

## **Oppression and Exploitation, Feminization in Alice Walker's Works**

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### **Abstract**

Alice Walker the feminist deals with the oppression of black women and men. Her quest is a new identify for black women, a self-awareness which will make them self dependent socially, emotionally and spiritually. Racial oppression, general violence, history and ancestry, Civil Rights Movement – all these form the sum and substance of her work. It was Alice walker who coined the term ‘Womanism’ a form of black feminism that affricates and prefers women’s culture, women’s flexibility and women’s strength. ‘Womanism’ according to Alice Walker is not narrowly exclusive; it is committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. In all aspects Alice walker is the brightest star in a galaxy of black American women writers.

**Keywords: Womanism, Civil Rights Movement, Black feminism, Women’s strength**

### **Alice Walker’s Works – Focus on Feminism**

Afro American Woman writer Alice Walker is a novelist in English. Racial oppression, general violence, history and ancestry, Civil Rights Movement – all these form the sum total of her work. It was Alice walker who coined the term ‘Womanism’, a form of black feminism that affricates and prefers women’s culture, women’s flexibility and women’s strength. ‘Womanism’ according to Alice Walker is not narrowly exclusive; it is committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female.

Alice Walker is a feminist, she is the foremost Afro-American women black feminist. Alice Walker’s black ‘womanism’ consciousness is characterized by sexual racial, cultural, national, economic and political considerations. Alice Walker deals with oppression, racism, and sexism in America. Alice Walker’s division of women into three kinds, as “suspended”

part of main stream'; and "awakened by political force" is pertinent. Some Afro-American and Indian Women are reconciled to their position, to the lack of understanding between them and their men ('suspended'); others question their lot but unable to break away resign themselves ('part of mainstream'). The third phase is that of rebellion. More Afro-American women than Indian women are able to positively define themselves; long periods of economic independence, existence of three women households, and preference for a daughter in the family are perhaps contributory factors for this emergence of the awakened black women.

### **Alice Walker's On Black Women**

Alice Walker contends that "Black Women now offer varied, live models of how it is possible to live. We have made a new place to move" (quoted in Washington 1979:146). However, the Afro-American women, like the Indian women turn to their children for emotional fulfillment and companionship; to be able, without fear of disapproval which they often receive from their husbands, to talk, to laugh and to feel. Motherhood not only gives them satisfaction, but also power, even if lop-sided, which they lack in their marital relationship.

### ***Meridian***



The creature sparks of the survival culture of the 'suspended' black women is the theme in *Meridian*. The theme finds an appropriate expression in the character of Meridian. Meridian, to begin with, is a looney, crazy Woman who has been physically and psychologically abused.

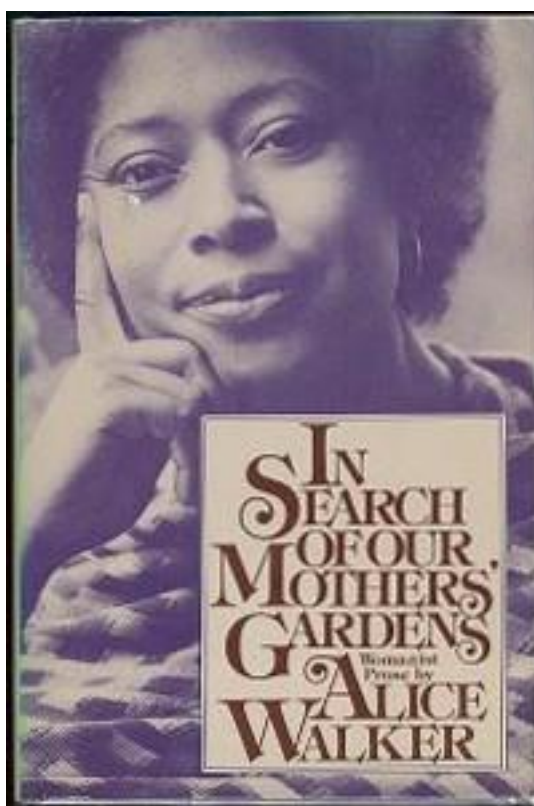
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But unlike the women characters in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, Meridian is provided with an opportunity to liberate herself, through the Civil Rights Movement. Initially she involves herself in a movement fully. But as the Movement turns into violent revolution, she questions the validity of the violent means to achieve revolutionary ends. She gains a sense of perspective and proportion through suffering, which she believes is essential to human development. The oppression which destroys all the creative sparks of Margaret and Memm, makes Meridian philosophical, as she imbibes the collective wisdom of her people.

### The Myth of Black Motherhood

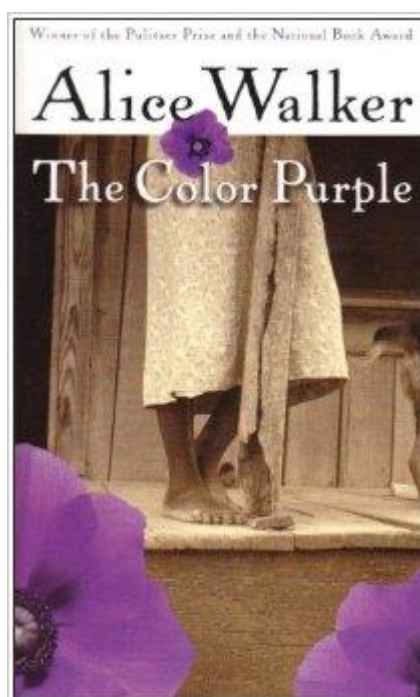


Alice Walker fights the myth of the Black motherhood as a stereotype of strength, self-abnegation and sacrifice. Margaret and Mem are abused mothers produced by the sharecropping system. Their idea of motherhood, quite not stereotypical, is restrictive. Mem's attempt at providing a good and protective motherhood to Ruth fails, and the role is finally taken on by George Copeland. Meridian's idea of motherhood is not restrictive: 'she is torn between her own personal desire to become a mother and the fact that motherhood seems to cut her off from the possibilities of life and love' (Alice Walker, *"In search of our Mother's Gardens"* 64-65). It is this contradiction in her desire which precipitates her quest to become a

mother not in the biological sense of term, but in the philosophical sense when she takes to non-violent resistance for the sake of children. The renunciation of her cell, her sleeping bag and her role passed over to Truman, again, is symbolic of the role of the mother earth that she had played. Truman climbs shabbily into Meridian's bag and realizes the terror of the role of mother earth that he now has to play. She therefore passes on the struggle to defend life to Truman in order to understand the sacredness of life fully, symbolizing the awakening of the spirit, and also the beginning of another individual search. The novel is thus used as a contemplative and analytical tool.

### **Alice Walker's Narrative Technique**

The narrative technique that she uses to emphasize the contemplative nature of her novel is that of a collage so that it works on the mind in different patterns. She calls it a "crazy quiet story" (Barbara Christian Black woman Novelist, 220) as it jumps back and forth in time and works on many different levels including that of a myth. This method is helpful in evolving metaphor and symbolism as an integral part of *Meridian*. Alice Walker prefers to call herself 'womanist'. For her, a womanist is a woman who "appreciates and prefers woman's culture, woman's emotional flexibility (values tears as counter-balance of laughter), and women's strength wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered 'good' for one.



### ***The Color Purple***

***The Color Purple*** by Alice Walker won her the Pulitzer prize and the American Book Award in 1983, for creating a very powerful black liberated woman character in Celie who succeeds in the process of survival both at the level of self and community meaningfully in the context of the racist, sexist and classist society of America. The novel chronicles the life of the black girl Celie who despite poverty, illiteracy, and physical as well as mental exploitation, transcends her plight through self-awareness, and attempts to scale the subtle and warm dimensions of womanish consciousness. Walker tells Celie's story in the form of letters first written to God and later to her sister Nettie. Celie, writes to God to help her to survive the spiritual, emotional and physical abuse she suffers at the hands of her father (step father). Thus, she begins her journey from powerlessness to the state of full empowerment and from self-abnegation to self-recognition.

### **A Womanist**

Alice Walker calls herself 'womanist'. It is the term she coined to express the comprehensive context of Black Feminism. To her, 'womanist' is "a woman who appreciates and prefers women's culture and woman's strength" (Culture, The Literature of the United States, 394). Further she explains 'womanist relationship with "feminist" by playing upon the title of her Pulitzer prize novel *The Color Purple*: "Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender" (395), thus focusing on the color dimension of Black feminism. Being a womanist, Alice Walker is more interested in heroines than in heroes. Though, men are not absent in her novel, they are only secondary. This helped her to effectively recasting the presentation of blackness in America. In *The Color Purple* (1982), Alice Walker is concerned with black life and expression in general, and female victimization in an essentially patriarchal world in particular. She focuses on the evolution of female wholeness: the development of identify and community in Celie; the central character in the *Color Purple*, Celie is presented as victim of racial and sexual oppression. She is raped by the man she believes to be her father and she is battered and abused in a loveless marriage. Nevertheless, Gray comments she gradually learns how to grow into being a woman and gain companionship (697).

The Color Purple is a story of Celie's survival and her personal growth that happen to be written as a series of letters.

### **Letters to God**

The letters are written to God. Celie writes to God because her step-father called Alphonso warned her not to tell anybody of what he did to her. "You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy" (Walker 1), her father warns her. Celie's first letter to God reveals how she is made victim to sexual desires by her step-father Alphonso when her sick mother doesn't respond to his sexual advances. Alphonso represents patriarchal black world in which women are subjected to sexual oppression. Mute submission to men's sexual advances is expected from women and they cannot make a cry against men. Celie experiences pain as she is being molested by her father. When she cries, her father starts choking her and says, "You better shut up and git used to it" (2). She is forced upon motherhood, though she is unaware of it. She is a mother wanting children, since Alphonso took her babies away from her. He would like Celie to look decent after she gives birth to two babies. He looks in Celie for a substitute for his sick wife and actually he has substituted her. Celie has gone through not only the sexual oppression, but also repeated beatings at the hands of her father. He beats Celie for no reason in particular; first he beats her for she winked at a boy in church and on the other occasion he beats her for 'dressing trampy'. In both cases the reasons for beatings are not tenable. Celie's position in the novel is the black women's position in general. Black men may be victimized by racism, but sexism allows them to act as exploiters and oppressors of [black] women (Ranveer, Black Feminists Consciousness 17).

### **Oppression of Patriarchal and Sexist Society**

Celie's suffering in the patriarchal and sexist society continues unabated even after her marriage to a man called Albert. On the very day of her wedding she is attacked by her husband's son with a stone, injuring her head. She is overworked in her husband's house by doing things for her husband's children. But her work is not acknowledged, neither does anyone care about her as a person; rather she is subjected to sexual oppression. "He never ask me nothing about myself. He clam on top of me and



fuck, even when my head bandaged” (Walker 117), Celie writes. In her husband’s house, the same vicious circle is repeated: she is sexually harassed and subjected to repetitive beatings. Like her father, her husband beats her for no particular reason.” He beat me like he beat the children, cept he don’t never hardly beat them. He say, Celie, git the belt. The children be outside the room pecking through the cracks. It all I can do not to cry”(23). Celie in letter, when Harpo asks his father Albert reason for beating Celie, he answers, “Cause she my wife. Plus, she Stubborn” (23 ) This reminds her of her father’s view about women and to the reader it echoes the white master’s view about his slaves before the abolition of slavery. Albert doesn’t want Celie to be ‘stubborn’ but rather to be submissive and obedient. He beats Celie for the stubborn quality in her character and even asks his elder son Harpo to follow his example in later disobeying wife’s case. He tells Harpo, ”Wives is like children. You have to let in know who got the upper hand. Nothing can do that better than a good sound beating”(37). What Albert means by it is that only men can have the upper hand over women and the only way to have it is by beating them. Surprisingly Celie advises the same thing as Albert does to Harpo, though she is of the same class of women who suffer at the hands of men. It is not strange on Celie’s part to advise Harpo to beat Sofia, because the patriarchal society has moulded her mind for such an action. Submission and not reaction to such actions is what she knows.

### **A Stereotype**

That Celie is a stereotype of black woman in the patriarchal society is corroborated by Sofia’s association of her in her mind with her own mother. In her person and behavior Celie reminds Sofia of her mother:

To tell the truth, you remind me of my mamma. She under my daddy thumb. Naw, she under my daddy foot. Anything he says, goes. She never say nothing back. She never stands up for herself. Try to make a little half stand sometimes for the children but that always backfire. More she stand up for us, the harder time he give her. (43)

### **Feminist Movement in US**

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In the United States the contemporary feminist movement started as the white, middle-class women's movement to eliminate sexist oppression and to achieve parity, or equality of opportunity, with white middle-or-upper class men. For a number of reasons, black women did not see this "as addressing their concerns" and felt alienated from "the main stream of the white feminist movement" (Powell, *Indian Journal of American Studies*, 1990,2). They are concerned as much about ethnic and racial discrimination as about sexism because to be "black and female" is to be in "double jeopardy" (Beal, 90). They are mistreated sexually by black and white men, and racially by white men and women. Consequently, they have lost their authentic self and occupied a marginal place in the American society. It became the responsibility of the black women writers to build up resistance to all such oppressions. Driven by an overriding impulse towards self-assertion, which they derived from the cultural ethos of the 1960's they soon succeeded in turning their identity into a source of strength. They brought about changes in their psychological environment by giving back to black women their own pride and confidence.

### **A Pioneer Celebrating Womanhood**

Alice Walker is one of those pioneers who celebrate womanhood in their writings. She calls herself a "womanist"; in her opinion, expresses woman's concerns better than feminism. It appreciates and prefers "women's culture, women's emotional flexibility, and women's strength" (1983 : xi). In the fictional world of Walker, woman is no longer subservient to man, but rather struggles against her patriarchal culture and its institution to define her individual identity. Walker destroys, or subverts, the old literary myths which are for heroes and creates new images of women in her novels. As a womanist she is concerned with the liberation of all womankind from the psychology of oppression. But as a black womanist writer she is more "committed to exploring the oppression, the insanities, the loyalties, and the triumphs of black woman" (Walker 1973 interviews with the black writes, 1973: 192). Walker clearly shows that they are victims of both racism and sexism in the American society and the same time seeks to transform them into emergent black women. This note attempts to examine how *Meridian*, one of her most celebrated novels, reflects her strong belief in the black womanist tenets. It tells the story of the black woman in a period of transition, the



story of a coming to consciousness and a subsequent development of self and search for authenticity.

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