

“Ain’t I a Woman ?”
Alice Walker’s Womansim and *The Color Purple*

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Feminism emerged as an attempt by women to understand the nature of the inequality they were subjected to by examining their social roles and lived experiences. It was also a step towards defining, establishing and defending a state of equal political, economic, cultural and social rights for women in education and employment. Feminist activists campaigned for women’s rights in contract, property and voting while promoting bodily integrity and autonomy over self.

Feminism evolves around the empowerment of the female in a patriarchal society. It also focuses on equality across the board for men and women. The Feminist movement, comprised of theories from the white women’s perspective, saw the male counterpart as the primary enemy; the issues to be confronted were more to do with gender equality manifested through political and economical opportunities.

Black Feminism on the other hand is family-centred. Women of African diaspora have never had to face the same institutionalized power that white men used against white women. Women of African-American origin in the United States have always been keenly aware of the impact of race, class and gender. Since slavery, they have, individually and in groups, struggled to eradicate the multiple injustices to their communities. The experience of women of colour is different from that of the white woman. Black Feminism evolved out of this difference. The woman of colour could never think of emancipation, freedom and equality on an individual level. The ante-bellum experience put the black woman at the helm of her family thus making the black woman’s struggle family- centric rather than female- Centric. Though she is often called ‘a voiceless people’, the stereotypes, used to oppress them; ‘black Matriarch’, ‘bitch’, ‘bulldagger’ contradict that notion.

Black Feminism is the acknowledgment that women of color have been oppressed by sexism and racism, that there was a failure to recognize and address these issues in the Feminist Movement and the Black Liberation Movement, and that women of color have their own agenda that neither movement can take on. Using the term “black feminism” disrupts the racism inherent in presenting feminism as a ‘for-whites-only’ ideology. Black feminism, then focuses on the experiences, needs and desires of women of color, and asserts that woman of color face a multiple interlocking oppression at three levels: racism, sexism and economic exploitation, all at the same time. Black Feminism, though subtly different, is still a derivative of feminism.

Womanism has been defined by Walker in her literary work, *In search of Our Mother's Gardens : Womanist Prose*:

A Woman who loves other women, sexually or/and non sexually. Appropriates and prefers women's culture, women's flexibility and women's strength. Sometimes loves men sexually and/or non sexually.

Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist except periodically, for health. Traditionally universally. Loves music, Love Dance, Loves the moon, Loves the Spirit Loves, Love and Food, Love Struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves Herself.

Regardless.

For Walker then, a womanist is one who is committed to the survival and wholeness of all people including men. Rather than supporting separatism, Womanism promotes universalism. The self-authored spirit of activism, spirituality and the woman's relationship with herself, other women and her surroundings comprise an important part of this ideology. Rather than focussing on social change, Womanism, focuses more on celebrating womanhood and the Afro-American woman's strengths and experiences.

Womanism creates a space for Black Women and other women of color to initiate a dialogue within a non-threatening environment.

Alice Walker has always been preoccupied with themes of sexism, racism and other trials and triumphs of the colored people. The central theme of her novels has always been the question of personal action and the power of regeneration. Walker consistently shows her concern for the plight of women in society. She reiterates the belief that every person has the ability to survive and justify one's self in the face of odds.

The Color Purple focuses on male brutality within the Black Community. Walker places a group of women within the black society, at the centre of the novel and demonstrates how the subjugation faced by them is structured on lines of racism. Just as the whites created a racist culture, the Black man has created a sexist culture. Male is Master, Female the Underling.

At the centre of the group of women is Celie; not only is she abused by the man is considers her father, she is callously sold to a man who came seeking her younger sister's hand.

“She ugly, but she
Aint no stranger to hard work and she clean.
She work like a man.

Her fate is no better in her married home where Mr_____ her husband has scant regard for her.

“He beat me, Like he
Beat the children He says Celie get the belt.

This total negation of Celie's self is most evident in the sexual aspect of their relationship.

Most of the times I pretend
I aint there he never knows
the difference. Never ask me

How I feel nothing.

So internalized is this feelings of self-negation that Celie advises her step son Harpo to beat up Sofia, his wife. This advice is a reflection of the segregation she feels from the free spirited Sofia. Yet, a feeling of guilt remains. She can't sleep. She writes

“A little voice says something

You done wrong. Somebody
Spirit you sin again it.”

The knowledge of sinning against Sofia is an unconscious acknowledgement of her awareness of the sins against her own spirit.

Since this novel is about a group of people rather than an individual, we are introduced to Squeal, Harpo's girlfriend, who is raped by her own relative as “Compensation” for help given.

Life changes with the advent of Shug who is Mr _____'s girlfriend. This rich, confident woman becomes the vehicle for Celie's deliverance and her aid in recognizing herself.

The most important feature of womanism is that a womanist is an embodiment of all that black women are, loving, giving and ready to struggle for survival: essentially a person who loves nature's spirit within herself as well as other living beings. Walker suggests that this love for the spirit should lead to the forging of friendship much more fruitful than segregation. In *The Color Purple* the women move from segregation to this conscious bonding and succeed in emancipating themselves. The friendship between Celie and Shug Every is mutually beneficial. While Shug gives Celie the support and confidence that she needs to face Mr _____, Celie gives her the unconditional acceptance that Shug craved for all her life. Both can open up to each other and confide their deepest feelings, confident of understanding. The lesbian relationship that develops between them ought not to be judged as sexual relationship, per se, but as

an extension of the bonding between them. A relationship with someone who does not constantly threaten or exploit her, helps Celie to acknowledge and accept her own sexuality as natural rather than as a weapon of subjugation.

When Walker talks of woman's culture she includes all those activities that come naturally to black women. One of the most accepted forms of artistic expression was quilting, and Alice Walker uses this art to symbolize the forging of ties between Celie and Sofia. After their initial confrontation they start quilting together. The activity symbolizes a conscious effort on their part to bring together their experience in an attempt to understand each other. The name of the pattern of their quilt "Sister's choice" is equally important because these sisters do have a choice. The choice is to find each other and build bricks across their differences. Celie and Sofia deliberately build a relationship from the remnants of their selves. Shug brings forth to Celie the idea of financial independence as a means of wealth creation rather than survival. Here too, the womanist looks within her natural skills and utilizes her art as a seamstress to create the highly successful business, Folkspants.

The struggle for survival has been accepted as part of a black woman's life. From the earliest writers, this aspect has been discussed at length. Though both black men and women face struggle, the struggle is much more complex for the woman. Walker has incorporated this struggle as an important part of womanism. Mary Agnes epitomizes this spirit of survival. Her initial inability to stand up for herself leads to her victimization. However her rape becomes a mode of re-birth for her. From the stereotype 'Beast' she transforms herself into a blossomed and 'standing' self. The instinct to fight back and survive is deeply rooted in her character.

Another important aspect of the theory of womanism is the love for the Spirit. In an interview in *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, Walker says:

The truth is that I don't believe
There is a god...Certainly I

Don't believe there is a god
 Beyond nature. The world is god.
 Man is god. So is a leaf or a snake.

This belief is incorporated into the theory of womanism when Walker says that the womanist loves everything that has spirit. In an extended discussion between Shug and Celie, Shug, the womanist, offers Celie an alternative faith. Celie's faith in the "Big, old and tall, grey bearded and white" God is badly shaken by facts unveiled by Nettie, her sister. Shug then tells her:

My first step from the old white
 man was trees. Then air, then
 birds, then other people: then it
 came to me, that feeling of being
 part of everything not separate
 at all.
 She also tells Celie,
 God ain't a he or a she, but a It.

This 'oneness', this feeling of being a part of a whole controlled by a genderless god, is the essence of womanism. Celie's last letter addressed to "Dear god, Dear stars, Dear trees, Dear sky, Dear peoples, Dear everything. Dear god." reflects her complete acceptance of Shug's views on spirituality.

Though Walker put down the theory of Womanism in 1983, she had already used its principles fully in *The Color Purple*. The title of Celie's story reflects the belief that "Womanism is to Feminism what purple is to lavender." Since a womanist is concerned with the entire people, the women in *The Color Purple* can achieve freedom when they try to establish a fair and sound relationship with their men. At the end of the novel, Celie has achieved complete emancipation by accepting womanism and conscious bonding with the women around her. What is more

interesting is the change in Mr___ and the other men in the novel. Mr.___, who was definitive in his view of women as the underlings, changes his views and accepts a important role than Celie's in the company, Folks Pants. He also accepts the natural love that has developed between Celie and Shug. The repudiating of his patriarchal belief, not the physical gesture of apologising, is the triumph of womanism. Thus, with conscious bonding between women, the men also develop their consciousness.

Language is one of the most important aspects of culture, and Walker's deliberate use of black English is a confirmation of her decision to let the women in *The Color Purple* speak for themselves. Valarie Babb points out that the spellings, syntax and grammatical constructions all evoke the way Celie speaks.

The use of the black "to be" conjunction and omission of "are" in sentences like 'she be my age but they married' serve as examples of Walker's intention to let Celie speak for herself. This lets Celie create a world that she lives in, in her own language devoid of foreign influences. The dialect reflects an innocence that is characteristic of the spirit regardless of what experience is. Walker chose to write *The Color Purple* in the epistolary form which further embeds Celie's experience in her lived environment. The epistolary novels had heroines who wrote in secret to narrate the repression and suppression they faced. Each letter Celie writes becomes a frame that encompasses her growth, the continuous unfolding of intellectual awakening towards self and community, while allowing an immediacy and intimacy to the narrative.

Walker wrote *The Color Purple* to protest against a slavery much more complex than racism. She explored the total mental, physical and economic slavery of the black women within the black society. Yet she brilliantly conceals this protest in Celie's quest for freedom. Her theory of Womanism and its principles emerge victorious with Celie's victory. By celebrating the values of love, togetherness, compassion and courage to stand against oppression, Celie and others like Alice Walker, bring to the mainstream American Literature the thought that individuality is linked with group

identification and the universalism of womanism is the way to true emancipation of women of color.

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