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## **Reconstructing Autonomy in Alice Walker's Select Novels: A Critical Study of Black Womanhood**

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### **Abstract:**

Alice Walker, often proclaimed as a bold novelist and a social activist, holds a prolific position in the contemporary African American scenario. For her path breaking literary work *The Color Purple* (1983), she was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1983. In her literary genre, she intricately interweaves experiences and incidents of her life to depict the plethora of sufferings encountered by the “triply marginalized” African American women. To empower black woman and liberate them from the pangs of slavery and patriarchal oppression, Walker like other Black Feminist critics- Bell Hooks, Sojourner Truth, Patricia Hills Collins et al., propounds her own theory called “Womanism”. In her seminal text “In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens” (1983), she speaks about the “deep and unconscious spirituality of black women” “driven to a numb and bleeding madness by the springs of creativity in them for which there was no release”. They had to give creative outlet in their everyday works amidst their “back- breaking, sun- up to sun-down labour”.

This paper would make an attempt to incorporate the theories of black feminism, especially Walker’s “womanism” to explore the fictional representation of black woman in the gendered space. It would also make a critical textual analysis of her novels *The Color Purple* (1983), *Meridian* (1976) and *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970). Rather than merely considering black woman as the “mules of the world”- in the words of Zora Neal Hurston, Walker takes a feminist stance in reconstructing her female characters (like Celie, Shug Avery, Sophia or Meridian Hill) as rebellious, questioning patriarchal and societal norms. Therefore, this paper would examine how Walker subverts the black woman stereotypes (as mother, wife or caretaker) and how her women characters embark on a quest for the self and identity and tries to establish an autonomy of the self.

**Keywords:** Autonomy, black feminist criticism, womanism, stereotype, liberation.

Black women are the greatest victim of gender as well as racial oppression. Along with the menace of slavery, they have to endure the physical and sexual abuse of the white as well as the black male. Even after years of abolition of slavery, they are not liberated from the pangs of slavery, and are constantly reminded of their colour and inferiority. This, in a way, hinders the growth of the individuality. Hence, African American women writers through their use of literary art have challenged the cultural, political, and spiritual realms of their communities and society, to present women who defy the traditional roles and resist strictures of oppression. In order to empower black woman and liberate themselves from both racial and gender segregation, Black feminist movement grew out in the 1960s and 1970s with academics and critics like Bell Hooks, Sojourner Truth, Hazel B. Carby, Barbara Christian, Barbara Smith, Patricia Hill Collins, Henry Louis Gates Jr., Eliot Butler or Angela Davis, et al. along with the American Civil rights movement. Black feminist critics like Bell Hooks questions the representation of Black women in the Western literary canon and create a genre of their own. They challenged the authenticity and accuracy of a White writer that fails to record their voice. Barbara Smith observes the state of black women novelists in her essay- "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" that "thematically, stylistically, aesthetically, and conceptually Black women writers manifest common approaches to the act of creating literature as a direct result of the specific political, social, and economic experience they have been obliged to share" (Smith, 1977). She further adds that "The use of Black women's language and cultural experience in books *by* Black women *about* Black women results in a miraculously rich coalescing of form and content and also takes their writing far beyond the confines of white/male literary structures..." Hence, using their literary art to represent women, black women writers made their voices heard. Alice Walker as well, feeling underrated in the mainstream literary movement, postulates a critical theory which she calls *womanism*, to empower black women solely.

Alice Walker holds a prolific position in the contemporary African American literary and social scenario. She is a vociferous voice as a writer, critic, essayist and a social activist. She strives not only for the cause of black women but also for uplifting the pitiable condition of women victims in the global scene. A prominent work worth mentioning is her initiative to curb the evil social customs such as female circumcision and the practice of clitorrectomy or female genital mutilation mainly prevalent in the African dominion. She along with Pratibha Paramar worked in the production of a documentary and published the *Warrior Marks: Female Genital mutilation and the Psychological blinding of women* (1993). Also, her novel

*Possessing the Secret of Joy* brings to light these silenced arenas of female physical violence and the menace of superstitious beliefs and customs. She brings forth the physical pain and agony, African American women had to undergo throughout her life.

Walker's widely read novels are *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970), *Meridian* (1973), *The Color Purple* (1983), *Temple of my Familiar*, *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, *By the Light of my Father's Smile* and *Now is the time to open your Heart*. In her novels she interweaves incidents of life and oral narratives so as to give a vivid description of the sufferings overcome by the triply marginalized African American women; class, race and gendered. She used her literary art as a form of weapon, to struggle against the complexities of gender and racial oppression and give an expression to her own self in the African American community. Walker's women characters raise their voice against all these and assert an identity of their own. Many of her female characters Meridian, Fanny, Celie, Shug Avery, or Sofia try to symbolize and address the negative perceptions of Black women, both in this story's era and the contemporary scenario. She uses a language, typically her own; the colloquial dialects used by the native African Americans. As such, she initiates to radically protest and establish an identity, a character or thought of her own, bringing a new direction to the African American literature.

### **Objectives:**

The proposed study aims to relocate the female characters of Alice Walker in the gendered space of American socio-political, economic and cultural background; and the condition of the stereotypical black women with the change of tradition. It probes into the selected novels in order to depict woman's progress towards self-awareness and establishing autonomy of the self in American society.

### **Methodology:**

This study shall incorporate the theories of black feminism, especially Walker's 'womanism' to examine Walker's literary practice in her fiction. The study shall analyse the selected novels vis-a-vis her 'womanist' concept encapsulated in her canonical essay "*In Search of Our Mothers' Garden*". It takes an analytical and descriptive approach, offering a close reading of her novels from the stated perspective. It examines her novels mentioned herein as the primary text and other critical works as secondary text.

Walker in her seminal essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" encapsulates her theory of "Womanism", a term she has coined to describe black feminism. In this essay Walker speaks about the "deep and unconscious spirituality of black women" which she refers as "Saints" and "Unconscious Artists driven to a numb and bleeding madness by the springs of creativity in them for which there was no release." They were the creators who had to find creative outlet in their everyday work and amidst their back-breaking, sun-up to sun-down labour. Walker pays tribute to her maternal ancestors who had surmounted mountaneous odds to leave the signature of their creativity through mediums that were available to them like quilting, cooking or gardening. In saluting their sacrifices, in glorifying their humiliated motherhood, Walker also traces the bonding between black women which has historically as pointed out by Bell Hooks, allowed them to survive in America. As a "womanist" Walker defines as "feminist of color- a women who loves other women sexually or non sexually... and is committed to survival and wholeness of an entire people, male and female." Patricia Hill Collins in her book *Black Feminist Thought* comments that the primary guiding principle of black feminism is that it is "a process of self-conscious struggle that empowers women and men to actualize a humanistic vision of community".(Collins: 39) She describe the term as "womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender" (Collins: 38). According to her one is "womanist" when one is committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male or female. She further adds that. ".....the colored race is just a flower garden with every color flower represented. By redefining all people as "people of color," she universalizes what are typically seen as individual struggles.

The central tenet of modern feminist thought like Bell Hooks has been the assertion that all women are oppressed irrespective of their individual experience of race, class, caste, religion and sexual preference. Hence it lacked the comprehensiveness to encompass the experience of black women and other women of color. As a group, black women are in an unusual position in the society as their overall status is lower than that of any other group. They are triply burdened as they are forced to bear the brunt of sexist, racist and classist oppression. Comparatively white women and black men are placed in a better position. Though white women may be victimized by sexism, racism enables them to act as exploiters and oppressors of black people. Similarly, though black men may be victimized by racism, sexism allows them to act as exploiters and oppressors of black women. The brutal complex systems of oppression of black women's experience and culture are "beneath consideration, invisible and unknown" in the "real world of white and or male consciousness" (Smith 168).

Hence black women share a totally different lived experience which makes it essential for them to criticize the dominant racist, classist, sexist hegemony and create a counter hegemony to voice their experiences.

*In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens'*, Walker claims, using first person in plural, that black women will rebel and acquire their rightful position in their society: "To be an artist and a black woman, even today, lowers our status in many respects, rather than raises it: and yet, artists we will be." In every black woman Walker probably saw an "artist". They needed to express themselves in an artistic way in order to preserve their own selves. Again, Walker reflects her intention for the cause of black women as- "I am preoccupied with the spiritual survival, the survival whole, of my people. But beyond that, I am committed to exploring the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties, and the triumphs of black women" (250). This collection of essays in a way, link writers through history: from Zora Neal Hurston to the work of Jean Toomer, Buchi Emecheta and Flannery O'Connor. She celebrates the rich women's stories and spirituality throughout history and how they make a significant contribution from one generation to the next in the African American literary tradition.

In the light of the black feminist criticism and Walker's 'womanism', this paper studies the pathetic fictional representation of black woman in the gendered space and how they are treated like animals and how men use them to satiate their lust. Rather than merely considering them as the 'mules of the world'- in the words of Zora Neal Hurston, Walker takes a feminist stance making her women characters rebellious, questioning the patriarchal and societal norms. She in a way reconstructs her women characters and make them break the stereotypical role as mother, wife or caretaker and provides autonomy of the self. Hence this paper is an attempt to make a critical textual analysis of, *The Color Purple* (1983) and *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1978), centred mainly on black women characters. Though these novels primarily focus on the atrocities inflicted upon woman, the endings manifest the possibility of black woman's liberation from such inhumanity. A principal question guides this study of Walker's activism as a writer, that is- How can we use these multidimensional literary portrayals of Black women for activism and leadership, thereby empower women to foster social change in contemporary African American communities, as well as in other communities?

Unlike her later novels Walker's portrayal of women lives, in her debut novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* is mild and submissive with society, their landlords, and their

husbands. Except Ruth, the grand-daughter of Grange Copeland, these women had to endure male domination and violence. They live a subjugated life and survive by taking the role of the black women stereotypes. Margaret, Brownfield's mother and Grange's wife follows their own survival tactics to resist from the dominant patriarchal and racist ideologies; but her mistake is her failure to choose the right strategy amidst the poverty befalling on any black family. Thus she is more prone to be victimised in the racist and gender oppressed black society. Brownfield considered his mother as docile

He thought his mother was like their dog in some ways. She didn't have a thing to say that did not in some way show submission to his father. (5)

She has not only to deal with gender violence and poverty but also Grange's drunkenness, mental abuse. There are instances where Margaret tries to beat Grange and find acceptance in order to gain some power in her family. By assuming the behavior of her oppressor Margaret in a way attempts to overturn the power. Margaret's power struggle is expressed through Brownfield's perception:

One day she was as he had always known her; kind, submissive, smelling faintly of milk; and the next day she was a wild woman looking for frivolous things, her heart's good times, in the transient embraces of strangers (24).

Margaret's attempt to resist gender violence implies that if she is given ample opportunity, she would definitely assert herself and identity and rebuild her family. But eventually she ends her life by poisoning herself and her illegitimate baby. When Margaret falls apart, Grange abandons the family and their son Brownfield wanders in search of his father and make a life of his own. But Celie in Walker's third novel *The Color Purple* is much bold in such perspectives. Though the novelist depicts her as docile and submissive in most part of the novel enduring inhumane torture, both physical and sexual violence; she turns out to be a rebellious character and succeeds in liberating herself from all bonds, thereby attaining an identity of the self. By choosing her own vocation of quilt making she is able to sustain herself economically and live a life of her own devoid of patriarchal domination.

Again, in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* another women character, Josie comes to Brownfield's life and changes his life unlike his traumatic sharecropping childhood. Josie the owner of the 'Dew Drop Inn' is a victim of sexual violence in the society and she uses the

same as a survival strategy and a way to obtain power. Josie is already an independent woman with authority. Her character is perceived as a challenge to the dominant patriarchal ideology. Again, Mem is the first character to use education as a tool to do away from poverty and abuse. Like Mem, in *The Color Purple* Walker depicts women characters like Shug Avery or Nettie who are already educated, independent and have an identity and reputation. Unlike her previous novels, here she is more liberal in delineating the attitude of women characters who have their own identity. Through gardening, quilting, and being the blues singer, black women could reclaim their art and their identities. Mem is a character through which Walker draws a parallel with her own mother because Mem attempts to retain identity and pride in herself in "whatever shabby house [she was] forced to live in" ("In Search" 241). As Mem takes pride in her flowers, she takes pride in herself. As Brownfield destroys the only element of Mem's identity that she has left, her flowers, Brownfield serves as the catalyst for Mem's movement to speech and action. Therefore, Mem is the only one who can change their condition. Mem's acquisition of power, self, and progress begin with her finding a house and signing the lease herself.

A black woman has to face gender as well as racial subjugation. The portrayal of Sofia's character in *The Color Purple*, shows a female character rebelling against the established patriarchal roles and customs assigned to them. She is sent to jail for sassing the mayor's wife who desired to have her as their slave. She fights like a man protesting against the white suppression. Sofia represents physical, as well as mental strength. She is the embodiment of the seemingly enduring stereotype of the rebelling black woman. Again, Celie, who is the docile character throughout is able to stand up to her husband insults by the end of the story, to retort, "I may be black, pore, ugly, but I'm here". Despite her endurance of several abuses, Celie evolves as a rebellious character and abandons her marriage and independently achieves emotional fulfilment. She takes quilting as a vocation to attain economic self-sustenance. Thus, she is eventually liberated from the domains of patriarchy, leading an independent life of her own.

Through different stages of Celie's life, from a shy young woman to a bold one who can stand up for herself, Walker underlies that she is able to raise her voice against the patriarchal order for self-defence and attain an autonomous state. This idea may be supported by other women characters like Shug and Sofia who defiantly oppose all oppressive designs of race and gender discrimination. Nettie conquers the adverse situation of her life through courageous actions and self-education. We also see the shy and timid Squeak, Harpo's

second wife transformed into self-reliant Mary Agnes. Following the vocation of Shug Avery, she succeeds to establish herself as a blues singer which is a dominant way of asserting herself as an independent woman. Though all these, women gradually redefine themselves with their own efforts and with the help of other women and lives an autonomous life. It can be seen that almost all the female characters of Walker's novels find a sense of self and vocation, apart from the world of patriarchy or familial bonding. Thus, Walker through her literary art initiates to epitomise the realities of the lives of Black Womanhood and registers a vociferous protest and defy the exploitative constraints of a society dominated and conditioned by white people and black men. They exhibit their indomitable will, which enables them to assert their identity and liberate themselves from their stereotypical roles and choose their own vocation.

### **Conclusion**

Many of Alice Walker's women characters range from domestic or docile "mule" like character who bear the burdens of life and social marginalisation to one who attains her own identity and thus establishes an autonomy of the self. Her novels display the emergence of the conflict of the two powerful social forces of stereotypical tradition and of modernity in the African- American domain. Unlike Zora Neal Hurston or Toni Morrison her novels provide a changing social and historical context in African American society. The novels pave the way for the quest of the individuality of the female and the steady encroachment of modernity into their traditional lives. Walker visualizes the reality and projects the feelings and perceptions associated with black women's progress and self-realization and expression of their identity, leading to liberation of their own self. Many of her women characters are able to transcend the narrow boundaries and restrictions imposed on them and make an effort to earn dignity through defining and transforming the self. Her characters cope up in the midst of their traditional stereotypical roles and modern values and change in all aspects.

In *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* she expresses her commitment to change: "I believe in change: change personal, and change in society" (252). Thus, Walker radically presents the diversified aspect of Black women taking into account the various changes in the socio-political background affecting their lives in the present scenario. She like other Black feminist or as a "womanist" condemns racial, social and gender oppression in her fiction; her literary genres serve as a tool for women emancipation. Almost all Walker's novels exhibit black women's indomitable will to overcome the barriers of patriarchy, attaining self-reliance

and thereby establishing an autonomy of the self. Many characters in her novels undertake a spiritual and religious development, but the thematic motif of spiritual or religious development in either overshadowed by or mingled with other dominant motifs, such as “personal development, female relationships and racial issues”. This is a unique feature in all of Walker’s novels. Hence, this study examines Walkers reconstruction of Black womanhood and the liberation struggle in gender relation, professing to fight against inequality. Her writings may be regarded as endeavours to establish a separate marker for Black womanhood.

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