

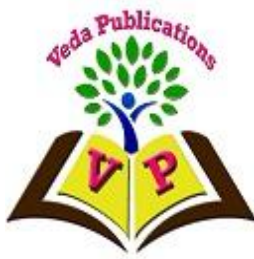
ALICE WALKER: THE HARBINGER OF BLACK WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN THE PATRIARCHAL SOCIETY OF AFRICA AND AMERICA

Kasukurhi Srinivasa Rao^{1*}, Prof. Kolakaluri Suma Kiran²

^{1*}(Lecturer in English, SVKP College – Markapur)

²(Professor, Department of English, S.V.University – Tirupati.)

ABSTRACT



The black women of Africa like those of India have been facing a hard time. Their humanity and rights have been denied by the power of patriarchy. With the emergence of Flora Nwapa's Efuru revolutionary changes occurred in African feministic fiction. The novel Efuru echoed strongly the thoughts of black women and their rights. After Flora Nwapa, Alice Walker broke the confines of established American and African literary structures she approached Womanism which means Black Feminism to her literature. With her own coined literary term, womanism she disclosed through her novels how black women's human rights have been violated by patriarchal community. Through her heroines like Celie, Tashi, and other heroines shown to the world how black women moved from victimhood to self realization and agitated against the sexual, racial and class oppression of the male dominated society of Africa and America.

Keywords: *Black Women, Womanism, Oppression, Male Dominated Society.*

© Copyright VEDA Publications

INTRODUCTION

Violation of human rights exist every part in the world. The black women of Africa like those of India have been facing a hard time. Their humanity and rights have been denied by the power of patriarchy. Their welfare and wellbeing have always been taken for granted, nicely and safely tucked away under the bed of patriarchy. Silence is their virtue. They are left behind to mind chores of house, the children and the farms. Their right of marriage & family equality has been exploited by male chauvinistic society. Black woman's worth in her dowry, her honor is in her virginity, her pride is making a man's tummy quit rumbling with her sweet meal, and it is in sexually massaging his ego by giving freely of herself. Her respect is being called a wife. That is the story of black woman's life in Africa and America of course in India also. To be a woman, she has to become an appendage to a man. Thus black women are triply burdened as they are compelled to endure the torments of sexual, racial and class oppression. Their common human rights have been neglected by the black and the white male of Africa and America. Civil Rights Movement and Feminist Movements in 1960's are failed in focusing the exploitation of Non-white women's rights and their specific issues. Even the prediction of African literature which is rooted in America and by the American descent writers from *The Things Fall Apart* to *The Lion and*

the Jewel wrote in the language of patriarchy. Women in this era of works of eminent authors like Chinua Achebe, Ola Rotimi, Wole Soyinka, depicted black women were as the possession of man., as tools of reproduction, as having small brains and bought and sold by men; promoters of polygamy, caressing the man's ego and enhancing man's social status. For instance the women characters Sidi, Sadiku and Ailatu were shown as the helpers to men to build their world. With the emergence of Flora Nwapa's Efurú revolutionary changes occurred in African feministic fiction. The novel Efurú echoed strongly the thoughts of black women and their rights. After Flora Nwapa, Alice Walker broke the confines of established American and African literary structures she approached Womanism which means Black Feminism to her literature. With her own coined literary term, womanism she disclosed through her novels how black women's human rights have been violated by patriarchal community. Through her heroines like Celie, Tashi, and other heroines shown to the world how black women moved from victimhood to self realization and agitated against the sexual, racial and class oppression of the male dominated society of Africa and America.

BLACK FEMINISM

Black Feminism is a school of thought which argues about intersectionality of sexism, racism and class oppression in the patriarchal society of Africa and America (Wikipedia). Black Feminism is originated in an effort to meet the needs of black women who felt they were being racially oppressed in the American Women's Movement in 1960 and sexually oppressed in the Black Liberation Movement in 1970. Evolution of Black Feminism is to address the interconnectedness of sexism, class oppression, and racism in the lives of African people. Black women felt invisible. Their need and existence are ignored by the white feminists. Alice Walker exhibited how black women's human rights have been ill-treated and exploited. Black Feminism vehemently attacks the idea of societal relationships based on race, class and sex. It disproves the erroneous belief that a woman is nothing without a husband. It dismantled the structure of race, gender, and class domination. Black Feminism is against the idea of **"We are women. What can we do?"** Alice Walker gave importance to her heroines who are independent minded women who often shout against traditional customs of African society. She highlights in her novels the importance of love and mutual understanding by showing suffering and hardworking wives who bear the brunt of family responsibilities and tragically grow apart from their truant and irresponsible husbands.

ALICE WALKER: THE CREATOR OF "WOMANISM"

Alice Malsenior Walker was born on 9th February, 1944 in Eatonton, Georgia. She was the eighth and youngest child of Minnie Thallulah Grant Walker and Willie Lee Walker. She is an American novelist, short story writer, poet and civil rights activist. She has created oeuvre of more than 27 books of poems, novels, short stories, essays, memoirs and children writings. She is influenced by Japanese Haiku and the philosophy of author Albert Camus. She grew up in the environment of violent racism which, along with her family's poverty, left a permanent impression in her writing. Walker was blinded in one eye when she was eight years old. She spent most of the time reading and writing and deserted herself from other children because of her facial disfigurement. In 1982 she completed the color purple, an epistolary novel about the life of a poor black woman, Celie. For this book, she won a Pulitzer prize in 1983 and the American Book Award. The novel was soon made into a motion picture produced by Quincy Jones and directed by Steven Spielberg. When her film premiered in her hometown of Eatonton, Walker received a parade in her honor. Her sister, Ruth even created the **Color Purple Foundation** to promote charitable work for education. Walker presently lives in Northern California where she continues her participation in civil rights activities and writing literature. Alice Walker replaced the term Feminism with Womanism because she wanted to give expression to a specifically black femininity which didn't see in American feminism dominated by white women. She described the term as **"Womanist is to Feminist as Purple is to Lavender"** (Collins 38). Womanism was inspired by Walker's real life situations of multiple oppressions as an Afro American woman and writer. Her life and experiences are deeply entered in her novels. Her works mirror the struggles of Afro Americans especially women and their revolt against racist, sexist and violent society and exploitation of their human rights.

COLOR PURPLE: STRUGGLE TO GAIN INDEPENDENCE

The Color Purple, since its publication in 1982, has been continued to enjoy enormous popularity. This epistolary novel by central protagonists Celie and her sister Nettie honestly describes the damaging effects of male domination upon Celie's spirit and her eventual redemption through the love of her husband's mistress Shug Avery. The novel broke the silence surrounding such taboo subjects as incest and lesbianism. It explored the theme of sexual oppression of black women by black men and situated its sincere treatment of sexism within the black community and also white racial oppression of blacks both in Africa and America.

Celie, a fourteen years old black girl, lives with her sick mother and her sister Nettie. Her stepfather, Fonso, rapes her more and more often and impregnates her twice. He warns her not to speak to anyone except God "you better not tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mommy." (Color Purple). She writes letters to God believing that at least God can listen to her anguish and feelings. After two children are born to her by Fonso, he takes them away and sells. She thinks that he killed them. After some days she is compelled by Fonso to marry Mr. Albert, an old and brutal widower. She agrees to marry with a hope that at least she can provide a secured life to her sister, Nettie. Her tragedy doesn't stop even after her marriage with Mr. Albert who often beats her and gives repeated sexual and physical assaults. Nettie leaves her sister to escape the sexual demands of Mr. Albert. Celie's sorrow is increased by her sister's departure. After enduring silently the brutality of her husband's cruelty, her tragedy is reduced with the arrival of Shug Avery, Mr. Albert's mistress. Shug Avery is a blues singer, very successful and wealthy lady. She comes to know the pathetic condition of Celie. When Celie looks at Shug she reminds her mother. She compares Shug to her mother throughout the novel. Unlike her mother, who oppressed by cultural loyalty, Shug is bold and refuses to allow herself to be dominated by anyone. Thus her relationship with Shug develops and becomes close friends. Shug fills the roles of mother, friend, sister, lover and teacher to her. With the help of Shug and Nettie Celie transforms from sorrow to happy, successful and independent woman. She starts new business sewing pants with the help of Shug and becomes a successful business woman. Mr. Albert who has changed a great deal since Celie's departure repents and reconciles with his wife. Thus the family of Celie is reunited with the arrival of Nettie with her children and ends the novel with happy note. The message of the novel is that women must stand up against the unfair treatment they receive at the hands of men and they should do this by helping one another.

POSSESSING THE SECRET OF JOY: REBEL AGAINST THE MEN'S CONTROL OVER THE FEMALE BODY

Alice Walker's main aim of this novel is that elimination of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) from the world. She wanted the world should know how Black Women's human rights have been exploited in the name of cultural practice under direction made by patriarchy. There are three kinds of female genital mutilation. Of the three procedures infibulation is the most serious form of female genital mutilation, as *the external or genetelia are almost scraped away and the normal urinary and vaginal openings are replaced by small openings in the sealed scar. The opening must be enlarged for sexual intercourse and even for child birth.* (Sanderson 13-61). Black Women are made to believe that "Infibulation purifies, and makes clean the outer surface of the womb, the enclosure of the home of the child birth, it socializes or culturalizes a woman's fertility" (Janet Boddy 696). This cultural practice is considered as the gate way for a girl to enter womanhood and wifehood. The consequences of this dangerous process of Female Genital Mutilation are urinary infections, blood poisoning, painful intercourse, recurrent vaginal injuries in sexual acts, and even death due to hemorrhage. Alice Walker through the heroine Tashi and other female characters like Dura, Nafa, M'Lissa, Amy Maxwell, and Mbatia has depicted what female genital mutilation done to the lives of black women. The novel Possessing the Secret of Joy centers the life of Tashi, who undergone circumcision and endured the pain in the name of cultural loyalty, from childhood to death. The mothers of the patriarchal society of Africa are both willingly and unwillingly ready to hand over their daughters to get circumcised even though the process is dangerous to life. Dura, Tashi's elder sister died due to over bleeding and blood poisoning. The novel shows through a wonderful quotation from African folk culture which is very apt to the theme of the present novel. "When the axe came into the forest, the trees said the handle is one of us" (possessing the secret of joy). Through this quotation, Alice Walker explains how women are made into pain inflicting tools to pain fellow women under the influence of patriarchy. Walker depicted through the novel circumciser like M'Lissa,

performer, slayer and villain of the lives of many girls who operate the Female Genital Mutilation are but tools in the hands of patriarchy. Tashi takes revenge against By killing M'Lissa, the performer of female genital mutilation, and gives redemption to many girls from infibulations. Through this novel Walker emphasizes that women should debunk the traditions and women are never allowed to know their bodies and explore their sexuality outside the male gaze.

CONCLUSION

Alice Walker asserts through her works women should always try to get gender equality and always aware of their human rights. Behind her philosophy of redemptive art is the will to liberate her race from an oppressive society and save the entire race through a collective oneness. She also stresses of the removal of the immoral and murderous options in women's strive for human rights and debunk the traditions and myths which kill women's human rights.

REFERENCES

- [1]. Sanderson, LilianPassmore. *Against the Mutilation of Women: The Struggle to Unnecessary Suffering*. London: Ithaca, 1981. Print. Websites: Wikipedia, spark notes
 - [2]. Walker, Alice. *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992. Print.
 - [3]. Walker, Alice. *The Color & Purple*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992.
 - [4]. "Walker, Alice." Interview. By Paula Giddings. *Essence* July: 59+. 1992. Print.
 - [5]. *Warrior Marks*. Dir.Pratibha Parmar. Women Make Movies, Inc,1993.
-