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Revisiting Alice Walker's Womanism: New Insights and Interpretations

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Abstract

This article examines Alice Walker's concept of womanism as a theoretical framework within feminist theory, emphasizing the issues, problems and circumstances faced by women of color. Womanists endeavor to rectify inequities that are typically overlooked by conventional feminism. Womanism examines who the woman is in isolation rather than in big framework of feminism as it emphasizes the unique experiences and strengths of women within the socio-cultural structure of America that is predominantly racial and patriarchal. It makes an effort to challenge the underlying injustices that mainstream feminism frequently ignores as a response to the perceived limitations of mainstream feminism. It celebrates blackness portraying black women as multifaceted individuals with strengths in beauty, physical and sexual aptitude, motherhood, sisterhood, and wifehood. It places more emphasis on the transition of black women away from violence and vengeance and towards spiritual awakening. Walker's womanism calls on black women to rebel against repressive systems and recover their agency, challenging accepted standards in a racist, sexist, and capitalist society. The article underscores Walker's commitment to portraying the complexities of black womanhood, examining themes of resilience, oppression, and liberation. Walker delves into the inner and outer lives of African American women by choosing womanism over feminism, encouraging female unity in the struggle against sexism and racism. This study observes women's strength and desire to make a departure from traditional societal narratives of racial and patriarchal society of America.

Keywords: feminism, patriarchy, racism, repression, sexism womanism

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Introduction

Alice Walker and her Issues

Alice Walker (b.1944) has cultivated a distinguished career as a prolific writer, positioning herself as one of the most celebrated contemporary African American literary figures. Profiling herself as a potent black female writer, she has authored a number of novels, poems, stories, and essays. In her literary works, Walker intricately explores how the world shapes the physical and emotional realities of black women. She addresses the very difficult and unspoken issues of women and urges her women to break the silence. Her primary focus in her writing revolves around the oppression inflicted upon black women by both white and black men, and their efforts to resist such oppression within a society marked by racism, sexism and patriarchal structures.

Walker prefers womanism above feminism to make the close study of the actual inner and outer goings of women specially of African American women's life. She thinks feminism to be a political umbrella term as it talks only about women's political right, property right, socio-economic right and different sorts of rights but it doesn't talk who the women are in isolation. She claims it is womanism that studies women in isolation, their feelings, experiences, sensitivity and so on. Womanism stresses on celebrating womanhood, women's strength and experiences rather than on social changes or activism. It appreciates women's culture, women's emotional flexibility and women's strength. She uses the term 'womanist' to refer to a woman who makes love with other women either physically or emotionally as it values intimate relationship within women. Walker claims that womanist approach makes close observation of women's particular circumstances in a better way than feminism. She takes womanism as a complementary to the feminist movement. Besides, black feminism and womanism can be taken as interchangeable for both encourage women to struggle against sexism and racism.

Walker stresses on black African American women's issues, their strength, experiences and womanhood. She addresses the issues like sexism, racism, domestic violence, black womanhood, and black female relationship in both black and mainstream society. Walker studies the overall condition of black women and questions the societal norms prevalent in mainstream America predominantly shaped by white dominance. She delves into Black women's pursuit of selfhood through their individual relationships within the community. Furthermore, she explores Black women's journey towards self-discovery through their unique connections within their communities. Her fictional characters embody the difficulties of balancing dual identities, being a double minority, and seeking self-realization and independence from both masculine authority and societal expectations.

Black Women Facing Triple Repression

Walker's writings frequently address the issue of double repression-being a woman in a patriarchal society and being black in a white-dominated American society. As opposed to men and white women, black women do, in fact, have their own unique world and experiences. Roby Ward and Diane Price Herndl also remark, "Black women are doubly marginalized" (Ward and Herndl 741). They have to struggle against the sexism of Black males within their own race in addition to the racism of white women and white patriarchy. To be black in race, female in gender and being financially underprivileged is to suffer from the triple oppression. Therefore, experiencing both male chauvinism and racial prejudice with scarce financial resources is a triple oppression for Black women.

African women experience racism because they are black as women. They are subjected to sexual abuse by both white and black people for being women in gender. Besides, as wives of former slaves, they are compelled to live in poverty with scarce resources more than their husbands. Kimberlé Crenshaw states that "Factors such as race, gender, and class converge to shape the lived experiences of women of color" (Crenshaw 142). In other words, racism, sexism, and classism put black women in America at danger of being victims of triple jeopardy. Black women are bearers of what Barbara Smith calls "geometric oppression" (Smith 5). Black women in a predominantly

male society, are bound to carry a triple consciousness-race, gender and class for not only being black but also being female and economically underprivileged. They have to face financial hardships for being women. Black women's ability to render meaningful participation in society as whole human beings has been restricted by this triple burden.

Black women find themselves in a complex web of oppression. Being dependent on males, black women suffer not only from the black male but also need to endure systematic injustices perpetuated by white men and women. Within this intricate dynamic, black man being a slave of whites, lacks the capacity to confront the misbehaviour and sexual violence that white men do against black women. Black men themselves are the victim of racism. The complex web of oppression underscores the substantial challenges faced by African American women as they attempt to live in a society that has been structured around interlocking supremacy and power structures. Lerner Gerda rightly states, "the black woman was deprived of a strong black man on whom she could rely for protection" (Gerda xxiii). So, black woman's awful predicament continued right from the days of slavery as Gloria Steinem states, in the slavery system, "white was universal but black was limited" (Steinem 7). The white dominating group had instilled in Black people a feeling of inferiority and inadequacy in order to rob them of their true potential. As black and white men abuse African-American women, they have to struggle for their survival both within and outside of their homes. Black women in America experience a severe lack of security, even in their own homes and society that is predominated by white cultural values. Their multiple forms of oppression from both black and white men and white women are the root of their insecurity. Domestic violence has a substantial adverse effect on them at home. Their feeling of safety and wellbeing is compromised by the different sorts of abuse they must suffer.

Black women face abuse and harassment outside the home as a result of racial profiling and systematic racism, which causes the already dangerous and vulnerable environment in public places. Their ability to acquire resources to defend themselves is hampered by structural injustices like economic inequality and unequal access to healthcare, which intensify their anxiety. Moreover, cultural stereotypes and negative depictions of black women weaken their sense of safety in their communities by fostering an environment of mistrust and discrimination. In general, black women experience systemic insecurity in a society shaped by intersecting systems of oppression and discrimination.

Due to racial and gender-based discrimination, black women have made only slow progress and are still far behind white women and black men. Therefore, since the earliest days of slavery, black women's circumstances in America have been worse than those of black males. They have been victims of rape and lynching as well as other forms of sexist and racial persecution. Alice Walker's writings provide a valuable window into each of these issues. She favours womanism above feminism to make the close study of the actual inner and outer goings of African American women's life. She emphasizes on the importance of female unity to fight against the racism of white people and the sexism of black men. In her works, Walker exposes the subjugation of African American women by portraying the psychological, emotional, spiritual and physical damage that results from a breach of familial trust.

Womanism and Feminism: Harmony Despite Differences

Alice Walker declares herself a womanist writer. She makes a distinction from the tendency of white feminists to generalize their own experiences as the blueprint for understanding the societal roles of women. Feminists and womanists share the common belief that women are given unequal and inferior status in the male dominated society and it is unjust and needs to be changed. Black feminists, in particular, assert that the oppression faced by black women cannot be attributed to any perceived lack of intelligence or awareness, but rather originates from their intersecting identities as black and female. They emphasize that race and gender intersect to form the primary axes of oppression for black women. In this context, Patricia Hill Collins argues that "the experiences of black women are central to understanding the broader dynamics of oppression (Collins 64). Many black women critique the mainstream feminist movement as narrow in scope, often serving the interests of elite or middle-class

women while neglecting the experiences and struggles of marginalized groups, thereby limiting its effectiveness in addressing the broader spectrum of women's issues.

Alice Walker explores womanism in her book *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* and relates it to feminism. She argues that, in comparison to conventional feminism, womanism offers a more inclusive viewpoint since it recognizes the difficulties experienced by women of colour. She points out a slight difference between feminism and womanism with her popular phrase "Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender" (In Search xii). Both have something in common but focal point is different. Purple is symbolic of "age, restored royalty, blossoming in an open field" (In Search xii). Thus, for Walker, womanism is an empowered version of lavender. Womanism and black feminism, nevertheless, are "concerned with struggle against sexism and racism by black women who are themselves part of the black community's effort to achieve equity and liberty" (Collins 10). The suggested meaning of the two phrases appears to be interconnected. So 'womanism' is neither opposite, nor synonym of black feminism but serves as a complement to it. According to Walker, they indicate "outrageous, audacious, courageous, or willful behavior" (In Search xi). Saunders also remarks, "[t]he emphasis is on 'wilful' because for so long, so many black women have not been considered to be in possession of their own free wills and no small part of the problem has resided in the psyche of black men" (Saunders 11). Despite possessing their own agency and aspirations, black women have historically been oppressed and disregarded within societies marked by racism and sexism. Pervasive societal injustices of patriarchal and racial society have hindered their capacity to exercise free will, follow their aspirations, and achieve their dreams. In their quest to reach their full potential, black women have faced many obstacles like limited access to education, employment opportunities, healthcare and political representation. Furthermore, they have often been subjected to harmful stereotypes and prejudices that undermine their autonomy and worth. Overall, Walker's examination of womanism in "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" emphasises the necessity of feminism taking a more intersectional stance, one that recognises and confronts the interconnectedness of the prejudice and oppression experienced by women from wide-ranging backgrounds.

Womanism: Strength in Unity and Sisterhood

Walker's concept of womanism lays emphasis on women's culture, family, spirituality and their relationship with men and women. She coined the term "womanism" in her prose book, *In Search of Our Mother's Garden*. She writes, "I just like to have words to describe things correctly. Now to me, 'black feminist' doesn't do that. I need 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' " (In Search 14). Walker claims that womanism emphasizes on celebrating womanhood especially on African American women's strength and experiences rather than on social changes or activism. It draws its attention to racism and class oppression as social issue and to peculiar feelings of a black woman in isolation. It appreciates "women's culture, women's emotional flexibility and women's strength" (In Search xi). She uses the term "womanist" to refer to a woman who makes love with other women either physically or emotionally.

Womanism values the relationship between black women higher and stresses on intimate relationship between them. According to Walker, a womanist is "a black feminist or feminist of color... outrageous, audacious, courageous or wilful behavior... A woman who loves other women sexually and / or nonsexually" (In Search xi). A womanist admires and prefers women's culture, loves music, loves dance, loves the love itself and knows to love herself. A womanist is one who is committed to sensuality, creativity and freedom, and who also speaks out, speaks up and speaks against or in defense of a woman. Hence, black feminism and womanism can be taken as interchangeable for both are concerned with struggle against sexism and racism to have equality and liberty in the society.

Walker prefers the womanist theory because she feels it fits to make close observation of women's particular circumstances in a better way than feminism. She takes womanism as a complementary to the feminist movement. In one letter published in New York Times Magazine, she writes, "I choose it [womanism] because I prefer the sound, the feel, the fit of it because I cherish the spirit of the women" (Letter 94). She tries to explore the causes of oppression on black women with her womanist approach. In an interview with John O' Brien, Walker says, "I'm committed to exploring the oppression the insanities, the loyalties and the triumph of black women" (O' Brien 192). She uses the terms, black feminism and womanism, as "being virtually interchangeable" (Collins 10). Of course, race and gender are important aspects of a black woman's identity. Many female scholars, besides Alice Walker, have pointed out that black people as a whole have faced racism in America but black women besides racism have to face sexism not only from outside but also from within the same race. Bell Hooks, in this context, remarks:

It is obvious that most Black men are not in positions that allow them to exert the kind of institutionalized patriarchal power and control over Black women's lives that privileged white men do in this society. But it is undeniable that they do exert a lot of power over Black women and children in everyday life. (Hooks 124)

The type of institutionalised patriarchal power and control that white men have over the lives of Black women is not available to Black males in racial society. However, they do hold significant authority over Black women and children in daily life.

Black women have been frequently made the victim of domestic violence at the hands of male. In patriarchal system of the society, almost all women both black and whites have physically or psychologically been under male domination. Bell Hooks further says, "Patriarchy, the institutionalized structure of male dominance encourages males of all races and classes to define their masculinity by acts of physical aggression and coercion towards others, women and children" (hooks 128). Black women are the severe victims of color and gender domination for being black and female. Walker's main focus is on how black women perceive themselves as feminine. she is primarily concerned with "the survival whole of her people" (*In Search* 250). Her people are black women, who suffer as black among blacks, slaves of the slaves and economically under privileged. This triple burden has blocked their hidden potentiality and made them subservient. They also suffer from different kinds of violence within their own family at the hand of male members. They are forced to live in the narrow enclosure of sexism. According to Walker, a womanist perspective is likely to closely examine all of these situations, as well as the emotions and problems of women.

According to Walker, womanism does not speak against heterosexual partnerships but discusses the multiple relationships that can occur between women, their love to relationship including lesbian relationships. She does not speak with the tone of her dislike for heterosexual relationships. She does not mean that she asks her people to hate men and heterosexuality. For Walker, "Lov[ing] individual men sexually and or nonsexually" (*In Search* xi) is also considered to be a characteristic of a womanism. Emma J. Waters Dawson, in her essay, "Redemption through Redemption of the Self in Their Eyes were Watching God and The Color Purple", remarks:

By weaving taboo subjects and life styles, such as in incest and lesbianism, into a creative literary pattern, Walker not only points out black women's physical and psychological abuse and black women torn by contrary instincts, she also affirms her belief in personal, spiritual redemption that may evolve through the self. (Dawson 77)

Walker not only draws attention to the physical and psychological abuse of Black women as well as the division of these women by opposing instincts, but she also affirms her belief in the possibility of personal, spiritual redemption.

Collins adds a point to clarify Walker's term womanism saying "womanism seemingly supplies a way for black women to address gender oppression without attacking black men" (Collins 11). It protests the gender biasness and male's hegemony but does not hate the manliness of men Walker says a womanist is "committed to survival and wholeness of entire people male and female" (*In Search* xi). So womanists are not separatist but are "traditionally universalist" (xi). Walker clearly says, "It would have to be a word that affirmed connectedness to the entire community and the world, rather than separation" (*In Search* 81). Even in her description of lesbian women, Walker shows herself to be non-separatist. According to her definition, lesbian women are "the women who love other women ... have concern in a culture that oppresses all black people" (*In Search* 81). Her concept of womanism stresses the sense of solidarity, unity and sharing in the community. Her emphasis on women's relationship does not mean the lesbian relationship but mother and child, more preferably a daughter. She loves motherhood because motherhood is very important factor to give an effective and heartfelt experience of being a woman. In this context, ArisikaRazak in her essay "Response" remarks. Walker focuses on "Sharing and mentorship that are a traditional part of idealized Black mother daughter relationship" (Razak 99). She emphasises on the traditional aspects of the idealised Black mother-daughter relationship, which are sharing and mentoring. With the concept of womanism, Walker highlights the importance of 'sisterhood', uniting all women and providing substantial support for the advancement of the entire group.

Conclusion

Womanist approach places women in fully liberated position and suggests them to cultivate the sense of women's solidarity, unity and sharing of feelings to each other. It accentuates the fact that women should recognize their womanliness and learn to adore what is specifically female about themselves. It also emphasizes the importance of recognizing the unique experiences and contributions of African American women within the feminist movement. Although mainstream feminism advocates for gender equality, it often overlooks and marginalizes the perspectives and concerns of women of color. According to Walker, womanism seeks to bridge this gap by emphasising the experiences of oppressed women and advocating for social justice on several fronts, including gender, race, and class. It offers a more inclusive perspective than mainstream feminism, particularly in its acknowledgment of the struggles faced by women of color. Walker's concept of womanism stresses on women's relationship, unity and solidarity but it does not mean only the lesbian relationship. Lesbianism is an important component of womanism but it does not mean that women should love women sexually and hate men. Walker neither hates heterosexuality nor suggests women to be lesbian. She explores themes of resistance, oppression, and liberation while portraying the complexity of black women in her creative works. Alice Walker highlights the importance of 'sisterhood' by using the womanist concept. Womanism serves as a framework that emphasizes the women relationships and support women's solidarity to support each other. Walker argues that when women get united, they feel more supported and connected to one another as a powerful force. In addition to feeling stronger and more bonded to one another, unified women can also go forward to challenge societal norms that are racist and patriarchal. Womanism's 'sisterhood' acts as a catalyst for the empowerment and advancement of all women in the community.

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