

# Alice Walker and Her Womanism

**Dr. P. Andrews Kennedy**

Lecturer in English, Sri Shankara Bhagavathi Arts & Science College, Kommadikottai, Tuticorin, Tamil Nadu, India

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### Abstract

*Alice Walker places herself at the centre of the literary world and writes in search of wholeness, finding action in spite of dependence. Alike Walker through her womanist perspective offers to the women their own women-self, their beauty, physical and sexual strength, motherhood, sisterhood, wife-hood etc. At the same time she has a strong feeling that the women are to be educated, and made aware of the need to recover from psychological and mental traumas of inferiority. This is possible only if their wholeness and roundness are restored. She precisely aims at achieving this end.*

**Keywords:** Alice Walker, womanist, feminism, Black feminist, White women's culture, exploitation, dehumanization, male chauvinists.

Alice Walker places herself at the center of the literary world and writes in search of wholeness, finding action in spite of dependence. To her, writing becomes a conceptual and linguistic act of the creation of self and her heroines, like their creator – Alice Walker – are ones who act rather than acquiesce. Alike Walker through her womanist perspective offers to the women their own women-self, their beauty, physical and sexual strength, motherhood, sisterhood, wife-hood, etc.

At the same time, she has a strong feeling that the women are to be educated, and made aware of the need to recover from psychological and mental traumas of inferiority. This is possible only if their wholeness and roundness are restored. She precisely aims at achieving this end. In this context, it is apt to quote the reply given by Alice Walker to her Mother's question thus:

Mother's Question: When you make these trips back South.... What is exactly you're looking for?

Alice Walker: A wholeness.... because of everything around me is split up, deliberately split up. History split up, Literature split up, and people are split up too. It makes people do ignorant things...<sup>1</sup>

At this point, it ought to be noted that Alice Walker is a womanist for she views the term, 'feminism', reflecting the problems and plights of the White women only and that the term 'feminism' does not do justice to the Black women. In other words, she prefers the term 'womanist' to the term 'feminism' because 'womanist' sounds stronger and more comprehensive and all-inclusive.

In fact, the definition of the term 'womanist', locates the Black woman first as a Black feminist. Then it celebrates the sensuality and spirituality of the Black women. Then it identifies her as the variegated flower in the garden of humanity.

Alice Walker argues that the term, 'womanism' signifies more than that they (women) could choose women over men. Yet again, women could choose to live separate from men. In fact, to be consistent with Black cultural values still has considerable worth.

Alice Walker insists upon searching through both cultural and psychological pasts for a meaningful synthesis in the lives of women. At this juncture her definition of the term, 'womanist' becomes very pertinent, and hence it is worth quoting:

The word, lesbian, may not.... Be suitable (or comfortable) for Black women..... indeed I (Alice Walker) can imagine Black women who love women (sexually or not) referring to themselves as whole women, from wholly, or holy, or as round women – women who love other women, yes, but women who also have concern, in a culture that oppresses all Black people (and this would go back far), for their fathers, brothers, and sons, and no matter how they feel about them as males. My own term for such women would be womanist...<sup>2</sup>

The primary emphasis of Alice Walker in all her writings lies in her consciousness of herself as a woman writer empowered to narrate the stories of women who are past or present creators of a female culture. The major role of Alice Walker in this regard is the enable to women marginalized by race, class or creed to have their voices heard and their histories read.

In a letter, which was published in New York Time Magazine the novelist makes a very significant observation, which is as follows:

Feminism (all colors) definitely teaches women they are capable, one reason for its universal appeal. In addition to this, womanist (i.e., Black Feminist) tradition assumes, because of our experience during slavery, that Black women are capable.. I (Alice Walker) don't choose womanism because it is better than feminism.... Since womanism means Black feminism, this would be a nonsensical destination. I choose it because I prefer the sound, the feel the fit of it; because I cherish the spirit of the women (like Sojourner) the world calls to mind, and because I share the old ethnic American habit of offering society a new word when the word it is using fails

to describe behavior and change, that only a few words can help it more fully see...<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, Alice Walker strongly defends the term, 'womanism', thus:

Womanism is a word that said more than they (women) choose women over men. More than that they choose to live separate from men. In fact, to be consistent with Black cultural values (which whatever their shortcomings still have considerable worth) it would have to be a word that affirmed connectedness to the entire community and the world rather than separation, regardless who worked and slept with whom...<sup>4</sup>

Alice Walker employs the term, 'womanism', to denote the metamorphosis that occurs in adolescent girls and middle-aged women when they come to a sense of their selves as women.

Furthermore, Alice Walker argues that the young girl inherits womanism after a traumatic effect such as menarche or after an epiphany or as a consequence of racism, rape violence or death in the family, or sudden respectability. Through coping with the experience, she moves creatively beyond the self to that concern for the needs of other characteristics of adult womanists.

In this context, the observation of Alice Walker, is once again worth quoting as the term womanism adequately defines the Black women:

Womanist encompasses feminist, but it is also instinctively pro-woman. It is not in the dictionary at all. Nonetheless it is has a strong root in Black Woman's culture... An advantage of using 'womanist' is that, because it is from my (Alice Walker's) own culture I need not preface it with the word Black (an awkward necessity and a problem I have with the word feminist), since Blackness is implicit in the term, just as for White women there is apparently no felt need to preface feminist with the word 'White', since the word feminist is accepted coming out of White women's culture...<sup>5</sup>

At this point, it becomes necessary to refer to the four definitions of 'Womanism' as enunciated by Alice Walker in her critical treatise, entitled *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*. These four definitions are based on her extensive and careful study of women, spread over a long period, and

gathered from some journals, periodicals and books. The four definitions of the term, 'womanism' run as given below:

1. From Womanism. (opp. of "girlilsh". i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious) 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 behaviour.
2. A woman who loves other women, sexually and non sexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as a natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strengths. Sometimes love individual men, sexually and non-sexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people male or 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 that the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every 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 roundedness. Loves struggle. Loves the folk. Loves herself. Regardless....
4. Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender....<sup>6</sup>

Concerning these four definitions of the term, 'womanism' the analytical remark of Elliott Butler Evans deserves a special mentioning here:

These four definitions constitute the frame work for interpreting the works of Black woman writers. And in these four definitions, one detects the movement from the specific racial reference in the first definitions to a broader application of the term in the second definition and the somewhat open definition of the term in the last two definitions...<sup>7</sup>

Alice Walker protests against the patriarchal power structure. Her works demand that the

perceptive readers, whether they belong to the group of male oppressions, or the section of the oppressed female, be aware of the ideological issues so that it may change their attitudes about patriarchy.

Alice Walker just does not deal with women and women's issues, but posit some aspects of the womanist ideology. Incidentally, the following descriptive statements serve as a working base to better appreciate the literary products of Alice Walker, and her considered viewpoints on patriarchy. Moreover, these descriptive statements serve as the framework for the combination of the following themes:

- a. Critical perception and reaction to patriarchy, often articulated through the struggle of a victim or rebel who must face a patriarchal institution.
- b. Sensitivity to the inequities of sexism allied with an acceptance of women and understanding of the choices open to them.
- c. A metamorphosis leading to female discovery in a Feminist Utopia, or a stasis, signifying the failure to. Alice Walker is vehement in her protest against denials, deprivations, exploitation, and dehumanization of women. She poignantly decries the discriminatory attitudes of the male chauvinists. She argues that in the male-dominated society there is one yardstick to judge men and another parameter to downgrade women.

In this connection, the strong argument of Alice Walker runs as follows:

I (Alice Walker) wanted to explore the relationship between men and women, and why women are condemned for doing what men to as an expression of their masculinity. Why are women so easily, "tramps" and "traitors" when men are heroes for engaging in the same activity?...<sup>8</sup>

Thus, Alice Walker sees the experience of women as the collective and historical violation of the female sex. Moreover, she sees women as a series of movements from a woman totally victimized by society and the Establishment and by men to grow, and developing and emerging woman of power, pelf, position and recognition. Such an emergent woman's consciousness of her empowered state allows her to

have control over her life. This is the burden of the womanist approach of Alice Walker.

Also, Alice Walker shares with other Afro-American women writers the heritage of the Blues. The Blues have had a tremendous impact on the womanist fictions as there is a connection between the Blues and the capacity to experience hope. Alice Walker's observation runs thus:

The Blues is the song of the people transformed by the experience of each generation, which holds them together, and if any of it is lost, the people suffer, and are without soul...<sup>9</sup>

And one of the themes that Alice Walker examines is that of the woman as a suppressed artist. She contents that for two centuries women had reminded as hidden artists. The creative impulses of the women geniuses have been thwarted and denied an opening in a society in which they have been viewed as objects of pleasure and as a source of cheap labour. The women artists who had been stifled instead of being cultivated and groomed to gain artistic maturation spent their lives in slow motion, and unaware of their own richness, they stated at the world wildly. Things changed for the better with the emergence of strong-willed women writers such as Toni Morrison and Lorraine Hansberry.

Alice Walker in her examination of the term, 'womanism' projects loneliness as the dominant feature of the denied, exploited and dehumanized women. The classic example is Mem Copeland. She is a woman without a past, without fond memories, without life giving myths, without self-reinforcing stories related and without neighbors who could give advice and lend support. Mary Helen Washington argues to the point thus:

Black women have been alone because the damage done to our men has prevented their closeness and protection: and alone because we have had no one to tell us stories ourselves...<sup>10</sup>

On this point Gloria Wade Gayles also has a pithy definition on the loneliest woman: the loneliest woman in the world is a woman without a woman friend....<sup>11</sup>

In her role as the devoted mother, Mem Copeland is the superhuman woman of strength, endurance and compassion. Her every goal, every wish, every struggle, is born of her identity as a mother.

She cleans cow manure out of sheds to make them habitable for her children. She fights Brownfield with words, though never with blows, always for the children. She slogs alone ploddingly like a cow for the sake of her children. Mem Copeland finally takes the initiative and signs a lease on the house in town. The fact that Mem has assumed the responsibility of caring for the family, is a blow to his ego. She gets a job and she announces that she will take the children to live in town, whether he goes or not. His typical response is to laugh at her attempt to better herself and once more to beat her into submission.

As Brownfield sleeps off his drunkenness, she wakes him by pushing a loaded gun into his 'balls', a symbolic act that her liberation is sexual. Mem understands what the man has done to Brownfield, but she also understands more painfully, what Brownfield has done to himself and his family. When he is called to account for his lapses and wrong doings by Mem Copeland, Brownfield shifts the burden of guilt for all the wrongs that he had done onto the Whiteman.

Mem Copeland forces Brownfield to assent to her own Ten Commandments at gun point, which she significantly does not aim at either his head or heart, knowing that he regards them as his less important organs. Her single act of assertion threatens and momentarily destroys Brownfield's straightened sense of manhood; it also becomes to him an act for which Mem Copeland must be made to pay.

In spite of her own destruction, Mem holds fast to her sanity and dignity. For the sake of her children, she works as a domestic maid and returns home to tend the house and cook. She continues to plant flowers (although she no longer plants them in beds but boxes) but she continues as Brownfield's wife, eventually giving birth to an albino son, whom Brownfield murders. He uses this child as an excuse to murder Mem, too, slandering her memory even though he knows that she has never been unfaithful to him.

Brownfield kills her with the same gun with which she proclaimed her recent independence. The murder of Mem, by the way, is more than an act of Brownfield's anger, it is, in part, a suicide as well, for Mem, who can see her husband on the lighted porch of their house, walks calmly towards his pointed

gun. The relevant textual passage makes interesting reading:

Mem looked up at the porch and called a greeting. It was a cheerful greeting, although she sounded very tired, tired and out of breath. Brownfield began to curse and came and stood in the steps until got within the circle of light. Then he aimed the gun with drunken accuracy right into her face and fired.....<sup>12</sup>

Like Mem Copeland, seven of the thirteen women in Alice Walker's short fiction collection, entitled *In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women* are also part of the suspended cycle in which the women are subjected to and often destroyed by oppression and violence. Pain, violence, and death form the essential content of these women's lives.

Moreover, Alice Walker's sense of personal identification with Black women includes a sense of sharing in their peculiar oppression. Though Alice Walker does not neglect to deal with the external realities of poverty, exploitation and discrimination, her writings most often focus on the intimate reaches of the inner lives of her characters. The true empathy Alice Walker has for the oppressed women comes through in all her writings. The novelist sees the experiences of the Black women as a series of movements from women totally victimized by society and by men in their lives to the growing, developing women whose consciousness allows them to have control over their lives.

Thus, Alice Walker through her women characters projects her view points on 'womanism'.

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