

## **A Study Of Emancipated Females Towards Alice Walker's**

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**ABSTRACT:**This paper is an attempt to show the concepts of identity in *Meridian* (1976), *The Color Purple* (1982), *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989) and *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992) by Alice Walker in the light of post-colonialism. Men and women within the race struggle with their identities, seeking to understand how to be men, women, American, Black, and a variety of other things at once while remaining true to their "true selves." Through the examination of and battle with these continuously warring elements, the African-American race has defined and redefined the standards of "being Black." Among the greater debates and longlasting identity struggles lies the problem of gender. The researcher refers to gender as a problem in the same lines as DuBois when he suggested in *The Souls of Black Folk* (2007) the question "How does it feel to be a problem?" (DuBois 10) in regards to being Black and American. In the same way that being Black in an America dominated by Whites seems a problem and a strange experience, examining gender and the roles of the masculine and feminine becomes a problem within the confines of race. She tries to reveal the position of Afro-American people in the contemporary world. The issues facing the African-American race in regards to their racial, national, and sexual identities seem innumerable. The multiplicity of the guidelines by which this race of people seeks to identify itself becomes an almost confusing jumble of multiple threads attempting to form one unified strand. The question of "What does it mean to be Black?" becomes "What does it mean to be a Black man?" and "What does it mean to be a Black Woman?" The identity of Black and Blackness no longer encompasses the whole race. Men and women become members of two different camps, now battling for their own identities separate from their male and female counterparts.

**KEYWORDS:**Emancipated women, Alice Walker's, Temple, Familiar, female, Men and women.

**INTRODUCTION:**The Temple of My Familiar is the fourth novel of Alice Walker which came out in 1989, seven years after her third novel and Walker called her novel a romance of the past five hundred thousand years. The novel is the logical extension of earlier fiction and a further step in the evolution of Walker's female characters. The novel consists of grouped in six parts and each of the chapter focuses on one of the main characters and multiple stories which are related towards the end of the book. This formal fragmentation is supported by the content, as the novel tells the stories of several characters in a non-linear way and in bits and pieces. Together the stories constitute a new interpretation of the history of human kind, talking about different times (especially past) and places and about man, animal and nature. In the novel, women are depicted as risk takers, and men as passive and different. The novel also is a mixture of mythic fantasy, revisionary history and it also postulates a comprehensive concept of memory. It gives us the desire of forgetting historical or personal catastrophes. Walker's use of time as circular and progressive helps all characters to change themselves from nothingness to possess power and having their own self-identity. The Temple of My Familiar argues that the roots of African American women's hope for spiritual wholeness lie in their African origins. Barbara Christian in *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers* points out that, 'Walker's poetry, fiction, and essays always focus to some extent on the major character's perceptions of their past as crucial to their personal transformation in the present and the possibility of change in the future'. The characters of the book achieve a potential for growth through listening to each other's stories which will reconnect them with other human beings and with their environment.

Walker once depicted in her novel women who is capable of breaking the bonds of oppression and defining themselves as whole person. She discovered divinity in all human and nonhuman elements of the universe which was a step for making the women to the goddesses which she does in *The Temple of My Familiar*. Walker's contemporary characters in the novel discover the ancient matriarchal religions which allow them to redefine relationships between the sexes. The novel deals with the great social and political issues of an age and it does not have a plot in the conventional sense of word, only series of the stories in which things happen without rhyme or reason. African American life throughout American history has been one of daily struggle. For centuries, black women have been called the "mule of world" and "slave of a slave" and they had the position of the wretched on the earth. Black women wanted to reclaim their humanity and

womanhood. Linda Brent says: ‘Slavery is terrible for men, but it is far more terrible for women; supper added to the burden common to all, they have wrongs, and suffering and mortification particularly their own’. The word “black” refers to the race, and feminist means the one who understands that the patriarchal hegemony is the factor of the exploitation of women. It is important to give voice to the black women and the exploitation of them must come to an end.

**ALICE WALKER’S WOMANISM:** Theory In this part of the paper a theoretical discussion of Alice Walker’s Womanism will be offered. First, a broader framework will be sketched. After determining the unique position of the black woman, the relation between mainstream and black feminism will be looked at to conclude that the two are similar, though not the same thing. In the second part, I will turn to Walker’s Womanism as one possible way of distinguishing between the two.

**Alice Walker’s Womanism:** Alice Walker’s Womanism is but one of the many concrete forms black feminism has taken throughout the years. Another well-known example is the Combahee River Collective, founded by Barbara Smith, and its Black Feminist Statement. Yet, as it is beyond the scope of this paper to go in to black feminism in general, these other approaches will not be elaborated on. Instead, the focus of our attention will be Alice Walker’s Womanism, which will be theoretically explored in this part. First of all, Walker’s own definition of the concept will be given and analyzed in detail. Secondly, some themes that return regularly in her theoretical writing will be considered in the light of this definition.

## **Black feminism**

**1. The women in no man’s land:** Being both black and female, one could argue, black women can identify with both AfroAmericans and women. Indeed, at first sight, their challenges to the prevalent social, political and cultural paradigms seem to be part of the problems those two minority groups have with them. Yet, as I will try to illustrate in this part, it is precisely because they belong to both groups and moreover belong to them to the same degree, that black women are undeniably different from their black male and white female “allies”. As Showalter points out, for both Afro-Americans and feminists, the black woman is “the Other Woman, the silenced partner”. This is not only true in general, but also more specifically for literary theory.

Throughout the years, black women have protested against “the sexism of black literary history” as well as against “the racism of feminist literary history”, finding themselves and their works irrevocably “excluded from both modes of inquiry” and consequently situated in some kind of no man’s land. Yet, instead of remaining silent in this no man’s land, black women have claimed their own place, stating that they should be considered more than some sort of common denominator of Afro-Americanism and feminism. Instead, being both black and female, these women are “doubly marginalized”, which makes their experience unique. As Smith argues, “the meaning of blackness in this country shapes profoundly the experience of gender, just as the conditions of womanhood affect ineluctably the experience of race.” (Smith, 1997: 317) Or, formulated differently: “black women experience a unique form of oppression in discursive and no discursive practices alike because they are victims at once of sexism, racism and by extension classism.”

**2. Feminism and black feminism: “as purple to lavender”** As has been illustrated, besides race, gender is an important aspect of a black woman’s identity. Many black female scholars have pointed out that although it is certainly true that black people are faced with racism as a community, black women are faced with sexism not only from outside, but also from within that same community.

“It is obvious that most Black men are not in positions that allow them to exert the kind of institutionalized patriarchal power and control over Black women’s lives that privileged white men do in this society. But it is undeniable that they do exert a lot of power over Black women and children in everyday life.”

As this quote suggests, many black women cannot relate completely to the mainstream Anglo-American feminist movement, although it is self-evident that in some respects white and black feminism are related. Obviously, both criticise the Western culture generally, and the Western canon more particularly, for being patriarchal (see: Russ, 1973: 4 and Gilbert & Gubar, 1979: 45-46). Yet, many black women consider the mainstream feminist movement narrow and elitist, as it is “markedly white, middle-class, Western, and heterosexual, and (...) [consequently] ha[s] been participating in the marginalization of women of color, working-class women, Third World

women and lesbians” (Ward & Herndl, 1997: 259). Black women explicitly refute the suggestion that there is something as “the female consciousness” or “the female experience”.

“For we now confronted the revelations we always knew, that there is both a She and there are many she’s. And that sometimes, in our work we seemed to reduce the both and to either-or. That revelation made itself felt strongly in the exclusion that women of color protested when Woman was defined (...). The awareness that we too seek to homogenize the world of our Sisters, to fix ourselves in boxes and categories through jargon, theory, abstraction, is upon us.”

## **ALICE WALKER'S MAJOR NOVELS IN THE LIGHT OF POST-COLONIALISM:**

Alice Malsenior Walker (born February 9, 1944) is an American author, self-declared feminist and womanist - Womanism is a feminist term coined by Alice Walker. It is a reaction to the realization that “feminism” does not encompass the perspectives of Black women. It is a feminism that is “stronger in color”, nearly identical to “Black Feminism”. However, Womanism does not need to be prefaced by the word “Black”, the word automatically concerns black women. A Womanist is a woman who loves women and appreciates women’s culture and power as something that is incorporated into the world as a whole. Womanism addresses the racist and classist aspects of white feminism and actively opposes separatist ideologies. It includes the word “man”, recognizing that Black men are an integral part of Black women’s lives as their children, lovers, and family members. Womanism accounts for the ways in which black women support and empower black men, and serves as a tool for understanding the Black woman’s relationship to men as different from the white woman’s. It seeks to acknowledge and praise the sexual power of Black women while recognizing a history of sexual violence. This perspective is often used as a means for analyzing Black Women’s literature, as it marks the place where race, class, gender, and sexuality intersect. Womanism is unique because it does not necessarily imply any political position or value system other than the honoring of Black women’s strength and experiences. Because it recognizes that women are survivors in a world that is oppressive on multiple platforms, it seeks to celebrate the ways in which women negotiate these oppressions in their individual lives. Alice Walker has written of length on issues of race and gender and is most famous for the critically acclaimed novel *The Color Purple*, for which she won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction. Since the publication of *The Color Purple* in 1982, Walker has gained a reputation as

one of the most popular and controversial writers in the African American literary tradition. Here the researcher explains Walker's project as a womanist writer and as a cultural and political activist who increasingly styles herself as a visionary for the new age. From *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*(1970) to *By the Light of My Father's Smile*(1998), and from the essays in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*(1983) to the memories in *Anything We Love Can Be Saved*(1997), the traces of child abuse and women's sexuality can be seen. Also it can be seen that the development of Walker's theories of racial hybridity , spirituality and goddess worship as well as her treatment of African-American history, which is staged as a protest against the White dominance of western thinking. Now the researcher will give a short plot summary of the novels which are going to be examined in this thesis. Set in the 1960s and 70s, *Meridian* centers on Meridian Hill, a student at the fictitious Saxon College, who becomes active in the Civil Rights Movement. She becomes romantically involved with another activist, Truman Held, and though he impregnates her, they have a turbulent on-and-off relationship. After Meridian has an abortion, Truman becomes far more attached to her and longs to start a life together. Later Truman becomes involved with a white woman, Lynne Rabinowitz, who is also active in the Civil Rights struggle, though perhaps for the wrong reasons. As time goes by, Truman attempts, unsuccessfully, to achieve personal and financial success while Meridian continues to stay involved in the movement and fight for issues she believes deeply in. *The Color Purple* is an acclaimed 1982 epistolary novel. It received the 1983 Pulitzer Prize for fiction and National Book Award. It was later adapted into a film and musical of the same name. Traces of feminism and post-colonialism can be found in this novel. Taking place mostly in rural Georgia, the story focuses on African American life during the 1930s in the southern United States, addressing the numerous issues in the black people life, including their exceedingly low position in American social culture. Because of the novel's sometimes explicit content, particularly in terms of violence, it has been the frequent target of censors and appears on the American Library Association list of the 100 most Frequently Challenged Books of 1990\_2000 at number eighteen. *The Temple of My Familiar* is 1989 novel by Alice Walker. It is an ambitious and multi-narrative novel containing the interleaved stories of :Arvedyda, a musician in search of his past; Carlotta, his Latin American wife who lives in exile from hers; Suwelo, a black professor of American history who realises that his generation of men have failed women; Fanny, his ex-wife

about to meet her father for the first time; and Lissie a vibrant creature with a thousand pasts. *Possessing the Secret of Joy* tells the story of Tashi, a minor character in Walker's earlier novel *The Color Purple*. She comes from an unnamed African nation where female genital mutilation is practiced. She agrees to have this operation performed on her because she is a woman torn between two cultures. She wants to honor her Olinkan roots. She sees several psychiatrists because of the trauma she has suffered before finding the strength to act. The novel explores what it means to have one's gender culturally defined and emphasizes that, according to Walker, "Torture is not culture."

**ALICE WALKER'S LIFE AND WORK:** Alice Malsenior Walker is born on February 9, 1944 as the eighth child of Willie Lee Walker and Minnie Tallulah Grant Walker. Growing up in a sharecropper family in Eatonton, Georgia, Walker experiences first-hand the southern atmosphere in which the "black vernacular is prominent and the stamp of slavery and oppression are still present" and which will shape many of her future works. When she is eight years old, Walker accidentally gets shot in the eye by one of her brothers playing with his BB gun. The incident leaves her blind in her right eye and turns the young Alice into a timid and reclusive child. Yet, this solitary attitude leads her "really to see people and things, really to notice relationships and to learn to be patient enough to care about how they turned out". It brings her to "read stories and beg[i]n to write poems." After graduating from high school as the valedictorian, Walker begins her higher education at Spelman College in Atlanta. The two years (1961-1963) she spends in the College are "marked by an awakening to intellectual and social issues" 2 as she gets more and more involved in the Civil Rights Movement. During these years she is also active in the Georgia voter registration movement of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. In 1963 she transfers to Sarah Lawrence College in New York where she finds herself to be one of the six black students there. In the summer of 1965, she travels to Africa and returns pregnant from the trip. Until a friend refers her to an abortionist, Walker struggles with suicidal tendencies, sleeping with a razor blade under her pillow for three nights. It is during this confusing period before and just after the abortion that she writes the poems that will later be published in the 1968 volume *Once Poems*.

**WOMANIST FEATURES IN THE TEMPLE OF MY FAMILIAR:** The Temple of My Familiar will be analyzed more concretely with reference to the ways in which the novel seconds, illustrates or maybe elaborates on Walker's theoretical writings on Womanism. If we take Walker's own definition of the concept as the starting point of the analysis, it should not surprise that most of the aspects she touches on in her four part definition cannot be retrieved in the novel very literally. Yet, in my opinion the book does confirm the most eye-catching and possibly most important feature of Walker's Womanism: her Universalist stance. It is this attitude that constitutes the most crucial difference with both mainstream feminism and Afro-Americanism. To be able to provide a more thorough analysis though, I opted to base the analysis mainly on the most essential themes in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, which, as was illustrated above, reveal important aspects about Womanism as well.

As Walker indicates in her definition of the concept, a womanist is "committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female". In the same manner, she pleads for a Universalist attitude between the races, saying "'Mama, why we are brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige, and black?' Ans.: 'Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented.'" Walker communicates a similar message in her theoretical writings by putting a lot of emphasis on community.

**CONCLUSION:** This paper explored both the theoretical and practical side of that approach. Walker refers to black feminism as Womanism, a term rooted in black folk culture to indicate clearly that the concept is shaped by the specific experience of being a black woman. The four-part definition she provides at the beginning of her collection of essays *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1983), however hybrid, can be said to be conveying two general meanings: a very concrete and a more universally valid one. Firstly and most importantly, Womanism specifically denotes a particular attitude for black feminists or, by extension, feminists of color. Comparing the relation between Womanism and (mainstream, white) feminism to that between purple and lavender, Walker indicates that both share certain features, yet in the end are undeniably different. Walker further elaborates on what a "womanist" is and characterizes the attitude in both objective and more irrational ways. Secondly, stating several times that womanists are non-separatists with regards to both race and gender, Womanism, in a less

straight-forward way, seems to denote a universally and eternally desirable attitude for people in general. Admittedly, considering the etymology of the word as well as the obviously feminine frame of the definition, it may appear quite farfetched to claim that Womanism actually refers to a unisex stance. Yet, on the other hand, the non-separatist philosophy so important to Womanism may suggest itself that it does. Walker backs up her complex definition with the essays in the collection. Four themes return regularly in this “womanist prose” and are therefore presumably central to Womanism as well. Being both black and female, the black woman’s situation and oppression go far beyond that of either (male) blacks or (white) women. Consequently, black women find themselves socially, politically and especially emotionally situated in a no man’s land, unable to identify with either Afro-Americanism or mainstream feminism. Although they belong to both minority groups up to a certain height, their specific predicament is never fully grasped by either. That is why, throughout the years, black women have claimed their own rightful place and have created a specifically black feminism. With her strong fascination for black women, from the start of her career, Alice Walker has presented herself as one of the advocates of this black feminism, coining her own term for and creating her own approach to the issue.

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