

Alice Walker's Continuum and Revision of Feminism: Womanism in *The Color Purple*

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Keywords: Womanism; feminism; *The Color Purple*; patriarchy.

Abstract. Alice Walker proposes the idea of womanism in the preface to her *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*. Her novels are perfect illustration of this idea. In *The Color Purple*, she develops the theme of womanism in full detail. Her womanism is first a continuum of feminism. She shows her concern on women's inferior political, cultural and economic status and issues associated with women's poverty, the celebration of femininity, women's marriagial and familial oppression. Then she goes on to interpret her preposition for a universalist view of human kind and advocacy of new relationship between men and women.

Introduction

The Color Purple is Alice Walker's most controversial novel. Taking place from 1900 to the 1940s, it tells the story of Celie, a black women who after years of physical and emotional abuse at the hands of her stepfather and later her husband, Mr.____, finds dignity, independence and kinship in her relationships with other women. The novel consists of series of letters written by Celie and her sister, Nettie, and won American Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize. In 1985, it was filmed into an Oscar-nominated movie by the famous Hollywood director Steven Spielberg.

Since its publication in 1982, *The Color Purple* has been reprinted at least 40 times so far, and it attracts attention of critics worldwide. Stacie Lynn Hankinson deals with the role of religion in women's liberation^[1]. James C. Hall goes further to analyzing how Walker constructs a black feminist literary tradition by attacking patriarchy (and patriarchal culture) at its Christian foundation^[2]. Some others discuss how surnames function in Walker's attitude towards patriarchal authority.

Seldom do the above critics relate feminism in *The Color Purple* to her advocacy for womanism in her collection *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*. The purpose of this paper, then, is to analyze the theme of feminism in this novel with regards to her three definitions of womanism, and to show how Alice Walker's womanism constitutes a continuum and revision of feminism and black feminism, which is perfectly illustrated in *The Color Purple*.

Womanism: continuum of feminism

Feminism in general has a long history, developing as a substantial force, in America and Britain at least, throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century. It is generally accepted that feminism goes through three stages. Feminism of the first stage, with Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir as the spokeswomen, strove for political and legal equality, focusing on a range of issues such as female suffrage; women's access to educational and employment opportunities; the legal rights of married women, for example, to own property, to divorce and to have custody of their children. Campaigns over the sexual double standard or unequal attitudes to male and female sexual behavior were also important. The dominant themes of the second stage of feminism are the omnipresence of patriarchy; the inadequacy for women of existing political organization and the celebration of women's difference as central to the cultural politics of liberation. Feminisms of the third stage are

the black feminism and lesbianism. The black feminists, such as Barbara Smith and Bell Hook^[3], argue for creation of a distinctive black feminist theory that embodies the realization that the politics of sex as well as the politics of race and class are crucially interlocking factors in the works of Black women writing. The main focus of lesbianism is, as the name suggests, the advocating of lesbian relationship between women to resist the oppressive patriarchal heterosexuality. In spite of all the varieties and branches, feminism is, as Cleage defines it, “the belief that women are full human beings capable of participation and leadership in the full range of human activities--intellectual, political, social, sexual, spiritual and economic”.^[4]

Walker’s feminism covers the main areas of feminism agenda. The first and foremost is her concern of women’s inferior political and cultural status. As we have shown, Celie’s stepfather, Mr.____, and Harpo take women as nothing. In Africa, a girl is also nothing to herself; only to her husband can she become something, the mother of his children. Instead they take women as objects. In Olinka, Tashi’s parents come to ask Nettie to stop the girl’s education. The father speaks angrily but he never looks at Nettie. This is the way that men speak to women in *The Color Purple*. “They listen just long enough to issue instructions. They don’t even look at women when women are speaking. They look at the ground.”^[5] In their eyes, women are just like the dirt on the ground. The only difference is that women can listen to their instructions and carry them out. Even as privileged as a white woman, Miss Mellie cannot drive a car as her husband does. That he buys her a car means he has the economic ability, but that he refuses to teach her means he does not think it appropriate for women to drive a car. And Miss Eleanor, the Mayor’s daughter, does not gain the same love from her parents as her brother--it is the fate that girls, whether black or white, face in their life.

The second feminist theme that draws Walker’s attention is the economic status of women and issues associated with women’s poverty, such as educational opportunities, environmental sexism and inheritance laws concerning property. In *The Color Purple*, Celie is forced to leave school on the excuse that she was dumb and being pregnant. Even as smart as Nettie, she can go to school not because she was smart but because her stepfather wants to keep her for his own use. Women’s lack of education is universal. In a remote African village, the Olinka do not believe girls should be educated. The reason is, in the Olinka men’s words, “Who wants a wife who knows everything her husband knows^[6]?” While in Olivia’s words, it is because “They (the Olinka men) are like the white people at home (America), who don’t want colored people to learn^[7].” Just as Francis Bacon said, knowledge is power. Men fear that once women possess the knowledge as they do, women would not be obedient as they are now when they are ignorant.

Though feminism provide sources of inspiration for Walker’s feminism, the white feminism and earlier black feminism has its own limitations. For example, femininity is frequently perceived as a white category and suffrage campaigns led by white women polarized around an “expedient” choice between granting the vote to black men or white women, as can be seen in Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*^[8] and Friedan’s *Feminine Mystique*^[9]. While the Black feminists define black feminism as being excluded for black women only, rejecting white women, black men and other minority groups. So Walker shoulders herself the task of compromising the two extremes of feminism.

Womanism: universalist view of human race

As part of her second definition for womanism in *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens*, Walker has a Black girl pose the question “Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige, and black?” The response “The colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented” broadens the notion of humanity to make all people people of color.^[10]

Walker likens all human races as flowers in a garden. Womanism thus furnished a vision where women and men of different colors coexist like flowers in a garden yet retain their cultural distinctiveness and integrity. Her requirement for a womanist is “not a separatist, traditionally universalist.”^[11] This universalist worldview realizes equity by providing equal opportunities, rights, and respects to all ethnic and interest group. By retaining black cultural distinctiveness and integrity, universalism offers a modified version of racial integration promised not on individual assimilation

but on group integration.

Similar to the “flower garden” theory, an English missionary says in the book that “an African daisy and an English daisy are both flowers, but totally different kinds.”^[12] Unfortunately, the white essentialists deliberately overlook the fact that they are both daisies. They focus their attention on the adjectives of “African” and “English” instead. Once they happen to find an English daisy that are more ‘beautiful’ than an African daisy, they draw the conclusion that all English daisies are more beautiful. So is the case when comparing people. In fact, it does not matter whether there exists a more beautiful English daisy. If they presume it is beautiful, they can fake a series of criteria to testify the theory. If one group perches the position of a judge in the comparison, the opposite will inevitably seem odd. The Olinka villagers in *The Color Purple* regard the white as “naked”. If it seems odd to the white, then they should realize that the “colored” makes the minority groups uncomfortable as well.

David Wright^[13] has once asked indignantly, “Why are other people described by comparison with whites, with the assumption that whites are normal and others are odd, rather than described in their own right?” as “unity as the key feature of homo sapiens: members of mankind are biologically more similar to each other than --- for example--- a black bird and a thrush”. Ironically, on the one hand, the essentialist scientists are doing their best to testify the kinship between human beings and monkeys; on the other, they are doing their best to enlarge the differences in the same species: humankind.

Similar to Wright, Walker holds that if every race regards itself as only flower in a garden, they will realize that other flowers are beautiful too. Anyhow, it is easier to get love, help and understanding from the same species as flowers than from trees and grass. In the novel, Walker shows that, without the obsession of racism and colonialism, Africans are human beings filled with the same self-confidence and self-esteem. “Africans are very much like white people back home, in that they think they are the center of universe and that everything is done is done for them”^[14]. This is quite on the contrary to the blacks in America, where Celie’s stepfather boasts to have discovered a shortcut to wealth: “[You] got to give them (the white) something. Either you money, your land, your woman or your ass”^[15].

In the novel, Sofia says to Miss Millie’s daughter, Eleanor Jane, “I feel something for you out of all the people in your daddy’s house because you show me some human kindness. But on the other hand, out of all the people in your daddy’s house, I show you some.” Only the love of the white without condescension and that of the blacks without flattery can eradicate the mistrust and misunderstanding among all “colored” people.

Womanism: a new relationship between men and women

Many feminist theorists view feminism as a movement exclusively for women only. Some even go to the extreme to attack and eliminate men. While in her definition of womanism, Walker says, “A womanist loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female.”^[17] Seemingly Walker hopes to seek ways for black women to address gender oppression without attacking black men. Some radical feminists sometimes regard men as stereotyped oppressors and enemies. They think the only alternative to dethrone the patriarchy is to set up a matriarchal society, a community where women do what men do now, and men do what they force women to do. In such an Amazon utopia, the opposition of the oppressor and the oppressed is still the same as in a patriarchal society, with only the sex roles exchanged. Unlike these extremists, Walker does not take black men as black women’s enemies but comrades to end their oppressions. Though she is aware of family violence in black community, she does not think the empowerment of women would necessarily be achieved at the expense of men. In her opinion, if women set themselves as the opposite against men, the oppression and fighting against oppression will go with no end. What she proposes is mutual understanding and cooperation between men and women.

The liberationists in the 60s and 70s tended to see femaleness as not only a disadvantage to a quest for self but also a negative condition to be eradicated or overcome. As Payant holds, when

women searching for self, they should reject that which is exclusively female and try to develop a more androgynous personality.^[10] Then in the novel, Sofia seems to be the ideal women warrior for these feminists. She is strong and willful. She likes to do men's work. She does what she thinks is right, paying no attention to her husband, Harpo. When Harpo follows his father's suggestion to give her "a good sound beating", people see him "his face a mess of bruises. His lip cut. One of his eyes shut like a fist. He walk stiff and say his teef ache^[18]." Seemingly Sofia does not receive her husband's beating willingly or obediently. She fights back as most feminists appeal. The only guarantee for her "getting the upper hand" is her strong body and plenty of muscle. With no doubt, Harpo sees it and eats a lot to get on weight. They fight again. This time Harpo has two eyes close like fists, and Sofia a bruise on her wrist. Though Sofia still gains the upper hand, she gets tired of fighting. She at last leaves Harpo with her children.

In the story of Sofia, Walker seems to suggest that going the masculine way, as how Sofia has behaved, would not work to resist sexual and racial discriminations. Even if they succeeded, it was on the expense of their female identity. They have become, in Greer's words, the eunuch women. Here Walker gives an alternative, a womanist way. It is that of Shug. She is a woman in control of her life. "When you look into Shug's eyes you know she been where she been, seen what she seen, did what she did^[19]." But unlike Sofia, she does not fight physically, she fight spiritually in the way that she does not take men as God nor as enemies. This enables her to love men as individual men and men respect her as an individual woman.

Walker does not portrait men as tyrant like Mr.____ or weaklings like Harpo. There are some natural men as well, such as Jack, husband to Sofia's sister, and Samuel, Nettie's husband. They understand and respect their wives. They are kind to children and generous to all people.

As we see from the above, Walker's womanism does not belittle others or claim superiority over men. She seems to suggest that men are not born sadist, as women not masochist. Women's awakening will not only bring out "outrageous, audacious, courageous and willful' women, but natural, kind, generous, individual men. She argues that the natural consequence of being in close relationship with an awakened and self-reliant woman is an empowered and re-enlightened man and a harmonious and united world.

Summary

In the last letter of *The Color Purple*, Celie writes to the Addressee: "Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear skys, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God^[20]," to express her happiness to have all her friends and relatives under her roof. This happy epilogue of family reunion has been criticized by Hankinson for possessing a rather superficial, fairytale-styled ending^[11]. It is difficult, for example, to imagine any character, despite the approximately forty-year time span, arising from utter oppression into such a state of bliss and restoration, as does Celie. It could be difficult for a radical feminist, but it is not for a womanist. Instead of concentrating on hatred and hostility between white and black, men and women, Walker focuses more on love, leniency and forgiveness. She cautions that racism does not only come from the white, but also from the colored themselves, and patriarchy harms the oppressed not only physically but also spiritually. If they do not arm themselves against patriarchal culture as a whole, they will inflict the same molest on the more marginalized group. Walker's womanism seeks to enlighten and uplift all people, through the enlightenment and uplifting of women, who are the mothers, the lovers, the wives and the teachers to all people. She implies that in spite of their racial and sexual labels, all people are just "flowers in the garden" that live harmoniously and peacefully. Her womanism is just like the color purple. It is neither gloomy as blue nor shiny as red, but cheerful and jovial as purple. Maybe this is what she means by the title *The Color Purple*.

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