

**ALICE WALKER'S WOMANISM: PERSPECTIVES
PAST AND PRESENT**

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Abstract: 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.

1. Introduction: Definition of womanism

Alice Walker who founded womanism is one of the most renowned African American writers today due to the broad spectrum of themes in her work which reflect the diverse experiences of the African American community in the U.S. Starting with her first novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* to the latest collection of essays *We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For*, Walker has examined the whole history of the African Americans, from the troubled period of slavery and the long struggle for civil rights to the victories scored in overcoming negative stereotypes and restrictions imposed by the white community. This struggle represents an integral part of the African

American matrilinear heritage which can clearly be traced in Walker's novels, especially in the portrayal of her female characters who find strength in their female precursors and oral heritage they had bequeathed to them. As Walker's literary scope expanded and she developed into a more mature writer and political activist, she became aware of the need for a movement which would be different from feminism and which would offer colored women a space to formulate their policy. She named it womanism. At the center of womanism is the concern for women and their role in their immediate surroundings (be it family, local community or work place) and more global environment. Walker defines a womanist as a "black feminist or feminist of color" who loves other women and/or men sexually and/or nonsexually, appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility and women's strength and is committed to "survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female" (Walker 1983:xi). She firmly locates womanism within black matrilinear culture deriving the word from *womanish* used by black mothers to describe girls who want to "know more and in greater depth than is considered 'good' for anyone" and whose behavior is "outrageous, courageous or willful" (Walker 1983:xi). Thus, the emphasis is clearly on a behavior which is at the same time responsible and playful, fearless and compassionate. In Walker's more metaphorical definition of womanism: "Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender" (Walker 1983:xii), she distinctly extols womanism and sets it apart by comparing it to the strong color of purple which is often described as the royal color. Feminism pales in comparison by being associated to weaker lavender and this appraisal reminds one of the debates whether feminism really lost its appeal to many women during the 1980s and 1990s. Lavender as paler color is also cleverly associated with the notion that feminism is related more to white women than colored. As Montelaro aptly notices: "This contrast of hues in Walker's definition is consonant with her political intention to demonstrate the crucial difference between the terms 'womanist' and 'feminist': according to the semantic analogue she constructs, an exclusively white, bourgeois feminism literally pales in comparison to the more wide-ranging, nonexclusive womanist concerns represented by the rich and undiluted color purple" (Montelaro 1996:14).

2. Past perspectives on womanism

The divide between white and colored women can be traced back to the very beginnings of feminism as a movement. Although at the start, the goal of feminism was to win equality and suffrage for women, already in the nineteenth century it became clear that there were two separate women's movements since white women refused to support the struggle of black women for their rights. For example, in the U.S., white women, especially in the South, built their ego by oppressing black women who were at the bottom of the social ladder. Refusal of white women to acknowledge the basic rights of black women can be found in many testimonies of slave women such as Harriet Jacobs and Harriet Wilson. In her famous speech "Ain't I a Woman" Sojourner Truth questioned such policies of white women and demanded equal rights for all women. Frances Harper emphasized the painful choice black women had to make during their struggle for suffrage in the 19th century since they had to seek the support either of the black men who demanded their own right to vote or of the white women. Since white women rejected black women's claim to the same civil and political rights, they decided to support black men in their struggle although that meant postponing attainment of their rights. Another good example is the story of Saartjie Baartman who was taken from Africa as a slave and then paraded in England and France as a freak because her physique did not correspond to Western standards. Instead of being treated as a human being, she was objectified and derogatorily dubbed as the Hottentot Venus.

The rift between white feminists from western countries (or so called First World countries) and colored women from minority ethnic groups and economically underdeveloped countries (often referred to as the Third World countries) remained. Similarly to patriarchy which rests upon binary oppositions in which man always occupies the first part in the equation and is seen as the norm, while woman is seen as his opposite, as weak, unfulfilled, as the Other, feminism started to operate on the same principle of binary oppositions, but this time it was the colored woman, the poor woman who was seen as the Other because of her difference in terms of origin, race, ethnicity and class. Michie contends that white feminists wanted to preserve their position of speaking subject and that they marginalized colored women because they did not fit into the prescribed norms (Michie 1991:60). Spivak and Allen also criticized white feminism which according to them consisted of various forms of elitism and cultural imperialism

reflected in the imposition of white women's norm upon the rest of womanhood. In their opinion, feminism kept the axioms of imperialism alive by accepting and utilizing the ideology of individualism which was at the center of colonial forces designating the first place to white western citizens who were seen as subjects and second or third place to colored people who were then seen as objects (Allen 1995a:2; Spivak 1991:798). Hence the division into First and Third world countries. Feminists accepted patriarchal policy and built their dominance at the expense of women of color's gains, by distancing themselves from them and excluding their work. As Baym puts it, "a difference more profound for feminism than the male-female difference emerged: the difference between woman and woman." (Baym 1991:73). In catering to the needs and goals of white First World women and operating from the premise of exclusivity, it did not include the needs and goals of colored women and Third World Women. Liu states that:

A key aspect of white women's privilege has been their ability to assume that when they talked about themselves they were talking about all women, and many white feminists have unthinkingly generalized from their own situation, ignoring the experiences of black women, or treating them as marginal and "different." Many have also projected western concerns and priorities onto the rest of the world, measuring "progress" according to western liberal standards and identifying a global system of patriarchy through which "differences are treated as local variations on a universal theme" (Liu 1994:574).

Showalter who charted parallel histories of African American and feminist literary criticism and theory ascertained that they remained separate and that the Other Woman, the silenced partner in feminist criticism, has always been the black woman (Showalter 1991:169). Eminent African American writers and scholars such as Barbara Christian, Mary Helen Washington, bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Gwendolyn Brooks, Toni Morrison and Alice Walker kept pointing out that racism became part of feminism and feminist scholarship. Walker especially begrudged feminists for not perceiving colored women as women, but as a completely different species, thus reserving for themselves the prerogative of womanhood. In her opinion, the reason for it was the desire of the white feminists to avoid assuming responsibility for the lives of colored women and their children so they denied them the rights they had (Walker 1983:374).

Exclusiveness of feminism was particularly evident in the field of literary scholarship since white feminist critics in the 1970s and 1980s largely ignored the work of colored women or relegated it to the margins of literature. Alice Walker in her description of the circumstances that prompted her to create the womanist movement recalled how her colleagues Patricia Meyer Spacks and Phyllis Chesler rejected the inclusion of African American women writers in their survey of women writers' history. When Walker questioned such a stance, Spacks and Chesler tried to justify themselves by saying that they could not write about women whose experience was so different from theirs. That, however, did not stop them from writing extensively about eighteenth and nineteenth century British women writers whose experience was also presumably quite different from that of Spacks and Chesler who are American scholars living in the twentieth century. Phyllis Chesler also stated that Third World women have a special psychology which scholars have to master in order to be able to write about their work (Walker 1983:372). While this example shows that the existence of racial and cultural differences was ignored, when at the end of the twentieth century the growing body of ethnic writers made it no longer possible, feminists placed a lot of emphasis on racial differences stating that a special knowledge and expertise were necessary to enable analysis of the work of ethnic and minority women writers thus effectively marginalizing them again. Mridula Nath Chakraborty is one of the scholars who posits that as soon as white feminists realized that they could no longer insist on unified subjectivity or singular identity of women because this position was contested by colored women, they started claiming that feminism was dead just like literary scholars proclaimed the death of the author precisely at the time when multicultural authors started dominating the literary scene (Chakraborty 2007:102).

Womanism reflected the decision of colored women to clearly state their objections to such an exclusive position of white feminists and to create a paradigm which would incorporate values important to them. Not only did womanism distance itself from feminism, it also presented itself as stronger and more original thus applying the feminist strategy of distancing in order to underscore the restrictiveness of their paradigm. Womanists wanted to decenter white feminists and challenge the 'normality' of their perspective (Bryson 2003:228). As an alternative to dominant patriarchal and

feminist models, womanism served as an example of different modes of behavior and thinking, and retrieved the submerged history which led to the transformation and redefinition of existing norms and to the broadening of traditional views. According to Valerie Bryson, black women's analysis of the interlocking and interdependent nature of oppression has constituted a paradigm shift in feminist understanding: "Placing African American women and other excluded groups in the center of analysis opens up possibilities for a both/and conceptual stance, one in which all groups possess varying amounts of power and privilege in one historically created system" (Bryson 2003:229). While womanism does not claim that black women have discovered the "truth", their insight into the multi-faceted and interlocking nature of class, race and gender can enable awareness of other systems of oppression such as age, physical ability and sexual orientation (Bryson 2003:230).

Womanism thus grew from an answer to the exclusionary practices of feminism into a larger form of political activism and became a tool for colored women with which they could not only challenge policies which marginalized them, but more importantly, provide the framework for the empowerment of colored women and women from ethnic minorities all over the world. In order to build a womanist paradigm which rests upon notions of inclusion and support among women, womanism insisted on the self-sufficiency and self-confidence of women since they had to deal with racism and denigration on a daily basis, and emphasized the need for a strong community of women who would help each other and provide the support needed to resist oppression and patriarchal dominance and transform traditional systems into new ones in which they would have more possibilities to express themselves. In order to provide women with the positive values which would sustain them, Walker found inspiration in the matrilinear culture of African American foremothers which is largely based on the tradition of building networks among women. Many African American scholars and writers supported such solidarity among women. Solidarity enables different groups of women to support each other without insisting that their situation is identical; it also enables women to form alliances with oppressed groups of men. Womanism strived to challenge all power structures which inhibit human growth and development and it largely contributed to the discussions about dynamics of power not just within feminist and womanist circles

but also on a more global scale. In her works, Walker painstakingly demonstrates that women become supporters of patriarchy when they subscribe to power games whose aim is to win dominance through the subjugation of others which can take many forms such as racism, sexism and classism. The answer obviously lies in steering away from dominating behavior and accepting a broader platform of interaction among women. That is why womanism placed to the forefront the commonality of female experience and introduced nonexclusive womanist alternatives to enhance social equality.

Precisely because it provided a broader framework than feminism, many prominent female scholars and writers such as Buchi Emecheta, Mariana Bâ, Miriam Tlali identified themselves as womanists rather than feminists and used womanism as a paradigm in their analysis of the texts of women from ethnic minorities or economically undeveloped countries. Women from Africa and the African diaspora have particularly embraced the idea of a network of women who support each other, especially mothers, since mothers are most vulnerable in the early stages of their children's development and need additional sustenance in African countries which often struggle with poverty, diseases and political turmoil. The womanist concept of universality also underscores as its utmost goal the wellbeing of the whole community or as Walker puts it: survival and wholeness of entire people and love for the Folk (Walker 1983:xii). These tenets gain special value in societies torn by ethnic divisions and civil wars in Africa. Mehta maintains that

[t]he communal mother, who occupies a privileged place in West African societies, exemplifies Alice Walker's definition of a womanist who is committed to the integrity, survival and wholeness of entire peoples due to her sense of self and her love for her culture. Several African feminists like Filomena Steady and Chikwenye Ogunyemi are self-identified womanists who have demonstrated how the philosophy and practice of womanism have enabled them to propose a new model of femininity for African women that is independent of patriarchal and western definitions of the feminine. Situating itself at the grassroots level, womanism posits the impracticality and inviability of feminist utopias, by seeking total commitment, as the woman factor is an integral part of the human factor. (Mehta 2000:396).

Mehta draws a parallel between colonialism and white feminism which both operate from the position of dominance and subordination of African nations. The split between womanism and feminism has resulted from the complicity between white western feminism and white patriarchy to further marginalize the experience of women of color by representing them as the negative instance of the white, middle class female model (Mehta 2000:396). In her groundbreaking essay “Under Western Eyes”, Chandra Mohanty has also shown how these representations have centered on a sensational or exaggerated sense of a daily reality of indigenous and Third World Women defining them in terms of their literacy, poverty, social and religious victimization (Mohanty 1990:180). These women consequently have to confront a dual system of discrimination, articulated by a white male and female patriarchy. It is important to note that exponents of womanism do not see it simply as a theory of and for feminists who happen to be black. Rather, it is a self-conscious epistemological standpoint which argues that feminist struggles cannot be confined to gender issues and that, if other perspectives are excluded from feminist thought, its attempt to understand even the situation of white women will be seriously flawed. The idea that oppressions interconnect and therefore *cannot* be challenged in isolation is now widespread amongst black and third world feminist writers (Davis 1990:31).

Inclusiveness of womanism allowed it to become a functional paradigm not just for colored women in the U.S. and Africa, but also for women in Latin American countries. Latin American women rejected feminism because they saw it as too “Eurocentric” and because it did not deal with problems such as racial violence, health issues, unemployment (Walters 2005:118). Unlike feminism, womanism did not concentrate just on gender inequality, while ignoring issues of race and class, which also made it a more viable option for many women around the world. Women in Latin America, as well as in Third World countries, must struggle against postcolonialism, ethnic and tribal divisions and rigidity of religious patriarchy and they embraced womanism since it gave them tools to confront various forms of oppression. It also enabled them to gather around a movement which expressed their concerns which were different from the concerns of white feminists from economically developed countries. These differences and the need of womanists to address them were apparent during the

conferences on women rights in Cairo and Beijing in the 1990s. Feminists from western countries were mostly interested in issues of contraception and abortion, while women from ethnic minority groups and economically undeveloped countries were more interested in issues of racial discrimination, poverty and family and community violence. In Bryson's opinion, more developed and systematic analysis of the ways gender, class and race discriminations overlap, influenced various movements of colored women, including womanism, to move beyond mere critique of white feminism to develop original theory which has serious implications not just for white feminism, but for all women (Bryson 2003:226).

3. Present Perspectives on Womanism

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. As Bryson observes: "Any claim that black women have a superior 'standpoint' upon the world is highly suspect" (Bryson 2003:231). Heidi Mirza also expresses reservations about the notion that there is a fixed identity possessed by all black women since she thinks it is a "naïve, essentialist universal notion of homogenous black womanhood" (Mirza 2004:5).

She states that depending on the context, black women may be aware of themselves as black, female or black women. This means that black women should explore “this fluidity by facilitating the construction and articulation of more positive black female identities” and use their view from the margins to challenge “dominant ways of seeing the world” (Bryson 2003:232). Womanists heeded such criticism and worked to diversify womanism which resulted in some significant changes of the movement during the 1990s.

The focus of womanism most importantly shifted to the exploration of the spiritual and religious aspects of womanism. Walker developed the spiritual side of womanism in her novels *The Color Purple*, *The Temple of My Familiar* and *Possessing the Secret of Joy* in which she examines the ways dominant Judeo Christian religion subjugates women by imposing on them strict norms and modes of behavior which objectify women and assign only two possible roles for them: pure Virgin mother or sullied Mary Magdalene. She goes back to the beginnings of civilizations on the African and Latin American continents and explores the ways matriarchal societies were suppressed by patriarchal and pantheistic religions and worship of Mother Goddess was supplanted by Christianity and Islam. She offers a more integrative vision of religion resting upon the premise of equality of all beings and celebration of both male and female aesthetics. As Montelaro states: “Womanism allows women to weave together their maternal identities and histories in order to revise their oppressive circumstances and to rewrite more acceptable scripts for themselves” (Montelaro 1996:71). This broadening of the scope of womanism corresponds to other women’s movements within and without feminism which also combined political activism, spirituality (with particular emphasis on female manifestations of divine power) and ecology in the 1990s. Most notably, in its more recent forms, womanism has integrated aspects of eco-feminism in its dedication to wholeness, ecology and preservation of natural resources. Since eco-feminism is based upon an assumption that all forms of life are sacred and interconnected, it opposes patriarchal attitudes, which led to the exploitation of the earth’s resources without concern for long-term consequences. Many eco-feminists see a link between the way society treats animals and the natural environment and the way it treats women. A parallel can also be drawn between womanism and spiritual eco-feminism in their

concern for the preservation of Earth, respect for all beings and the spiritual component of people's lives.

The branch of womanism concerned with spirituality developed into womanist theology which gained in significance during the first decade of the 21st century. Nnaemeika observes that the concept of womanism has had a profound influence on the formulation of theories and analytical frameworks in women/gender studies, religious studies, African American studies, and literary studies. Because of the interweaving of womanism and spirituality in Walker's project, many African American female theologians have incorporated womanist perspectives in their work. African American womanist theologians question the subordination of women and assume a leadership role in reconstructing knowledge about women. Prominent black womanist theologians and scholars of religion – such as Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, Katie Geneva Cannon, Delores S. Williams, Emilie Maureen Townes, and Marcia Y. Riggs – bring womanist perspectives to bear on their church, canon formation, social equality, race, gender, class, and social justice. The impact of womanism goes beyond the United States and many women scholars and literary critics have embraced it as an analytical tool. (Nnaemeika)

Thus, womanism continues to reinvent itself and functions as an operational paradigm which carefully monitors processes of creation and definition of the roles women play in their communities so that previous mistakes can be avoided and essential balance maintained. Womanism is still dedicated to the struggle against oppression and fragmentation and against any kind of behavior whose goal is to denigrate a community or an individual based on the difference in race, culture or class. It can therefore be asserted that womanism evolved from a policy to a philosophy of life. Walker voices this philosophy in her call to all women to create a platform based on the communality of female experience which would allow them to communicate better with one other.

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