American community in American South, but pervades the entire world of her black men and women, The Juxtaposition also produces the effect of reinforcing the sense of gender oppression in the novel. To the Olinka people, as to the African-Americans, a girl can at most be the mother of her husband's children, i.e., the breeding machine. This is what Nettie writes

to Celie about the Olinka people's evaluation of their women: " When I asked a mother why she thought this, she said a girl is not a thing to herself; only to her husband can she become something. What can she become? I asked. Why, she said, the mother of his children". (Letter 62, p.140)

Afro-Americans, as well as Africans, avoid looking at their women while speaking: " They look at the ground and bend their heads towards the ground". (Letter 63, p. 146) They confine them to the care of children, and " among the Olinka, the husband has life and death power over the wife. (Letter 64, p. 151) This is also true of the Afro-Americans in a sense, for, in one way or another, wives or mistresses are caused to die in childbirth, are shot down at him. The death of Celie's own mother in childbirth and Annie Julia's murder by her lover are cases in point.

It is to resist all these physical, sexual, racial and economic oppression that the black women in the novel turn to lesbianism. For them, it not only serves as an oasis of relief from all types of oppression, but also facilitates their psychological growth by imbuing them with self-identity, self-esteem, and strength, helps them to present a united front against them. Consistently with her womanist design, Walker sets herself to expose as well as oppose all the various ways in which male American society tyrannizes over them; and, instead of simply making a sensational story of Celie's victimization, undertakes to offer a psychological insight into her inner world, her early self-insignificance and confusion and eventual sense of triumph and clarity.

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