

Womanist Approach of Alice Walker

Samriti Kamboj

Lecturer, Govt. Sr. Sec. School, Brass, Karnal

There are many different types of authors in the world of literature out of them Alice Walker is the one who writes, through personal experiences. Although most critics categorize her writings as feminist, Walker describes herself as a "womanist", she defines this as

"a woman who loves other woman...Appreciates and prefers woman culture, woman's emotional flexibility... and woman's strength... Loves the spirit... Loves herself, Regardless".

Walker's thoughts and feelings show through in her writing of poetry and novels. Alice Walker writes through her approach and the morals that she has grown with, she writes about the black woman's struggle for spiritual wholeness and racial, political and sexual equality.

Alice Walker became so self-conscious of the large white scar tissue left in her right eye that because she felt ugly and ashamed of herself. She was blinded in her right eye by an errant BB gun pellet shot by one of her brothers. She had forgotten to look at all the great opportunities that life offered her. Alice focused only on her outward appearance because she was so frenzied with the importance that society placed on beauty. She always remembered what doctor had said to her, "Eyes are sympathetic. If one is blind, the other will likely become blind too."

She isolated herself from the other children. She explained,

"I no longer felt like the little girl I was. I felt old, and because I felt I was unpleasant to look at, filled with shame. I retreated into solitude, and read stories and began to write poems."

In 1961 Walker won a scholarship to Spelman College in Atlanta, where she became involved in the civil rights movement and participated in sit-ins at local business establishments. She transferred to Sarah Lawrence College in Bronxville, New York, graduating from there in 1965. She met her future husband Melvyn Leventhal, a Jewish civil rights attorney, in Mississippi where she was an activist and teacher. In 1967 Walker and Leventhal married. They were the first legally married interracial couple to reside in, the state capital, Jackson. They had one child named Rebecca . They divorced in 1976. Walker has focused more on her writing and has taught at various colleges and universities after her divorce.

Walker is one of the most prolific black women writers in America. Her work consistently reflects her concern with racial, sexual, and political issues-particularly with black woman's struggle. She explained,

"The black woman is one of America's greatest heroes. Not enough credit has been given to the black woman who has been oppressed beyond recognition."

Walker's firmness on giving black women their due resulted in one of the most widely read novels in America today, Alice's third novel, "The Color Purple". The novel traces thirty years in the life of Celie, a poor Southern black woman who is victimized physically and emotionally by her step-father and husband. While in her teens, Celie is repeatedly raped by her step-father, who sells the children. Then she is placed in a loveless marriage to Albert, who also beats and torments her continuously. She eventually finds peace with the help of Albert's mistress, Shug Avery, a blues singer who gives her the courage to leave her marriage. At the end of the novel, Celie is reunited with her children and with her long lost sister Nettie. Walker

earned many praises for the novel along with many criticisms as well. Those who praise the book such as Peter S. Prescott would agree with him when he said, "an American novel of permanent importance, that rare sort of book which amounts to a diversion in the fields of dread". Some felt differently about certain points the book made, one being the its negative portraits of black men, people like Darryl Pinckney state, "Walker's work shows a world divided between the chosen (black women) and the unsaved, the poor miserable critter' (black men), between the 'furnace of affliction' and a 'far off, miystic land of" miraculous. Walker's central characters are almost always black women; the themes of sexism and racism are predominant in her work, but her impact is felt across both racial and sexual boundaries.

Walker is also considered an accomplished poet. Walkers first collection, *Once: Poems* (1968), includes works written during the early 1960's while she attended Sarah Lawrence College. Some of these pieces relate the confusion, isolation , and suicidal thoughts Walker experienced. For she had learned her Senior year that she was pregnant and had to deal with the stressful time that followed. *Revolutionary Petunias and Other Poems* was Walkers second volume of poems, in this she addressed such topics as love, individualism, and revolution. When Alice Walker lived in Mississippi and was active in the civil rights movement and teaching she experienced these such things. With Walker's most recent poems she expresses her ideas of races, gender, environment, love, hate and suffering, the same topics she writes about in her novels. In addition to her novels, and poetry, Walker has also published two volumes of short stories, *In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women* (1973) and *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down: Stories* (1981), both of which evidence her womanist philosophy.

The first novel written by Alice Walker "The Third Life of Grange Copeland" (1970), again carries many of her prevalent themes, particularly the domination of powerless women by equally powerless men. In this novel, which spans the years between the Depression and the beginnings of the civil rights movement in the early 1960s, Walker showed three generations of a black sharecropping family and explored the effects of poverty and racism on their lives. Because of his sense of failure, Grange Copeland leads his wife to suicide and abandons his children to seek a better life in the North. His traits are passed on to his son, Brownsfield, who in time murders his wife. In the end of the novel, Grange returns to his family a broken yet compassionate man and attempts to make up for all the hurt he has caused in the past with the help of his granddaughter, Ruth. While some people accused Walker of reviving stereotypes about the dysfunctional black family, others praised her use of intensive, descriptive language in creating believable characters.

In 1990 Black sociologist Patricia Hill Collins pointed to the revolutionary potential of placing African American women's experience at the center of analysis of processes of domination in the redefinition of "either/or dichotomous thinking of Eurocentric, masculinist thought"(225).

This role is crucial due to the fact that African American women are most profoundly affected by the interlocking systems of race, class and gender oppression "with in a more generalized matrix of domination"(226).

African American women's experience of oppression rejects the possibility of applying additive models, that is of analyzing race,

class and gender as competing hierarchical frameworks for analyzing oppression (as racist and economic and sexist) but calls for a new theoretical framework of intersectionality, which is a paradigm viewing race, class and gender (sexuality, age and ethnicity might be added here) as mutually constructing systems of power, which both shape and are shaped by African Americans(351).

Assuming the intersectional paradigm has allowed Collins to analyze how excluded groups of African Americans may be penalized and simultaneously enjoy privilege depending on the context. For example, Black men may be penalized by their race but are privileged by gender in their race, while white women are penalized by their gender but are privileged by their race. Consequently, an individual might be a member of an oppressor and an oppressed group at the same time.

Black feminist critics, for example, are penalized by their race and gender but they are simultaneously privileged by their class (as is sometimes pointed out by womanist and Africana critics).

On the one hand, this particularly vulnerable, intersectional position of African American women has made it necessary for them to constantly interrogate feminist thought which has colonized colored women in the gender framework that neglects the role of racism. On the other hand, they interrogate African American antiracist politics which gives priority to "race as a consensus issue [because it affects all group members] while assigning gender and sexuality a secondary status as crosscutting issues [because they affect only certain segments of the group]"(47).

As a result, African American women are engaged in a dialogic relation with feminists (as women and as colored persons) and with

Black men (as colored persons and as women), simultaneously and respectively affirming identity with and asserting difference from both groups which assign coloured women marginal positions in their discourses and politics(348-368).

Overall Alice Walker has been a very influential author throughout the black community, and her audiences are very much interracial. Although many of the criticisms are controversial on her view of black men and their abuse toward black women, that depiction can not be narrowed down to only that, there is much more that is present in Alice Walker's writing. Her feelings, morals and the opinions, Walker has towards women, sexuality, and racial equality shine through her works of all literature.

In the end, Alice learned the true value of life and what was important. Since she was a little girl she was always so used to people telling her how cute and adorable she was, until that horrible day when she was eight years old that literally changed her life for the worst or so she thought. Alice goes on to say that she would sit in front of the mirror before going to bed and abuse her eye. She would rant and rave about how much she hated her eye and how she wished it would clear up by morning. Alice would never pray for sight, but only for beauty. It goes to show how a tiny disfigurement can almost ruin a person's life and how a few simple words from another can completely change one's perspective on everything that a person grew up believing. Alice lost sight of everything that was important to her because she was so obsessed with her physical appearance instead of realizing how beautiful it is just being able to see the world through her one good eye. After Alice left her daughter's room, she dreamt of a beautiful girl dancing and she realizes that the beautiful girl in her dream was no one other, than herself.

Work Cited

- P. H. Collins: *Black Feminist Thought*, New York: Routledge, 2000.
- P. H. Collins: *Black Sexual Politics*. New York & London: Routledge, 2005.
- M. G. Henderson: *Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Woman Writer's Literary Tradition*. In: *African American Literary Theory: A Reader*. Ed. W. Napier. New York and London, New York University Press, 2000.