

Other-mothers and Other-Sisters: Womanist Bonding in the novels of Alice Walker

Dr. Asha Krishnan

Assistant Professor

Department of English

HHMSPBNSS College for Women

Neeramankara

Abstract

The concept of motherhood holds an important place in African tradition and culture. The early Africans bestowed supreme importance to mothers as they believed mothers are responsible for giving and sustaining life on earth. African Americans too give a significant position to the mothers. Not only biological mothers, other-mothers, who assist the mothers are also given respect. Sisterhood is also an important notion among African Americans that emphasize the womanist bond. The paper analyses how womanist bonding is portrayed in Alice Walker's novels.

Keywords: African American, Black women, motherhood, sisterhood, other-mothering

African American women writers view sexism as another form of colonization. Patriarchy reduces women subjects to second - rate citizens. The African American woman has to bear the atrocities of the White man in the name of racism as well as the atrocities of the Black man in the name of sexism. Women at the lower strata of the society, who are dependent on their male counterparts, are victimized most by patriarchy. For Walker, all that prevents the free blossoming of a woman's self is viewed as manifestations of colonization.

Black woman started to view writing as a tool to liberate her. Within the antagonistic circumstances, of racial as well as sexual oppression the Black female made her pen an effective instrument for representing herself as well as her society. Her writings became a mirror which reflected the life of the Black woman in the society as well in the domestic sphere. However, for the literary world, the African American writers were non-existent entities until recently. Toni Morrison severely criticizes the marginalization of African American writing in her essays. In her article, “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature,” Morrison states: “There is something called American literature that, according to conventional wisdom, is certainly not Chicano literature, or Afro-American literature or Asian literature... It is somehow separate from them and they from it” (201). This separation becomes all the more severe when it comes to the works of women writers.

In *Canonization, Colonization, Decolonization: A Comparative Study of Political and Critical Works by Minority Writers*, Seodial Deena emphasizes the importance of writing as a tool for the women of colour to define themselves and to create “a new territory for postcolonial women”(19). White women were negligent of the problems of Black women. For them, racism was only a problem subordinate to patriarchy. But, for Black women, racism and patriarchy were problems of equal magnitude.

The writings of Black women were quite different from their White counterparts. They dealt with subjects which were taken from their own experiences. The themes which they penned were not about the niceties or superficialities of life. They dealt with the hard-core actualities of their lives, the trials and tribulations they had to undergo, the sufferings which transformed their selves to iron-hard selves. Laretta Ngcobo validates this:

We as Black writers at times displease our white readership. Our writing is seldom genteel since it springs from our experiences which in real life have none of the trimmings of gentility. If the truth be told, it cannot titillate the aesthetic palates of many white people, for deep down it is a criticism of their values and their treatment of us throughout history.(4)

In the writings of Walker, the notion of motherhood as well as sisterhood is stressed. In a world where patriarchy as well as racism rules, the Black woman gets comfort and solace in the presence of her mother than from anybody else. Walker acknowledges the influence of her mother's creativity in gardening in her life. Her mother's garden was filled with flowers of myriad types which made Walker's life forget the pangs of poverty. This garden, with a feast of many varieties of flowers influenced Walker in coining the title "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens".

Like Mem, a character 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, spirea, delphiniums, verbena... and on and on. (*In Search* 241)

Motherhood is a very significant concept among the African Americans as well. Mother, in African American community, is not viewed as just a person who has given birth, but she is the carrier of tradition, the person who is responsible for the cyclicity of life. There are historical reasons for mother-daughter bonding in African American communities.

Most of Black women, who were left alone when their men went to seek jobs, depended on their children for emotional support. This emotional dependence helped to forge a strong bonding between the mothers and children, especially daughters. It is the Black mother, who initiates the daughter to the realities of the world, teaches her lessons of survival, and facilitates her to redefine herself. The torchbearers of cultural continuity, it is through the mothers that a tradition is maintained. Maria Stewart, the African American intellectual in her speech in 1831 exhorts the black mothers: “O ye mothers! What a responsibility rests in you. You have souls committed to your charge...It is you that must create in the minds of your little girls and boys a thirst for knowledge, the love of virtue and the cultivation of a pure heart” (qtd in Collins, *The Black Feminist Thought* 318). Mothers are endowed with the responsibility of guiding the future generation to the secure routes in their voyage of life. Walker, in an interview with Mary Helen Washington acknowledges the influence of her mother when she asks the reason behind speaking in her mother’s voice:

Just as you have certain physical characteristics of your mother's-her laughter or her toes or her grade of hair-you also internalize certain emotional characteristics that are like hers. That is part of a legacy. They are internalized, merged with your own, transformed through the stories. When you're compelled to write her stories, it's because you recognize and prize those qualities in yourself. (qtd in Prenshaw 38)

Walker, in the tradition of Africans, pays homage to her great grandmothers and other unacknowledged women artists. They were slaves and could not express their creativity in a hostile environment which crushed all the buds of creativity. Walker states:

For these grandmothers and mothers of ours were not Saints, but Artists; Driven to a numb and bleeding madness by the springs of creativity in them for which there was no release. They were Creators, who lived their life of Spiritual waste, because they were so rich in spirituality- which is the basis of Art- that the strain of enduring their unused and unwanted talent drove them insane. Throwing away this spirituality was their pathetic attempt to lighten the soul to a weight their work-worn, sexually abused bodies could bear. (*In Search* 233)

Walker acknowledges the legacy of Black women artists who were made silent by inimical societal forces. There were some artists, who gave expression to their creativity with the only accessible raw materials. Seeing a quilt by “an anonymous Black woman in Alabama” (86) with a splendid portrayal of Crucifixion, at the Smithsonian Institution at Washington D.C., Walker recounts: “If we could locate this “anonymous Black woman in Alabama”, she would turn out to be one of our grandmothers, an artist who left her mark in the only materials she could afford, and in the only medium her position in society allowed her to use” (*In Search* 86).

The image of the Black mother struggling for the well-being of her family has been an influence on Walker. In *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, we find Mem, the mother of three children battling with her drunkard husband to shift their life from the sharecropper’s cabin to a better home in the city for the sake of their children’s future. Though Mem has forsaken many things for the sake of Brownfield, and her life stooped to that of a domestic worker’s, Mem is courageous enough to defy her husband’s orders to shift to another

sharecropper's cabin. "I already told you" she said, "you ain't dragging me and these children through no more pigpens. We have put up with mud long enough." (110)

Mem's courage to rebel against Brownfield, make him obey her 'ten commandments', sign an agreement for the house in the town even without Brownfield's consent are all her desperate attempts to provide an improved life for her children. In the portrayal of Mem, the spirit of a Black mother who strives against all the odds in the relentless necessity for survival is captured by Walker. In Mem, we find the will power of a dedicated mother who brushes aside the entire obstacles that adversely affect her children. Walker describes the devotion of Mem to her children : "Each time she had to clean cow manure out of the room to make it habitable for her children, she looked as if she had been dealt a death blow...She slogged along, ploddingly, like a cow herself, for the sake of the children"(78).

Gloria Joseph, in her article "Black Mothers and Daughters: Their Roles and Functions in American Society" notes the importance ascribed to motherhood in Black families. Unlike other immigrant communities, Joseph opines:

...the traditional role of mother was preserved with less conflict among Blacks due to the circumstances surrounding their lives in America. The family had to depend more on family members and roles which were preserved partially due to the enforced segregation, isolation, and insularity of Black families. (Joseph 89)

Moreover, Gloria Joseph investigates into the influence of the African notion of motherhood upon the African Americans and finds out that there are many elements of similarity between the two and cites as example the similarity in celebrating Mother's Day: "... the style and

manner of celebration for Blacks has cultural differences and the role of honor and respect for the Black mother has its roots in African history” (Joseph 87). African Americans have retained many concepts and practices revering motherhood which forms the base of Black motherhood.

Familial structures similar to that of African families have been developed by African American women. Quite contrary to the nuclear-family concept prevalent in American households, African American families try to include members of their community into the concept of family. The African concept of ‘othermother’ or person who assists the biological mother in child rearing is an example. This concept has been borrowed by the African Americans. Patricia Hill Collins states that:

In African-American communities, the boundaries distinguishing biological mothers of children from other women who care for children are often fluid and changing. Biological mothers or blood-mothers are expected to care for their children: But African and African-American communities have also recognized that vesting one person with full responsibility for mothering a child may not be wise or possible. As a result ‘othermothers,’ women who assist blood-mothers by sharing mothering responsibilities, traditionally have been central to the institution of Black motherhood. (46)

Examples of unconventional mothering are found in the works of many African American writers including Walker. In *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, though Tashi is not the biological mother of Mbat, she feels Mbat is the daughter she might have had, if she had not aborted her second child because of the fear of Caesarian operation. Tashi says about the

attachment between herself and her psychological daughter: “I am this child’s mother. Otherwise she would not have appeared so vividly, a radiant flower of infinite freshness in my life”(271). Tashi presents Mbatl, the little sacred figure of Nyanda, covered in a beautiful scarf, to be handed over to “my granddaughter” (272). Tashi hopes that during Mbatl’s daughter’s times, women will be free from patriarchal restrictions. They will have the look of confidence, of pride, of peace. “Neither of us can have it, because self-possession will always be impossible for us to claim. Perhaps your daughter...” (273). Tashi parts with Mbatl before the night of Tashi’s execution by saying the words “Ache Mbele”, Ache is a Yoruban term which means “power to make things happen” or energy. Mbele means “forward” (273). Tashi, like a mother wishes her daughter, Mbatl to possess the power to move forward and transmute the things which remain as hindrances for the development of the daughters of her community. Here we find Tashi with a womanist zeal, who is concerned with the goal of survival of all the members of her community.

Another example of othermothering is found in *The Color Purple*. When Celie is married off to Albert, she assumes the role of step-mother of Albert’s children. Though the children hurt her physically as well as mentally, Celie feels it is her responsibility as a mother to take care of them.

I spend my wedding day running from the oldest boy. He twelve.

His mama died in his arms and he don’t want to hear nothing bout no new one. He pick up a rock and laid my head open. The blood run all down tween my breasts. His daddy say Don’t do that! But that’s all he say. He got four children, instead of three, two boys and two girls. The girls hair ain’t been comb since their mammy died. I tell him I’ll just have to shave it

off...So after I bandage my head best I can and cook dinner...I start trying to untangle hair. They only six and eight and they cry. They scream. They cuse me of murder. By ten o'clock I'm done. (*The Color Purple* 13)

Mr. Albert's children, slowly understand Celie and develop a maternal bonding for her. Harpo, the elder son of Albert, discusses with her even his love affair with Sofia.

For a Black woman, sisterhood is as important as motherhood. The bonding between sisters has been valorized by many Black woman writers. During the times of slavery, women from various tribes were put together in groups. They started communicating with each other their innate sadness, their life and their helplessness. A sisterly bondage was thus forged among them. The mutual support among the female members of the Black community helped them to face the challenges in life with equanimity.

The sisterly affection between Celie and Shug Avery in *The Color Purple* is responsible for the resurrection that happens in Celie's life. It is from Shug that Celie learns the beauty of life and begins to enjoy it. It is from Shug that Celie learns facts about her own body, to enjoy sexuality. The intimacy that she feels towards Shug makes Celie narrate the instances of her early life- rape by her step-father, selling of her children to missionaries by her step-father, ill-treatment and physical abuse she had to endure from Albert. This lends a cathartic effect to Celie's mind which has been made numb because of suffering. The sexual relationship between Celie and Shug enables Celie to overcome the feeling of inferiority over her body. Yvonne Johnson comments "...Celie with Shug's help, succeeds in freeing herself, (de)objectifying herself, from this system which is characterized by interlocking dualisms" (210). Celie, with the help of Shug discovers the letters written to her by Nettie, which have

been secretly kept by Albert. While reading the letters Celie's guilt of incest is relieved as she discovers the man whom she believes to be her father is not her biological father but is her step-father. Celie feels relieved as she learns that Nettie and her children are now in Africa and soon they will be coming to visit her. Celie's decision to leave Albert's house and stay in Memphis with Shug is another step in the metamorphosis of Celie. Celie gets courage to vent her rage towards Albert: "You a low-down dog is what's wrong I say. Its time to leave you and enter creation. And your dead-body just the welcome mat I need" (207). Celie's wrath against Albert is channelized by Shug and is transformed into her creativity. Celie starts making pants and eventually becomes a confident, successful entrepreneur.

African American women writers strive to define a space that has been denied to them. The racist and sexist barricades are questioned as they transcribe their experiences. They break their silence and create a space of their own. Walker, too in her novels, identifies new contours of experience in a multicultural society where to be Black was to be marginal. Walker's novels are an attempt to write her race into existence with defined cultural and traditional moorings and the will to survive through racism and sexism

Works Cited

Walker, Alice. *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*. 1970. New York: Harvest,2003. Print.

---. *The Color Purple* 1982.Great Britain: Phoenix, 2004. Print.

---. *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens. Womanist Prose*. 1983. Great Britain: Phoenix 2005. Print.

---. *The Temple of My Familiar*. 1989. New York: Pocket, 1990. Print.

---. *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. 1992. New York: Pocket, 1993. Print.

Collins, Patricia Hill. "The Meaning of Motherhood in Black Culture and Black Mother/Daughter Relationships." *Double Stitch: Black Women Write About Mothers and Daughters*. Ed. Bell-Scott, Patricia. Boston: Beacon P, 1991. 42-60. Print.

Deena, Seodial F. H. *Canonization, Colonization, Decolonization: A Comparative Study of Political and Critical Works by Minority Writers*. New York: Peter Lang, 2001. Print.

Joseph, Gloria I. "Black Mothers and Daughters: Their Roles and Functions in American Society." *Common Differences: Conflicts in Black and White Feminist Perspectives*. Eds. Joseph, Gloria I, and Jill Lewis. New York: Anchor P/Doubleday, 1981. 75-126. Print.

Ngcobo, Laretta. *Let it be Told: Black Woman Writers in Britain*. London:Virago, 1997. Print.

Morrison, Toni .Unspeakable Things Unspoken : the Afro-American Presence in American Literature".1989. *Toni Morrison. Modern Critical Views*. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea, 1990.201-30. Print.

Prenshaw, Peggy Whitman, ed. *Women Writers of Contemporary South*. Washington: U P of Mississippi, 1984. Print.