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A womanist reading of Alice Walker's short stories: A feministic study

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Abstract---In 1983, Alice Walker proposed the idea of womanism as a way for black feminism to distinguish itself from white feminism by using the concept of womanism as a point of departure. In response to the erasure of women of color from the mainstream feminist critical theory and politics, this school of thought was born. Womanism, a phrase that comes from black folk culture, is a term used by Walker to indicate that the notion of womanism itself is moulded by the experiences of an African-American female. To be a womanist is to love women, admire and favour women's culture, and prefer women's power above everything else. Black life values are celebrated, and womanism lack women's gendered problems are shown. When it comes to race or gender, it promotes inclusion rather than exclusion. It was the need to address problems of gender without demonizing males that gave rise to the feminist political and analytical framework known as womanism. Studying how far the author has integrated the notion of womanism into presenting her characters' problems is a major goal of this article. Additionally, the feminine characters are devoted to ensuring the survival and well-being of both sexes, male and female.

Keywords---womanism, feminism, marginalization, race, gender.

Introduction

Because she is both black and female, a black woman's misery is greater than that of either black man or white woman. They are in a social, political, and emotional "no man's land," and it's hard not to compare it. Afro-Americanism and

mainstream feminism do not resonate with them. Even though they are members of two minorities, blacks and women, their existence is ignored. Throughout the years, black women have struggled and protested against “the sexism of black literary history” as well as “the racism of feminist literary history,” attempting to identify themselves inside and outside the white-dominated feminist thinking by women, primarily white women, but always seeing themselves as “the other women, the silenced partner ” (Showalter 214). This facet becomes true in their day-to-day lives and, more specifically, for literary theory. Many black women see the mainstream feminist movement as “markedly white, middle class, western, and heterosexual and... (as a result) has been participating in the marginalization of women of colour, working-class women, Third world women, and lesbians ” (Ward & Herndl 259).

Racism and gender inequality are intertwined. So black women must constantly question both feminist and Afro-American anti-racist thinking about race and gender to understand the double jeopardy of race and gender that is intersectional and the importance of “race as a consensus issue while assigning gender and sexuality a secondary status as cross-cutting issues ” (Collins. 47). As a result, African American women find themselves in a relationship with both feminists and black males, placing them on the margins of their discourses and politics. There needs to be a feminist movement that tackles a broad range of concerns in Black existence (mothering, black masculinity, the link between gender and murder and poverty, the crisis of black womanhood...)... (a movement) that might have a transformational influence on our future” in this scenario (Hooks 56). Also a “feminist movement that addresses the needs of black women, men and children (and) can strengthen our bonds with one another, deepen our sense of community, and further black liberation ” (Hooks 124).

Since the beginning of her career, Alice Walker’s interest in black women has made her one of the most vocal proponents of black feminism, prompting her to coin the word “womanism” to describe how black feminists vary from white feminists in her essay collection *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*. This philosophy came up as a reaction to the marginalization of women of colour in the mainstream of feminist critical theory and politics, which was caused by a feminist focus only on gender oppression. Walker refers to black feminism as womanism, a term rooted in black folk culture to demonstrate clearly that the very concept of womanism is shaped by the experiences of being a black woman. She provides a four-part definition of the term womanist at the beginning of her collections of essays *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*:

Womanist. 1. From womanish. (opp of “girlish”, i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious). A black feminist or feminist of colour. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, “You acting womanish,” i.e., like a woman...2. Also: A Woman who loves other women, sexually and nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility (values tears as a natural counterbalance of laughter), and women’s strength ... committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female... traditionally universalist. 3. Loves music ... loves the spirit. Loves love ... Loves struggles. Loves the folk. Loves herself. Regardless. 4. Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender. (Walker xi-xii)

In celebrating black life and presenting a balanced view of black femininity and black gendered challenges, womanism is a celebration of the values of black life. Womanism is a worldview that encourages inclusion rather than exclusion, especially when it comes to different diseases, such as racism, classism, and gender discrimination. It was the need to address problems of gender without demonizing males that gave rise to the feminist political and analytical framework known as womanism. While the two ideologies have certain characteristics, Walker asserts that they are fundamentally distinct from one another, as the differences between purple and lavender.

To counter the exclusionary practices of feminism, womanism evolved into a bigger type of political action and became a weapon for black women to oppose and criticize policies that oppressed them. When it came to building a notion of inclusion and support among women, womanism pushed for women's self-sufficiency and their ability to aid and support each other in the battle against all forms of oppression. Womanism does not believe in any power game since it restricts human progress. Throughout her writings, Walker demonstrates that women are linked to patriarchy when they engage in power games, attempt to subjugate others, and ultimately become victims of oppression such as racism and sexism. Women and men need to stop dominating one another and embrace a greater range of social interactions. Womanism places a high value on women's shared experiences and the overall well-being of all individuals.

In the novella "Coming Apart," the woman learns that her husband enjoys reading pornographic magazines for sexual pleasure. When she confronts him about his Jiveboy magazine, he merely defends himself by claiming that the erotic images are harmless, though not useless. But she thinks, "they are not me, those women. She cannot say she is jealous of pictures on a page. She feels invisible. Rejected, Overlooked" . "He is right. I will grow up. Adjust. Swim with the tide" . The next day, he brought Jivers, "a black magazine, filled with bronze and honey-coloured women" , thinking that his wife would appreciate him as they are not white women as in the Jive boy like her, dark-skinned. But he was wrong, for the black woman appeared to her "like a human turd at the man's feet" or much less than human.

When she looks in the mirror and sees her reflection, she realizes that no pornographic magazine could cover the whole spectrum of human sexuality. She determines right away that she will not "grow up," "adjust," or "change", but instead will fight back. She intends to influence her husband's attitudes about women when she realizes that the porn business systematically exploits the female body. There are many pieces written by black women who oppose pornography that she reads to him. Pornography depicts just the voluptuousness of women "where white women are depicted in pornography as 'objects,' black women are depicted as animals" . In the end, the husband realizes that he has harmed his wife and other women for a long time and that pornographic films and magazines "have insinuated themselves between him and his wife, so that the totality of his wife's body, her entire corporeal reality is alien to him" . This pornography displays the wife's self-awareness and lets her husband know that black and white women are not sexually stereotyped.

Because he has been lynched by the police and the jail system in the United States hundreds of times a year over the same white corpses, her husband cannot understand why she is fighting to preserve a white body a white girl (Walker 176). However, when it came to her self-identification, the wife never saw herself as anything other than a “womanist.” She claims, citing from another piece, that “white men’s increasing obscene and inhuman treatment of women, particularly white women, in pornography and real-life, directly correlates to white men’s increasing obscene and inhuman treatment of black men by white men.” White women who are pursuing the power and identity, and Women now challenge the manhood and dominance of the white male, just as the Black man does.” Finally, the husband realizes that by purchasing and seeing pornographies, he has “bought some, if not all, of the advertisements about women, black and white.” Furthermore, he has unavoidably purchased advertising featuring himself.” (Coming Apart 179).

“To Hell with Dying,” Walker’s first published short story, is about an elderly man who is repeatedly spared from death by the affection of his neighbour’s children. It’s as much, if not more, about what the old man’s love accomplishes for the story’s narrator, the neighbour’s female child.

Mr. Sweet Little, a family acquaintance, has had a death ritual for as long as the narrator can recall. He’s “a diabetic, an alcoholic, and a guitarist who used to live down the road... on a run-down cotton farm” . He was their childhood friend — the ideal friend since he can be both inebriated and irritable without losing his cool. At the start of the narrative, Mr. Sweet Little is roughly seventy years old, while the unidentified girl narrator is about four. He is ninety years old after the novel, and she is twenty-four. Over twenty years, he has been rescued several times by the narrator’s love and care. She liked to get into his bed and tickle his body with kisses and hugs.

Her father’s statement, “To Hell with Dying, man; these children want Mr. Sweet,” invariably starts this ritual that she has been conducting with her siblings and sisters . The elderly men lived quiet lives in their eighties, while the narrator had grown up and was away from home studying at university. When he reaches ninety, Mr. Sweet is near death, and she is brought home. She attempts to outlast him but fails, and he bestows onto her the gift of his spirit.

Mr. Sweet is the one who gives her a feeling of selfhood and value. He again convinces her that black people are lovely by first convincing her that she is physically attractive. “Mr. Sweet used to call me his princess, and I believed it. He made me feel pretty at five and six, and simply outrageously devastating at eight and a half” . He has also taught her that black people can control their future by convincing her that she has the potential to do so. The elderly guy greatly enlightens the narrator, both a participant and contributor to the spirit’s celebration. Her acceptance of Mr. Sweet’s guitar shows that she is prepared to continue to sing the blues and accept responsibility for her history. The guitar’s acceptance serves as an outward representation of her coming to grips with her history and community. Finally, the nameless narrator assumes the role of community spokesperson. Mrs. Gracie Mae is a motherly figure and a black vocalist in “Nineteen Fifty-Five.”

Traynor, a white male vocalist, buys her tune for a thousand dollars. She was stripped of all rights to the music and the song itself. As a consequence, Traynor continues to accumulate wealth, earning up to \$40,000 a day at times. He performs the song, but, strangely, he doesn't realize the song's deep meaning. Traynor continues to give her presents and provide her with the pleasures of life despite his remorse for borrowing her music and gaining both name and renown. But he had an intrinsic urge to comprehend the song's message the whole time, which he sorely struggled to do. He was attempting to accomplish something he was neither a part of nor particularly fond of. He is undeniably a commercial success, the next rock and roll heartthrob, but he has fallen short spiritually. He couldn't find life in the music, couldn't link it to life, and couldn't even see the connection between art and life itself. Traynor lacks the entire devotion that is required to bring art to life. His passion for life is equal to his love for the music given him life. His marriage is also a failure. He tells Gracie Mae, "I married, but it never went like it was supposed to. I never could squeeze any of my own life either into it or out of it. It was like singing somebody else's record" . "Everyone still loves that song of yours," he says in his letter to Gracie Mae. They often inquire as to what I believe it implies. They want to know precisely what I want to know. "Where did it come from in your life?" . "Musicians can put so much of themselves into what they sing," Walker added. If it's fantastic, there's no difference between what they feel and what they say, and I enjoy it... because it gives them some freedom" (Bonetti 10). He invites her to the "Tonight Show" with him so that she might partake in his achievement and alleviate him of his load.

Gracie Mae discovered new and more pleasant independence that she couldn't buy with Traynor's name, fame, or money. She realizes, to some measure, her freedom from conflict, her acceptance of herself as she is, comfortable with her overweight self: "my fat ain't never been any trouble. Mens always have loved me. My kids have never complained. Plus, they are fat. And fat like I am I look distinguished. You see me coming and know some body's there" (Nineteen Fifty-Five."140). Mrs. Gracie Mae is still "Nobody from Notasulga" but is spiritually more healthy and whole than Traynor's popular rock star. She is a feminist who refuses to allow racism, classism, or gender inequalities to rob her of her inner serenity and completeness. She is happier as a spiritual mother, one who does not discriminate based on skin color and is more radiant and kind than a biological mother. "I don't know why I called him son," she says, referring to her unwavering affection for Traynor. They're all our sons, in one way or another."

Walker explores the issue of searching for one's ethnic identity in "A Sudden Trip Home in the Spring." She also discusses the difficulties black artists experience in getting models for their work and how they work hard to locate them. Sarah Davis, the protagonist, strives to find models for her white canvas while still emphasizing the value of her culture, heritage, and customs. She brings about a new understanding between herself, black males, and her cultural legacy by reclaiming her history and origins and reexamining her connection to her family and community. Sarah Davis left her home in Georgia as a young child to pursue an art scholarship at Cresselton, a famous girls' school in New York. She is one of the school's two black pupils. As a result, she is left with just one other black face to act as a role model for her community. As a result, she is unsure how she will represent or depict her people in paint. She also finds "black men impossible to

draw or paint; she could not bear to trace defeat into blank pages" (A Sudden Trip Home in the Spring 250). Even her identity is also not known to her friends; she is just someone for her schoolmates; she is "interesting and beautiful only because they had no idea what made her" and "from where she came" .

When Sarah was called to attend her father's funeral, she learned a valuable. A practical lesson about art and life was taught at his burial. Her father was always associated with failure, while her grandpa and brother, unlike her father, were always models and pictures of success. Her grandpa did not lose hope and did not cry in the face of tragedy. He seemed even more courageous, magnificent, cheerful, and heroic. He stood like a brave and erect rock, supporting the whole family. "It is strange..... that I never thought to paint him like this, simply as he stands; without anonymous meaningless people hovering beyond his profile; his face turned proud and brownly against the light". At the same time, she understood that putting him against a white backdrop was a mistake. She also recognized that "the defeat that had terrified her in front of black men was the defeat of black forever defined by white". His family, not the canvas, defined him, and he will never fail them or their members. Only after Sarah is secure in her ability to express such power on paint does her grandpa advise that she create him out of stone rather than canvas. She eventually realizes that her work will be her way of shouting "No with capital letters" to the system that tore her mother apart and ruined her father's soul.

The faces of her family provide her with the context and direction she needs to pursue her work, her face, and her own identity. Though she first struggled to accept her father's failure, she could not ignore the bond between herself, her father, her brother, and her grandpa. She recognized that her father's connection to her family's generations could not be severed. Though he "was one faulty door in a house of many ancient rooms" but "was that one faulty door to shut (her) off forever from the rest of the house?" (A Sudden Trip Home in the Spring 253). This "broken door" in the family didn't bother her much since she quickly discovered the joy of her grandfather's advice and her brother's devotion, and she told her brother, "You are my door to all the rooms, don't ever close". She discovered the correct doors to her cultural history and tradition via the doors of her family members, both her grandpa and brother.

These women are paving the way for a new generation of women to come out and shine their light. This group of women is well aware of the changes taking place in society and politics. They become stronger and more capable of taking on the obligations of other women as a result of this experience. They are concerned for the well-being of the whole community, regardless of race or gender. However, they do not reject their history, heritage, or customs as a new set of women. Rather than harbouring resentment or a desire for retribution, the women in this community put aside their feelings of animosity and sought reconciliation with their male counterparts. They recover their ties with their black community and humanity by cultivating this kind of interaction with the male members.

In contrast to feminism, which focuses only on the improvement of the female, they recognize the humanity and equality of all persons, male and female, of all races. Instead of taking vengeance on men who have oppressed them, they

practice loving compassion. They want not just to better themselves spiritually but also to better the community as a whole. Because of this, they are showing a constructive attitude about defeating evil forces and reclaiming their power. The womanist's knowledge of herself and the environment shows that they are interested in the entire race's survival.

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