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ALICE WALKER'S CONCEPT OF WOMANISM

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Abstract

Alice Walker is one of the prominent and towering personalities who first coined the term 'womanism.' womanism is a social theory based on the discovery of the limitations of the second-wave feminism movement in regards to the history and experiences of black women, and other women of marginalized groups. Writer, poet, and activist Alice Walker is credited with coining the term "womanist." Since Walker's initial use, the term has evolved to envelop varied, and often opposing interpretations of conceptions such as feminism, men, and blackness.

The article charts the development of womanism as a movement which has presented an alternative to feminism. It advocates inclusiveness instead of exclusiveness, whether it is related to race, class or gender. womanism provided political framework for colored women and gave them tools in their struggle with patriarchy which imposed restrictive norms and negative stereotypes on them. It also tackled the restrictiveness of feminism which was especially evident in the field of literary scholarship. Womanism is also related to new movements within feminism such as womanist theology and eco-feminism.

Key words: colored women, feminism, patriarchy, womanism

It is an established fact that in the writings of African female writers we get the delineation of the race, gender, class and oppression in their lives. It is because of the concept of slavery that we come across their struggle individually as well as in groups just to eradicate the multiple injunctions that they and their communities face. Alice Walker is such an author who contributed a great deal to the concept of feminism, and that is why, in her novels we get a peep in to the lives of female characters who suffered in the society because of various reasons like caste, class and gender.

Black feminism is a school of thought stating that sexism, class oppression, gender identity and racism are inextricably bound together. The way these concepts relate to each other is called intersectionality, a term first coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989. In her work, Crenshaw discussed Black feminism, which argues that the experience of being a black woman cannot be understood in terms of being black or of being a woman. Instead, each concept should be considered independently while including the interactions that frequently reinforce each other. Feminism at its core is a radical political movement to end sexist oppression. Alice Walker uses the term womanism in place of feminism which is a term for black feminism. The struggle for

Women's rights generated the discourse of feminism in Europe and America in the late eighteenth century. Now-a-days Feminism has become historically and culturally an international movement. Basically it aimed at equality for women. Yet, it failed to take into account the issues of Black women, black men as well as women of colour. This insufficiency birthed womanism as a new concept or variant for feminism. This need is the origin of womanist discourse. This is an idea created and designed for all African American women. It focuses on the needs, desires, experiences and struggles of African American women. womanism is a variant or alternative theory that focuses on the black women experiences. It concentrates on the writings of men and women giving description of racial issues, classist issues and sexist issues. For feminist thinkers sexist oppression is a key concept to deal with. The racial issues and classist issues are different from it. Whereas according to womanists, racial and classist issues are interlinked with sexist oppression. Many times they portray racial and classist issues with more precedence than the sexist issue. They think that the liberation of black women folk is only possible with the liberation of the whole race. They give more importance to the partnership with their men than the sexist oppression. This feature of womanism separates it

from feminism. It differs from feminism because the womanists fight against the triple oppression of black women under racial, classist and sexist difference. They desire male participation in the movement of women liberation from all kinds of oppressions. The womanist thought is totally dependent of black culture accounting centrality of family, community and motherhood in its discourse. Because of this all inclusiveness womanism is extended beyond African American community and reached up to Africa, India and other parts of the world. womanist discourse differentiates the black writers from the white feminists in relation to the discussion of issues.

The women and the men of black community have experienced the past and present control over them by the Western Culture. This control has given them the subject of conflict between white and black. This conflict is because of different priorities and strategies in sexual politics. womanist novels posit almost all the elements of womanist ideology. In these novels a reader may find the theme of critical perception of patriarchy and reaction to it. These perceptions and reactions to patriarchy are presented through the struggle of the oppressed against the patriarchy. womanism is a philosophy celebrating the black life ideals and black roots with the presentation of black womanhood. It aims at the liberation of black women, men and children against the contemporary oppressive social structure. Black American female writers present their experiences aiming at the survival and wholeness of the entire people, male and female. Many of the black female writers have presented their protagonists in their novels as women without men. Zora Neale Hurston's novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), presents Janie Crawford, the protagonist of the novel, without any support of man. Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* (1966) portrays Vyry, the protagonist, as a womanist character. Toni Morrison, Marshall, Aidoo and Heads are African American and African women writers, who present their protagonists as women without men. The black woman, as presented in different novels, is not a powerless character. But she is less protected than she should be. She has to grow independent. This is a sort of spirit in the womanist novels that deal with female

achievement. In this discourse the womanist explore the connection between black Americans and Africans. They strive jointly for the good of their folk. This womanist approach to religion and society is considered to be a means of presenting black women's issues from their own culture.

Walker's fame comes from her novels, and Walker views the genre of novel as the medium that permits her the greatest amount of freedom in her creation of a literary work that is uniquely hers in her own words.

Walker has a skill of novel writing that helps her weave the story into proper dialogues that exhibit the thoughts of the characters. She has a special ability to develop the stories of black women, those have not been the parts of American literature. There are seven novels to her credit till date. All the novels have different themes, different narrative techniques with a single current of wholeness of humankind.

The characters delineated by Alice walker in her fictional works show their revolutionary zeal, and through her novels, Alice walker is successful in redefining the negative image of the black women. Walker says that they are also capable of realizing their potentials and if they are also given chance, they can also come up with vigour and vitality. There is no doubt that the characters portrayed by Alice Walker are remarkable to accept change, and can attain a state of transformation. Without any shadow of doubt, she picks up unlikely characters in whom there is ample of possibility to explore growth and change.

Womanism and womanist are synonyms for the black feminism and black feminist, and womanism is a specific term used by Alice Walker for advocacy of or enthusiasm for the rights and achievements of women. The term Womanism used by Alice Walker brings a racialised and often class located experience suggested by the Feminists. No doubt, the term womanism used by Alice Walker helps to give visibility to the experiences of African American women and other women of colour always in the forefront of movement against sexual and racial systems.

The term womanism reflects a link between the historical facts that includes African cultural heritage, enslavement in the United State and a kinship with other women especially black women.

While during the 1970s and 1980s the focus of womanism was predominantly on political activism and the struggle against racism, sexism and classism, during the late 1990s and in the first decade of 21st century, womanism changed under the influence of the fragmentation of feminism but most significantly under the influence of multicultural feminism. Multicultural feminism shares many of the tenets of womanism such as insistence on the analysis of the influence of the social categories of race, ethnicity, sex and class on the lives of women and the decentralization of feminism. Multicultural feminists criticized womanism for its exclusionistic stance in relation to white feminists which influenced Walker to change her original standpoint and to allow for the possibility of including all women, colored or white within the span of womanism, including men who respect women and their rights. One of the reasons for this change of opinion was the fact that under the constant criticism of colored women, some of the white feminists changed their stance and recognized the need to incorporate different voices and discourses into feminism

and to avoid divisions along the lines of race and class. It also became clear to Walker and other womanist scholars that womanism is in danger of becoming similar to feminism if it continues its policy of exclusion.

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