

Alice Walker and Womanism

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ABSTRACT:

Alice Walker has emerged as the most powerful black writer whose mission is to raise the visibility of black women, to celebrate their strength, endurance and resourcefulness, to praise their creativity evident even in domestic skills which are generally unvalued. Walker concentrates on the development of identity and community among black women in the face of *white* and *male* supremacy and focusses on female wholeness. In her non-fiction this has led her to search out and celebrate her connection with other African American women, particularly writers. As a feminist, she is also a constant critic of established forms of feminism-going so far as to establish “Womanism”, that is, a form of feminism that incorporates specific qualities indigenous to the experiences of African American women. Walker has established a specifically womanist tradition, and has helped to affirm the pivotal importance of work by African American women.

KEYWORDS: Black writing, Feminism, Womanism, Racism, Sexism.

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INTRODUCTION:

Considered America's most gifted and influential writer, Alice Walker's creative vision is rooted in the economic hardships, racial prejudices and folk wisdom of African American life and culture. Centered around the struggles of African American women, her writing explores the multidimensional kinships among women and their journeys of self discovery and development. Growing up in a sharecropper family in Eatonton, Georgia, Walker had a first-hand experience of the southern atmosphere in which black vernacular was prominent and slavery and oppression prevailed. The experience of a disfigurement in her childhood also profoundly influenced her life, leading her into a self-imposed isolation. She remarks:

I believe... that it was from this period – from my solitary, lonely position, the position of an outcast – that I began really to see people and things, really to notice relationships and to learn to be patient enough to care about how they turned out...I retreated into solitude, and read stories and began to write poems.
(Walker 1983: 244-45)

Her self-imposed alienation, coupled with her fear of becoming totally blind, encouraged the young girl to monitor people and relationships closely to discover the inner truths masked by facades. Walker used her blinded eye as a filter through which to look beyond the surface of African American women's existence, and discovered that she cared both about the pain and spiritual decay she found hidden there. Walker commented that as a southern black growing up in a poor rural community, she possessed the benefit of "double vision." She explained in *In Search...*:

Not only is the [black southern writer] in a position to see his own world, and its close community...but also he is capable of knowing, with remarkable silent accuracy, the people who make up the larger world that surrounds and suppresses his own.
(Walker 1983: 19)

Themes like racism and sexism, the role of the artist, the relation between art and life, the process towards spiritual health and self-definition of the characters and environmental issues are dealt with throughout her writings comprising novels, short stories, poems and essays. She also often incorporates autobiographical elements in her works and depicts the political, social and moral conditions of the South. *Once*, a volume of poems marked Walker's debut as a distinctive and talented writer. Barbara Christian remarks that already in *Once*, Walker displayed what would become a feature of both her future poetry and fiction, an "unwavering

honesty in evoking the forbidden, either in political stances or in love” (qtd in Shukla 2007: 201). Although showing a special preference for “the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties, and the triumphs of black women” she herself says that she is “preoccupied with the spiritual survival, the survival *whole* of [her] people” (Walker 1983: 250).

Alice Walker takes pride in the relationships and continuities developed from within a matrilineal tradition of writing. For Walker, women such as Gwendolyn Brooks and Zora Neale Hurston were foremothers from whom she and other African American women writers could learn and grow. Although both these writers were important to Walker and her creative vision, Hurston was an icon for her, representing tremendous literary achievement and courage. Walker also journeyed to Florida in 1973 in search of the writer’s past where she found and marked Hurston’s neglected gravesite with a headstone. Walker took the initiative of saving African American women writers from the dark recesses of oblivion. “It was, rather, a duty I accepted as naturally mine --- as a black person, a woman, and a writer --- because Zora was dead and I, for the time being, was alive” (Walker 1983:87).

“Black women are called, in the folklore that so aptly identifies one’s status in society, ‘the mule of the world,’ because we have been handed the burdens that everyone else – *everyone else* – refused to carry,” (Walker 1983: 237) Explaining her thematic concerns to an interviewer, she said:

I am preoccupied with the spiritual survival, the survival whole of my people, but beyond that, I am committed to exploring the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties, and the triumphs of black women . . . For me, black women are the most fascinating creations in the world. Next to them, I place the old people – male and female – who persist in their beauty inspite of everything.
(Walker 1983: 251-52).

As a creative writer, her fiction too centres around the lives of black women focussing attention on sexism within society at large and within black society in particular. She has been critical of the invisibility of black working women whether in novels, literary history, the civil rights movement, black nationalism or white middle-class feminism. She raises her voice against all those racial and patriarchal tendencies (both white and black) which systematically deny the reality of black female lives. Alice Walker is noted for her prolific writings depicting the struggles of African American women. Her famous collection of essays, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: A Womanist Prose*, is at once a memoir and a series of observations on African American women’s culture. With this collection of what Walker herself calls “womanist prose” she affirms her reputation as a black feminist, coining the term “Womanism” to refer to black feminism. She describes a womanist as “a black feminist or feminist of color.” For her, a womanist is a black feminist who is “committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female”(Walker 1983: xi). The designation “womanist” and the ideologies it represents spread Walker’s influence beyond literary circles and into the domain of African American religious culture.

Consistent with this concern for the wholeness of both males and females and celebration of “courageous or wilful” black women, Walker calls herself a womanist rather than a feminist.

By coining a new term “Womanism,” she goes a step further in emphasizing the uniqueness of black women. The main reason why womanism was a step forward from feminism is because while the latter was a movement/ philosophy aiming for equality, the former was about achieving “personal and communal wholeness.” This striving for becoming a “whole” person unites all the aspects of Walker’s womanism as reflected in her works. Womanism brought a racialized and often class – located experience to the gendered experience suggested by feminism.

The term womanism, coined by Walker, may be interpreted as an attempt to integrate black nationalism into feminism, to articulate a distinctively black feminism that shares some of the objectives of black nationalist ideology.
(Dubey 1994:107)

Alice Walker chose to call her concept of feminism ‘womanism’ because she felt it suits her particular circumstances. She notes in the New York Times Magazine in 1984:

I don’t choose womanism because it is ‘better’ than feminism...I choose it because I prefer the sound, the feel, the fit of it; because I cherish the spirit of the women...the word calls to mind...I dislike having to add a color in order to become visible, as in ‘black feminist.’ Womanism gives us a word of our own.
(qtd in Chakranarayan and Shahida 2005: 28)

She simply saw womanism as a complement to the feminist movement; a womanist, according to Walker, is a feminist of color or black feminist. However, it is pertinent to mention that womanism, while focussing on the female, does not negate the significance and necessity of the male gender. The womanist movement gave black women a means of speaking on gender issues without attacking black men. In relation to the survival of the black community, issues such as gender equality were addressed in a more complete way by womanism than feminism. The intention is not to reciprocate oppressive behaviour against the males who often attempt to dominate females; the purpose is to recognize wrongdoing, evoke change, and move forward as a community – male and female – while specifically celebrating the strength, fortitude, and progress of the female. Although Walker stated that a womanist is a black feminist, she insisted that a black feminist as womanist talks back to feminism, brings new demands and different perspectives to feminism, and compels the expansion of feminist horizons theoretically and practically. Womanism was soon adopted by, and often used in the description of African American women’s struggle for self - determination and community, past and present. Womanism helped give visibility to the experience of African Americans who had always been on the forefront of movements to overthrow the sexual and racial caste systems, yet had always been marginalized or rendered invisible in history texts, the media, and mainstream movements led by European American Feminists or male civil rights leaders.

Black womanhood, since the times of slavery, was destroyed, distorted, dismantled and abused with racial, sexual and inhuman practices by black men and white men and women. In the process, they lost their genuine “self” and saw themselves through the eyes of white men and women and black men and which ultimately destroyed and dehumanized them. They looked upon themselves as chattels and were called the “mules of the world” (Walker 1983:

237). Jean Toomer referred to them as “the exquisite butterflies trapped in an evil honey” (Walker 1983: 232). The task of the black womanist writers, therefore, was to give back to black women their own black woman self, their beauty, physical and sexual strength, motherhood, sisterhood, wifeness, etc. At the same time, the need was to educate them and make them aware of the need to recover from psychological and mental traumas of inferiority; which was possible only if their wholeness as women was restored.

Mary Helen Washington, in 1979, described Walker as an “apologist and spokeswoman for black women” (Gates Jr. and Appiah 1993: 37) and in an essay published in 1984, Bettye Parker Smith argued that Walker’s “cause is the liberation of black womanhood” (qtd in Dubey 1994: 110). From whatever aspect one investigates the work of Alice Walker, it is clear that the special identifying mark of her writing is her concern for the lives of black women. In her interview with John O’Brien, she says, “I believe in listening – to a person, the sea, the wind, the trees, but especially to young black women whose rocky road I am still travelling” (Walker 1983: 345). Her sense of personal identification with black women, moreover, includes a sense of sharing their peculiar oppression. Throughout the interview, Walker spoke of her own awareness of and experiences with brutality and violence in the lives of black women, many of whom she had known as a girl.

As a “womanist” writer, Walker concerns herself with racial, cultural, national, economic, and political issues along with sexual ones. Protesting against sexism and the patriarchal power structure, she is unapologetically a propagandist. Her writing demands that the readers, whether the male oppressors or the oppressed females become aware of the ideological issues in order to change their attitudes about patriarchy. Her works not only deal with women and women’s issues but puts forward aspects of her womanist ideology. Walker’s main strength is her consciousness of herself as a black woman empowered to narrate the stories of black women who were in the past or present, creators of a Black Female Culture. She ensures that black women, most marginalized by race, caste, and class, have their voices heard and their histories read.

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