

## Womanhood redefined as a case of study of Alice Walker

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### Abstract

This paper will explore the concept of Walker's Womanism. Walker's own definition of the concept Womanism will be analyzed in detail, the essays she collected in *In Search of Our Mothers Gardens* and which she labeled as "womanist prose" will be looked at in the light of this definition. The novel *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989) is analyzed, with specific attention to the ways in which the work could be called a womanist novel.

**Key words:** Feminism, Womanism, Black Feminism.

Novelist, poet and feminist Alice Malsenior Walker was born on February 9, 1944, in Eatonton, Georgia. Alice Walker is one of the most admired African-American writers working today. She studied at Spelman College, Atlanta, and Sarah Lawrence College, New York, then worked as a social worker, teacher and lecturer. She took a brief sabbatical from her writing in the 1960s to live in Mississippi and work in the civil rights movement, returning to New York to write for Ms. Magazine. She worked as a social worker, teacher and lecturer and took part in the 1960s civil rights movement

in Mississippi. She won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for her 1982 novel *The Color Purple* and she's also an acclaimed poet and essayist.

### Defining womanism from Authors perspective

Alice Walker coined the term Womanism in her collection of essays entitled *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, published in 1983. At the beginning of the collection she gives a definition of this feminist, Afrocentric, healing, embodied, and spiritual concept:

1. Womanist from womanish. (Opp. of "girlish," i.e. frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black emminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, "You acting womanish," i.e. like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior. Wanting to know more and in great depth than is considered "good" for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: "You trying to be grown." Responsible. In charge. Serious.

2. Also: A woman who loves other women, sexually and or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally Universalist, as in: "Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige, and black?" Ans.: "Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented." Traditionally capable, as in: "Mama, I'm walking to Canada and I'm taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me." Reply: "It wouldn't be the first time."

3. Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. Regardless.

4. Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender (Walker, *Gardens*, xi-xii).

This chaotic enumeration suggests that Womanism denotes very different things, which makes it difficult to fully grasp what Walker is saying. I will try however to analyse each of the four entries in the definition as completely as possible.

According to Torfs (2008), the origin of the term "womanist" is derived from the adjective "womanish" that features in the black folk expression: "You acting womanish." It is also similar in meaning to another folk expression: "You trying to be grown." The two folk expressions are

associated with the adjectives “outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful*” that suggest strong determination and plenty of motivation. However, the emphasis on ‘willful’ implies that most black women have been denied their own free wills. Both expressions suggest an attitude related to the will to know more and in greater depth than is considered good’ for one.

The second definition reveals different types of relationships between women. On the one hand, womanists love other women, particularly for the traits that make them female, e.g., their female culture, their emotional life, and their strength. On the other hand, they show interest in lesbian relationships. Regarding their attitude towards men, womanists show no reluctance to maintain heterosexual relationships. Although Walker appeals to her audience to love themselves merely because they are female, she does not have hard feelings towards men.

In the third definition lists the things a womanist loves, including the moon which is considered a symbol of femininity. In her list, Walker also mentions music, dance, love, food and roundness as symbols for the worldly, bodily pleasures in life as well as the spirit as a symbol for the spiritual dimension of our being. In this regard, Walker’s reference to spirituality as fundamental to human survival in general and black and womanist experience in particular is emphasized by Harvey. This womanist attitude to carry on strife is a part of the larger human struggle for greater peace, beauty, freedom and justice.

The fourth phrase “Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender”. With this statement, Walker suggests that both womanism and feminism have much in common; nevertheless, they are unquestionably different. However, Walker does not identify the similarities and differences between womanism and feminism, or between purple and lavender. Exploring Walker’s four-part definition of womanism, Hudson-asks if there is any difference between purple and lavender. She concludes that there is hardly any difference for Walker except in shade and color. The difference between feminism and womanism, however, is that the former “tends to favor the separation of the sexes,” while the latter “urges for a union of males and females in joint endeavors to promote the advancement of the human race”(Hudson, 20).

### **Critical view point about womanism by feminist writers.**

As Showalter points out, for both Afro-Americans and feminists, the black woman is “the other Woman, the silenced partner”. This is not only true in general, but also more specifically for literary

theory. Throughout the years, black women have protested against “the sexism of black literary history” as well as against “the racism of feminist literary history” finding themselves and their works irrevocably “excluded from both modes of inquiry” and consequently situated in some kind of no man’s land. Yet, instead of remaining silent in this no man’s land, black women have claimed their own place, stating that they should be considered more than some sort of common denominator of Afro-Americanism and feminism. Instead, being both black and female, these women are “doubly marginalized”.

As Smith argues, “the meaning of blackness in this country shapes profoundly the experience of gender, just as the conditions of womanhood affect ineluctably the experience of race” (Smith, 38). Or, formulated differently: “black women experience a unique form of oppression in discursive and non discursive practices alike because they are victims at once of sexism, racism and by extension classism. According to hooks, this puts black women in a privileged position to tackle questions of oppression of any sort. It is essential that black women recognize the special vantage point their marginality gives them and make use of this perspective to criticize the dominant racist, classist, sexist hegemony as well as to envision and create counter-hegemony.

### **Women hood re-defined in the works of Alice Walker.**

In *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, my mother adorned with flowers whatever shabby house we were forced to live in. Whatever she planted grew as if by magic, and her fame as grower of flowers spread over three counties. Because of her creativity with her flowers, even my memories of poverty are seen through a screen of blooms- sunflowers, petunias, roses, dahlias, forsythia, spire, delphiniums, verbena and so on.

The image of a garden full of flowers lies at the basis of the title essay *In Search of Our Mothers Gardens*, and has become very important in Walker’s Womanism as the symbol for her universalist attitude. She also talks about biological foremothers on a larger temporal scale. About black women in the twenties, she write spirituality it was so intense, so deep, so unconscious, that they were themselves unaware of the richness they held. They stumbled blindly through their lives creatures so abused and mutilated in body, so dimmed and confused by pain, that they considered themselves unworthy even of hope. In the selfless abstractions their bodies became to the men who

used them, they became more than “sexual objects,” more even than mere women they became “Saints” These crazy, loony, pitiful women Some of them without a doubt, were our mothers,

Walker also refers to motherhood in a more symbolical and spiritual way, when she talks about models. Her own relationship to the Harlem Renaissance author Zora Neale Hurston, of whose book *Their Eyes Were Watching God* Walker says, “There is no book more important to her than this one”. Walker discovers Hurston and her work when she is looking for information on voodoo for a story she is writing. Just when she becomes irritated by the racist tinge of the works on black folklore by white scholars, she finds Hurston’s *Mules and Men*. As she says, “she immediately appreciates in Hurston her racial health, a sense of black people as complete, complex, undiminished human beings” Yet, when she starts looking at what critics have said about Hurston, she finds mostly negative things. This is when she decides to do something about it and starts “looking for Zora” Walker will do all she can to recover Hurston and her literary production and it is because of these motivated attempts that Hurston is now considered an important Afro-American author and one of the first black feminists. Walker’s personal involvement in Hurston’s case goes quite far pretending to be Hurston’s niece.

The essays, *In Search of Our Mothers Gardens* are rightfully labelled womanist prose, as they are indeed an illustration and elaboration of the concept Womanism and the definition Walker provides of it first and foremost, black feminism, the black woman and her specific situations and emotions are as central in the collection as they are in the definition. Secondly, the Universalist stance that is so crucial in Walker’s Womanism is also illustrated in several ways in the essays. The essays in addition reveal that this non-separatist attitude determines Walker’s view on the race in general, which she stresses to be a community in the first place, as well as on the artist, to whom she attributes a social function. Lastly, the essays elaborate on the mother-child relationship Walker touches on in her definition, considering the relationship both in a literal (i.e. biological) and in a more symbolical sense

## **Conclusion**

Being both black and female, the black woman’s situation and oppression go far beyond that of either male blacks or white women. Consequently, black women find themselves socially, politically and especially emotionally situated in a no man’s land, unable to identify with either Afro-Americanism or mainstream feminism. Although they belong to both minority groups up to a certain height, their specific predicament is never fully grasped by either. That is why, throughout the years,

black women have claimed their own rightful place and have created a specifically black feminism. With her strong fascination for black women, from the start of her career, Alice Walker has presented herself as one of the advocates of this black feminism, coining her own term for and creating her own approach to the issue.

Every Black person concerned about our collective survival must acknowledge that sexism is a destructive force in Black life that cannot be effectively addressed without an organized political movement to change consciousness, behavior and institutions. What we need is a feminist revolution in Black life. But to have such a revolution, we must first have a feminist movement. Many Black folks do not know what the word feminism means. They may think of it only as something having to do with white women's desire to share equal rights with white men. In reality, feminism is a movement to end all sexism and sexist oppression and the strategies necessary to achieve that.

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