



*International Journal of Humanities & Social Science Studies (IJHSSS)*  
*A Peer-Reviewed Bi-monthly Bi-lingual Research Journal*  
ISSN: 2349-6959 (Online), ISSN: 2349-6711 (Print)  
Volume-I, Issue-III, November 2014, Page no. 123-128  
Published by Scholar Publications, Karimganj, Assam, India, 788711  
Website: <http://www.ijhsss.com>

---

## **Gender Politics: A Womanist Reading of the Short Stories of Alice Walker**

**Soma Das**

Asst. Professor, Dept. of English, Karimganj College, Karimganj, Assam, India

### **Abstract**

*Alice Walker's proposition of womanism as a stand point for black feminism to voice their difference from white feminism was formulated in her collection of essays entitled In Search of our Mothers' Gardens in 1983. This philosophy came up as a reaction to the marginalization of colored women in the mainstream of feminist critical theory and politics, which was caused by feminist focus only on gender oppression. Walker refers to black feminism as womanism, a term rooted in black folk culture to demonstrate clearly that the very concept of womanism is shaped by the experiences of being a black woman. A womanist loves women, appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's strength but above all is committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Womanism celebrates the ideals of black life and at the same time gives a balanced presentation of black womanhood and gendered struggles. It advocates inclusiveness instead of exclusiveness, whether it is related to race or gender. This political and critical framework of womanism stemmed from the desire to take up gender issues without turning against men and to foster bonds between men and women.*

*The contention of this paper is to study how far the author has incorporated the concept of womanism in portraying the struggles of her characters. Apart from the struggles in fighting the gender discrimination, the women characters are committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female.*

**Key Words: Womanism, Feminism, Marginalization, Race, Gender.**

---

Being both black and female, the black woman's condition and sufferings transcends the plight of both the black males and white women. They find themselves socially, politically and emotionally situated in a space which can be related to a no man's land. They find themselves unable to identify with either Afro-Americanism or mainstream feminism. It is true that they literally belong to the two minority groups of blacks and women but no where do they find their presence being adhered to. Throughout the years black women have fought and protested against "the sexism of black literary history" as well as against "the racism of feminist literary history" and have been trying to define themselves within and outside the white dominated feminist thought by women, particularly white women, but always found themselves as "the other women, the silenced partner" (Showalter, 1997. p. 214). This facet becomes true not only in their day-to-day lives but also more specifically for literary theory. Many black women consider the mainstream feminist movement narrow as it has failed to encompass the diverge issues of the women of color, as it is "markedly white, middle class, western and heterosexual and ... [consequently] has been participating in the marginalization of women of color, working class women, Third world women and lesbians" (Ward & Herndl, 1997 : 259). Spivak and Allen also criticized white feminism, which operated on binary opposition like patriarchy, as it consisted of various forms of elitism and cultural imperialism which was seen in the white women's imposition of their norms on the rest of womanhood of the world.

The double jeopardy of race and gender which is intersectional has made it necessary for the black women to constantly interrogate feminist thought which negates the role of racism by further colorizing the black women as well as interrogate Afro-American antiracist thought which gives importance to "race as a consensus issue while assigning gender and sexuality a secondary status as cross cutting issues" (Collins. 2005 p. 47). The outcome of such situation is such that African American Women are engaged in such a relation with both feminists and black men that their position

is marginalized in their discourses as well as politics. This situation has called for a feminist movement “which addresses a wide variety of issues in Black life (mothering, black masculinity, the relationship between gender and homicide, poverty, the crisis of black womanhood ....)...[ a movement ] that could have transformative impact on our future” (hooks, 1989.p. 56). Also a “feminist movement that addresses the needs of black women, men and children [and] can strengthen our bonds with one another, deepen our sense of community and further black liberation (hooks, 1992 .p. 124).

Alice Walker’s fascination for black women from the beginning of her career has made her one of the strong advocates of black feminism leading to her proposition of the term “womanism” as a standpoint for black feminism to voice their difference from white feminism in her collection of essays entitled *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*. This philosophy came up as a reaction to the marginalization of colored women in the mainstream of feminist critical theory and politics, which was caused by feminist focus only on gender oppression. Walker refers to black feminism as womanism, a term rooted in black folk culture to demonstrate clearly that the very concept of womanism is shaped by the experiences of being a black woman. She provides a four part definition of the term womanist at the beginning of her collections of essays *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*:

Womanist. 1. From womanish. (opp of “girlish”, i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious). A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, “You acting womanish” i.e., like a woman...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 ... committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female... traditionally universalist. 3. Loves music ... loves the spirit. Loves love ... Loves struggles. Loves the folk. Loves herself. Regardless. 4. Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender (Walker. 1984: xi-xii).

Womanism celebrates the ideals of black life and at the same time gives a balanced presentation of black womanhood and black gendered struggles. The philosophy of womanism supports inclusiveness rather than exclusiveness, even in matters related to their various afflictions which made them suffer for generations- racial, class or gender discriminations. This political and critical framework of womanism stemmed from the desire to take up gender issues without turning against men and to foster bonds between men and women. In comparing the relationship between womanism and feminism to that between purple and lavender, Walker says that both have certain similar features but are undisputedly different.

Womanism, thus, developed as an answer to the exclusionist practices of feminism into a larger form of political activism and became a tool for the black women to fight and challenge the policies which marginalized them. In order to build a womanist theory which believed in the practices of inclusion and support among women, womanism advocated the self-sufficiency and confidence of women and at the same time emphasized the need for a strong bond among women which would help and support each other to fight all kinds of oppression. Womanism did not believe in any kind of power game as it inhibits human growth. Walker in her works demonstrated that women in one way or the other become related to patriarchy when they subscribe to power games, try to dominate over others by subjugating them which finally lead to oppressions like racism, sexism, classism, casteism, etc. The solution lies in moving away from dominating behavior and accepting a broader platform of interaction among women and men. Womanism, thus, gives importance to the commonality of female experience and the well being, survival and wholeness of the entire people.

The wife in the story “Coming Apart” comes to know that her husband reads pornographic magazines and derives sexual pleasure from them. When she first confronts him with his Jiveboy magazine, he simply defends himself saying that the pornographic pictures are harmless and even meaningless. But she thinks “they are not me, those women. She cannot say she is jealous of pictures on a page. That she feels invisible. Rejected, Overlooked” (Walker. p. 170). She rather says to herself that “He is right. I will grow up. Adjust. Swim with the tide” (Walker.p.170). The very next day he brought Jivers, “a black magazine, filled with bronze and honey-colored women” (Walker.p.170) thinking that his wife will appreciate him as they are not white women as in the Jive boy but are like

her, dark skinned. But he was wrong for the black women appeared to her “like a human turd at the man’s feet” (Walker. p. 170) or much less than human.

When she looks at her own image in the mirror she comes to a realization that the varied range of human sexuality cannot be dealt up in any pornographic magazine. She at once decides not to “grow up” or to “adjust” or to change herself but to fight back. She resolves to change her husband’s perceptions of women by not going against him but by making him realize the pornography industry’s exploitation of the female body. She reads to him a number of essays by black women which are against pornography. He previously failed to realize that the pornography industry showed only the voluptuousness in women “that where white women are depicted in pornography as “objects”, black women are depicted as animals” (Walker. p. 179). The husband finally comes to a realization that he has wronged his wife and women for a long time and that the porno movies and magazines “have insinuated themselves between him and his wife, so that the totality of her body, her entire corporeal reality is alien to him” (Walker.p.180). The wife, by fighting against this pornography shows that she is not only aware of her own self but at the same time makes her man realize women, both black and white are not sexual stereotypes.

The husband cannot come to terms as to why she is struggling to save a white body, a white female when “it is over these very same white bodies he has been lynched in the past, and is lynched still, by the police and the U.S prison system, dozens of times a year” (Walker. p. 176). On the other hand the wife never regarded herself as a feminist- though she is, of course, a “womanist”. She by quoting from another essay says that the “inhuman treatment of black men by white men, has a direct correlation to white men’s increasing obscene and inhuman treatment of women, particularly white women, in pornography and real life. White women, working towards their own strength and identity, their own sexuality, have in a sense become uppity niggers. As the Black man threatens the white man’s masculinity and power, so now do women”. (Walker.p. 178). The husband finally comes to a realization that in buying and seeing the pornographies he has actually “bought some it not all of the advertisements about women, black and white. And further, inevitably, he has bought the advertisements about himself”. (Walker. p.179).

Walker’s first published short story “To Hell with Dying” is about an old man saved from death a number of times by the love of his neighbour’s children. It is as much, if not more, about what the old man’s love does for the neighbour’s female child, who narrates the story.

For as many years as the narrator has remembered, Mr. Sweet Little, a family friend, has made a ritual of dying. He is “a diabetic and an alcoholic and a guitar player and lived down the road... on a neglected cotton farm” (Walker. p.116). He has been their childhood companion – a perfect companion, for he can be both drunk and temperate and never lose his head. Mr. Sweet Little, in the beginning of the story is about seventy years old while the unnamed female narrator is about four. Towards the end of the story he has turned ninety and she is twenty four. In a span of twenty years, he has been saved many a times by the love and care of the narrator and her siblings. She used to climb on his bed and kiss and hug him tickling his body.

This ritual which she has been doing with her brothers and sisters is always initiated by her father’s call, “To hell with dying, man; these children want Mr. Sweet” (Walker. p.116). In his 80s, the old man lived a peaceful life and the narrator had grown up and was away from home studying at the university. When he becomes ninety, she is summoned home as Mr. Sweet is again near his death. Her efforts to survive him fail and he leaves her with the gift of his spirit.

It was Mr. Sweet, who gives her a sense of her own selfhood and self-worth. Again it was he who makes her realize that blacks are beautiful by first making her realize that she is also physically attractive. “Mr. Sweet used to call me his princess, and I believed it. He made me feel pretty at five and six, and simply outrageously devastating at the age of eight and a half”(Walker. p.117). He has also made her realize that the blacks can control their own destiny by first making her believe that she has the ability to make her own destiny. The narrator here, who is both a participant and contributor in the celebration of the spirit, is immensely enlightened by the old man. Her acceptance of the guitar from Mr. Sweet signifies that she is willing to continue and take responsibility of her heritage and continue to sing the blues. The acceptance of the guitar also becomes the external symbol of her coming to terms with the past and her community. The unnamed narrator finally becomes the representative voice of the community.

Mrs. Gracie Mae in "Nineteen Fifty Five" is a motherly figure and a black singer. Her own song is bought by Traynor, a white male singer for just a thousand dollars. Along with the song all the rights to the song were also taken away from her. As a result Traynor goes on becoming richer and richer at times earning forty thousand dollars a day. He sings the song but ironically enough he fails to understand the soulful meaning of the song.

As Traynor is burdened with a sense of guilt for using her song and making both name and fame, he keeps on giving her gifts and providing her with the luxuries of life. But all the time there was an innate desire in him to understand the meaning of the song, which he failed to desperately. Actually, he was trying to do something of which he was neither a part nor even was this dear to him. He is no doubt a successful commercial artist, the latest heart throb in the rock and roll scene but he has failed spiritually. In no way could he find life in the song nor could he relate the song to life nor even could he draw the relation between art and the very life. Traynor lacks the complete commitment, which is very essential to give life to art. His love for life is no more than his love for the very song that has made him. Even his marriage is not a success. He tells Gracie Mae, "I married but it never went like it was supposed to. I never could squeeze any of my own life either into it or out of it. It was like singing somebody else's record" (Walker. p.141). In his letter to Gracie Mae he writes, "Everybody still loves that song of yours. They ask me all the time what do I think it means, really. I mean, they want to know just what I want to know. Where out of your life did it come from?" (Walker. p.139). Walker herself said that musicians "can put so much of themselves into what they sing. There's nothing between what they feel and what they say, if it's really good, and I like that... because it means a type of freedom for them" (Bonetti, p. 10). He takes her to the "Tonight show" with him so as to share his success with her and be relieved from his burden.

Gracie Mae found a different and satisfying type of freedom which cannot be bought even with all the name, fame and money of the rock star, Traynor. She, to some extent achieves her freedom from her sense of contention, her acceptance of herself as she is, content with her overweight self: "my fat ain't never been no trouble. Mens always have loved me. My kids ain't never complained. Plus they's fat. And fat like I is I looks distinguished. You see me coming and know some body's there" (Walker. p. 140). Mrs. Gracie Mae is still "Nobody from Notasulga" (Walker. p. 140), but is spiritually more healthy and whole than the popular rock star, Traynor. She is a womanist who does not let racism; classism or gender issues waste away her inner peace and wholeness. She is more happy as a spiritual mother - a mother who does not discriminate on the basis of skin colour, who stand more luminous and caring than a biological mother. It is her unconditional love for Traynor that makes her say "I don't why I called him son. Well, one way or another they're all our sons (Walker. p.135).

In "A Sudden Trip Home in the Spring", Walker deals with the theme of quest for one's ethnic identity. She also deals with the problems faced by the black artists in finding models for their art and how they strive hard to discover their models. The protagonist, Sarah Davis, here struggles to find the models for her white canvas and also the importance of her culture, roots and traditions. She, by claiming back her past and roots and also re-examining her own relationship to her family and community, brings about a new understanding between herself, the black men and her cultural tradition. As a young girl Sarah Davis has left her native Georgia to study art on a scholarship at Cresselton, a prestigious girls' school in New York. She is one among the two black students in the school. Thus she is left with only one black face other than her own who can serve as a model for her community. As such she wonders how she will be able to capture or portray her people on canvas. She also finds "black men impossible to draw or to paint; she could not bear to trace defeat into blank pages" (Walker. p. 250). Even her identity is also not known to her friends; she is just someone for her school mates; she is "interesting and beautiful only because they had no idea what made her" and "from where she came" (Walker. p. 253).

It was only when Sarah was called to attend her father's funeral that she learnt a valuable lesson at his graveside - the practical lesson about art and life. Her father was always synonymous with the image of defeat; but unlike her father, her grandfather and brother always served as models and images of victory. Her grandfather did not give up hope nor did he break down at the hour of grief. Rather he looked even more brave, majestic, positive and heroic He stood up like a bold and upright rock providing support to the whole family. Sarah looked at him and thought "It is strange ..... that I never thought to paint him like this, simply as he stands; without anonymous meaningless people hovering beyond his profile; his face turned proud and brownly against the light" (Walker. p. 252).

She at the same time realized that it was a mistake to place him against a background that was white. She also realized that “the defeat that had frightened her in the faces of black men was the defeat of black forever defined by white” (Walker, p. 258). It was not the canvas that defined him but the family and he will never let the family or its members down. Only when Sarah becomes confident of portraying such strength on her canvas, her grandfather suggests her to make him not just in canvas but in the more durable stone. She finally learns that her art will be her own way of saying “No with capital letters” (Walker, p. 256) to the very system that separated her mother from her and shattered her father’s spirit.

The family faces provide her a necessary context and direction to pursue her art, her own face and her own identity. Though initially she faced the problem of accepting the defeated father but she could not deny the very connection that existed between herself, her father, her brother and grandfather. She realized that her father cannot be separated from the link that he is to the generations of her family. Though he “was one faulty door in a house of many ancient rooms” (Walker.p.253) but “was that one faulty door to shut [her] off forever from the rest of the house?” (Walker, p. 253). This “faulty door” in the family did not matter much as she soon found the jauntiness of her grandfather’s guidance and her brother’s affection and she said to her brother “You are my door to all the rooms don’t ever close”(Walker, p. 260). Through the doors of the family members- both her grandfather and brother, she found the right doors to her cultural heritage and tradition.

Through their sufferings and struggles these women pave the path for a new group of women to come forward and show the light. These women are aware of the changes, both in the social and political arenas. They emerge as more strong and competent to shoulder the responsibilities of other women. They transcend the barriers of race and gender and look after the well being of the whole community. These new group of women carve out a new space for themselves but they do not deny their past, their roots and their traditions. The women here over throw their hatred or any kind of revengeful attitude and seek for reconciliation with their male counterparts for they know that hatred is not a solution. In fostering such a relationship with the male members they reclaim their relationships not only to their black community but humanity as a whole. They acknowledge the humanity and equality of all people, male and female, of all races in contradistinction to feminism that strives only for the betterment of the female. Instead of revengeful action against males for their domination, they transcend hatred with loving kindness. They hanker after not only their own spiritual growth but strive hard for the development of the whole community. This attitude of theirs itself shows their positive attitude to over throw the dark forces and bring out the light. The womanist’s awareness of their complete self and their surroundings show that they are involved in the spiritual survival of the whole race.

## References:

- Allan, Tuzyline Jita. *Womanist and Feminist Aesthetics: A Comparative Review*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 1995.
- Bonetti, Kay. “An Interview with Alice Walker” Columbia, Mo: American Audio Prose Library, 1981.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. “What’s in a Name? Womanism, Black Feminism, and Beyond”. *Black Scholar* 26.1.1996. p: 9-17
- Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Sexual Politics*. New York & London: Routledge, 2005.
- hooks, bell. “Feminism and Black Women’s Studies.” *Sage* 6.1 .1989 p: 54-56.
- hooks, bell. “Feminism – it’s a black thing!” *Essence* 23.3 .1992 p: 124.
- Showalter, Elaine. “A Criticism of our own, Autonomy and Assimilation in Afro American and Feminist Literary Theory” In *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Robyn R Ward and Diane Price Herndl. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1997.213-233.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Three Women's Text and a Critique of Imperialism" In *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Robyn R Ward and Diane Price Herndl. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1997. 794-814

Walker, Alice. *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984.

Walker, Alice. *The Complete Stories*. London: Phoenix, 2005.

Washington, Mary Helen. "An Essay on Alice Walker" In *Alice Walker: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr and K. A. Appiah. New York: Amistad, 1993.

Ward, Robyn R and Herndl, Diane. "Conflicts" In *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Robyn R Ward and Diane Price Herndl. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1997. 259-262

\*\*\*\*\*