

FEMINISM IN THE SELECT NOVELS OF AFRO-AMERICAN WOMEN WRITER-ALICE WALKER

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Abstract: *Feminism represents the important social economic and aesthetic values of the times which is especially concerned with the problems or rights of the women. Alice walker was the first Afro – American women writer who received, the Pulitzer price for her novel the color purple (1982), her novel meridian (1976), Third life of grange Copeland (1970).*

The present study analyses the selected novels of author Alice walker, a widely known black American feminist and activist who grew up in a racially divided south, who Envisions the body of literatures one immense story written from a multitude of perspectives Alice walker's theory and her novels is basically about women and their marginalization. Walker also pledges allegiance to the feminist thought. The main focuses of her works are abuse of women, sexism, racism, male dominance and power of strong female relationship.

Key words: *colored women, feminism, patriarchy, discrimination, abuse of women.*

Alice Walker was a gifted writer, she won prizes and scholarships. Her debut novel was *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970), poems, short stories and novels followed. Among them *In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women* (1973), *Meridian* (1976) and *You Can't keep a Good Woman Down* (1981), *The Color Purple* (1982), so far Walkers most successful book, was published. As the greatest success, however, the book itself can be considered. It won a Pulitzer Prize and made Walker the first African American to achieve the prestige carrying price. Besides writing Alice Walker has been teaching at different Colleges and Universities, Wellesly College and Yale University are only two of them.

Feminist theories arose to address the mishandling of black woman feminists in prior feminist movements. Early feminist radicals such as Angela Davis commentated how, 'woman' was the test, but not every woman seemed to qualify. Black women, of course, were virtually invisible within the protracted campaign for woman suffrage" a popular critique that highlighted black women's position: invisible (Davis 1982, p. 140). Writer Ashley Etamadi references in her *Feminist Theory Thursday* blog post a powerful quote by political activist, feminist and writer Assata Shakur, where Shakur boldly claims that, "black people will never be free unless Black women participate in every aspect of the struggle" (Etemadi 2017). In her article "Black Feminism and Intersectionality", feminist theorist Sharon Smith acknowledges black legal scholar, feminist and author Kimberle Crenshaw as offering what is means to be "in every aspect of the struggle" citing Crenshaw's 1989 essay, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex" A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics" where Crenshaw coins the term "intersectional" (Smith 2014).

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.

In her novel *The Color Purple* (1982), Walker gives an account of the experiences of African-Americans women in a society dominated by male and white people. Through sketching the characters, Walker presents various themes including black feminism, selfhood and discrimination. One of the most important novels in African-American literature that discusses the situation of black women in America is Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1985). The novel has been studied from different perspectives.

The Color Purple by Alice Walker describes the cruel and unjust treatment that women face in the society. Walker explains the struggles that colored women faced in the nineteenth century to be accepted in the white-dominated society, which also discriminates against women.

Through the character of Celie, an uneducated African-American woman, Walker explains the extent of racial and gender bias in the United States. Celie strives hard to escape the brutality she faces from men in the society, including her father, who one might expect would protect her. She complains of the physical and sexual abuse, including raping her, inflicted upon her by her step-father. Rape against Celie by her step-father is a clear indication of the unfair treatment that women receive from men. The rape scene is not related to racial bias because Celie is raped by a man from her race, it is rather related to the andocentric attitude in her society. This scene also aggravates the oppression of the black women in the society.

Celie, experiences some changes, and as a result of these changes the novel turns out to be not only a story about pain and despair but also a story of ultimate triumph. Novel begins in the early 1900's and ends in the mid 1940's and, between these time spaces, the readers witness Celie's changing from a small girl who is abused continuously in to a mature, young woman, realized herself. She frees herself from her husband's repressive control, and her conditions improved dramatically. Improved by her friendships with other women, especially Shug Avery, Albert's mistress, and by her fondness for her younger sister, Nettie-who went to Africa with a missionary group with the help of Celie, Celie decides to leave Albert and moves to Memphis. She starts a business designing and making clothes, and becomes a business woman and earns her own money. The most ironical part of the novel is, it is Albert's real love and, Shug Avery, Albert's mistress, and his rebellious daughter-in-

love, Sofia, who gives the emotional support for Celie's personal progress and helps Celie to realize her dreams in the life. "And, in turn, it is Celie's new understanding of an acceptance of herself that eventually lead to Albert's evaluation of his own life and reconciliation among the novel's major characters." (Gates, 16-17) When the novel ends, Albert and Shug sit with Celie on Celie's front porch 'rocking on a fanning flies,' waiting for the arrival of Nettie and the missionaries. In a deeper study of the novel, it's easy to see that almost all the women are under the domination of men. Women are abused; especially Celie is raped, beaten and abused by all the men around her, firstly by her step-father and by her husband. The novel is told through the eyes of a woman, Celie. We can say that camera-eye narrator is used, because Celie tells every detail she experienced. She tells the novel in epistolary form, that is, in the form of letters; firstly to God, then to her sister Nettie.

The Color Purple is Alice Walker's masterpiece, which made the author not only the first female Afro American author to receive a Pulitzer Prize but moreover brought her world fame and a broader recognition of her other works. This paper focuses on feminist motifs, themes and symbolism used in the novel. It also talks about the author by giving an in-dept overview not only about her life but also the sociocultural background that shaped this novel. As mentioned before a clear focus is put on themes, symbols and motifs in the novel, which are widely used and therefore also are somehow responsible for the diversity of approaches to reading the novel. The textual analysis is enhanced by a brief summary of the plot, characters and their relationship as well as a compressed paragraph talking about the setting and an overview over some narrative techniques used in the novel.

From her novels, the feminist critical conversation focuses on the different types of females in Walker's work, the societal roles they break or are supposed to fulfill, the women's issues treated in Walker's work, and reactionary critiques to the criticism of male critics, specifically regarding *The Color Purple*. The discussion of theme centers on four major subjects: the role of silence and speech in *Grange*, the narrative journey motif, the role of folklore and oral tradition, and the role of family and community. Three of these major themes, silence and speech, the narrative journey and family and community are dealt with in the lives of Margaret, Josie, and Mem, but the majority of the thematic discussion does not mention their involvement in these important themes. A majority of critics, including some who could be considered feminist, assume three female characters, Margaret, Josie, and Mem, are victims. Reviews directly following the publication of the novel in 1970 focus on different themes than those highlighted by the larger thematic discussion that continues in the 1980s and 1990s. But the views on the female characters from these early reviews coincide with the treatment they have received more recently. One female reviewer, Josephine Hendin, believes that *Grange* is about the "depletion of love" and that the female characters are "victims of both whites and their own husbands" (5). While a male reviewer, Robert Coles, a few months later, in 1971, states that the novel is about "the directions a suffering people can take" (7). Neither mentions the importance or behavior of these female characters.

Walker discusses the female characters as women who represent the universal issue of sexism. But, by stating that in *Grange*, Walker explores the "black man's search for self-worth" and that "the casualties of that search are the wives of Grange and Brownfield Copeland" (154), she allows the men to dominate the text and she relegates the women to the nameless role of victim. Peter Erickson highlights one of the many reasons that critics have not turned their focus to Margaret, Josie, or Mem. Erickson claims that "the point of view is evenly distributed among Brownfield, Ruth, and Grange" (12). But this claim does not account for the point of view given to Josie and Mem several times in the text. Other critics claim that Grange, Brownfield, and Ruth are the main characters. Gerri Bates sums up how the majority of critics view these three characters: Mem is "a victim of gender-role socialization," her husband, and white society; both Mem and Margaret are "defeated women"; and Josie is just a "minor character" who serves as an example of what a father's rejection can do (65). These surface-level explorations of characterization lead critics to dismiss them as less important than any of the others. The feminist discussion often allows these critical claims to go unchallenged.

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. Thus, Alice Walker voices this philosophy in her call to all women to create a platform based on the community of female experience which would allow them to communicate better with one other.

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