

CHAPTER - I

INTRODUCTION : FROM VICTIMIZATION TO SURVIVAL OF WOMANIST SELF IN THE RACIST, SEXIST, AND CLASSIST SOCIETY OF AMERICA

Alice Walker (1944 -) is one of the younger pathbreaking novelists to come to prominence in the 1980s. She has already written four novels, two collections of short stories, two collections of essays and four collections of poems. She was born in Eaton, Georgia on 9 February 1944. When she was eight, Alice Walker lost one eye in a traumatic accident. This led her to believe ugly and made her shy and timid. Feeling ugly and outcast, younger Walker escaped into a world of words, reading Shakespeare and the Russian novelists and beginning to write poetry. This isolated little girl became young woman who searched unsuccessfully - first at Spelman, a prestigious black women's college, and then at Sarah Lawrence, a prestigious white women's college - for literary models that would link her words to those of women who preceded her.

Walker acknowledged that her earliest poems were her means of celebrating with the world the fact that led her to suicide at Sarah Lawrence college by an unwanted pregnancy. But she chose survival. Walker's works represent her celebration of the black women who have had the wherewithal to discover inside them selves from which to draw strength, and have thus survived whole, as Walker herself has done.

The South has provided Walker with spiritual balance and an ideological base, despite racist domination through sharecropping or by wage labour. Her first collection of poems, Once : Poems and first collection of essays, In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens contain Walker's personal and triumphant struggle for survival.

In 1966 she spent summer working for the civil rights movements in Mississippi. Her essay entitled The Civil Rights Movement : What God was It ? won the first prize in the American Scholar essay contest.

Walker published her first novel The Third Life of Grange Copeland in 1970. Her other novels are Meridian (1976), The Color Purple (1982), winner of the Pulitzer Prize and the American Book Award and The Temple of My Familiar (1989).

Much of Walker's pain ended at the arrival of daughter Rebecca. She rediscovered with her help free 'self'. She thought she had disappeared forever from her. Walker realized how much life is a matter of perspective. Survival whole means choosing which self to celebrate. Part of the celebrating of the self in Walker's work is her character's acknowledgment that there is something of the divine in everyone and everything in the universe. Walker's male characters achieve psychological health and wholeness only when they are able to acknowledge women's pain and their role in it. Her women achieve

psychological wholeness when they are able to fight oppression, whether its source is white racism, their own black men, or their own self-righteous anger. Thus Walker's overwhelming concern is with the survival of the people.

Toni Morrison once said that she wrote the types of books she wanted to read. Walker responded that she herself wrote rather the types of books that she should have been allowed to read. Walker should take pride in the fact that, with her life's work still unfinished, she has already become for younger artists the model that she was long denied.

II

Feminism :

In the last twenty years many of our institutions have felt the impact of feminist revolution. Women are increasingly establishing themselves in previously male-dominated domains. The rising prominence of women's publishing is one such notable success and has been crucial in the promotion of women's writing.

The study of history has begun to include women's history (her story), a discipline which strives to uncover women's lives and achievements, to acknowledge the contributions of women as scholars, researchers and writers. Today every historical period and literary genre

is undergoing reassessment from a feminist perspective. Since the late 1960's, literary criticism has also broadened to include both readers and writers who are no longer presumed to be male or white, or middle-class.

The term feminism was first used in the latter part of the 19th century and it was defined as having the "qualities of females." The meaning of the term has been gradually transformed and now it means a "theory of the political, economic and social equalities of the sexes." In the introduction to The Remembered Gate : Origins of American Feminism, Barbara Berg defines feminism as a "broad movement embracing numerous phases of women's emancipation." She further states :

It is the freedom to decide her own destiny, freedom from sex-determined role; freedom from society's oppressive restrictions; freedom to express her thought fully and to convert them fully to actions. Feminism demands the acceptance of women's rights to individual conscience and judgement.

It postulates that women's essential worth stems from common humanity and doesn't depend on the other relationship of her life.

The post-modern feminist Alice Jardine defines feminism as a , 'movement from the point of view of, by and for women.' She views feminism as a movement by women which takes on different and very specific forms in different contexts.

Present day feminism is a historically specific movement rooted in French Enlightenment thought and in British Liberalism and consequently wedded in deeply critical style to notions of truth, justice, freedom and equality. Today feminism is viewed as a rapidly developing major critical ideology. The concept incorporates a broad spectrum of ideas and possesses an international scope. Its developmental stages have historically been dependent on and in tension with male-centered political and intellectual discourse but whose more recent manifestations transcend the latter. Feminist literary criticism, now includes lively combination of Historical criticism, New criticism, Psychoanalysis, Structuralism and Deconstruction.

Black feminist criticism is establishing norms to examine the distinct cultural values of black women writers, to prevent their being subsumed into 'universal' literary studies; dominated by male and or white writers. Black women writers such as Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Buchi Emecheta, Gloria Naylor write to shape their experience and to reclaim both their history and self-image; battered by their three enemies : racism, classism, sexism. Black women writers usually offer a wider critique of patriarchy in their struggle to find themselves and validate their language.

In general feminism is the ideology of women's liberation since intrinsic in all its approaches is the belief that women suffer injustice because of their sex. Feminism is basically a critique of male dominance and of the male point of view which has forced itself upon the world, and does force itself upon the world as its way of knowing.

A feminist is one who is awakened and conscious about women's life and problem. Feminists, who value women's experience and potential, have re-read 'women's novels' with new eyes and have found a wealth of psychological, social and political insight. Feminist consciousness is the experience in a certain way of certain specific contradictions in the social order. Feminist consciousness turns a "fact" into a "contradiction", often, features of social reality are only apprehended as contradictory from the vantage point of radical project of transformations. Thus women understand what they are and where they are in the light of what they are not yet. Thus they comprehend their world and also what it is not and the world that could be if changed.

According to Sandra Bartky, feminist consciousness is consciousness of victimization. To apprehend oneself as victim is to be aware of an alien and hostile force which is responsible for the blatantly unjust treatment of woman and for a stifling and oppressive treatment of sex-roles; it is to be aware too, that this victimization in no way earned or

deserved, is an offense.² It is an understanding that one is victimized as a woman as one among many, and in the realization that others are made to suffer in the same way that one is made to suffer lies the beginning of a sense of solidarity with other victims. It is a joyous consciousness of one's own power, of the possibility of unprecedented personal growth and of the release of energy long suppressed. In this manner it is a consciousness both of weakness and of strength.

All African-American women share common experience of being black woman in a society that denigrates women of African descent. This commonality of experience suggests that certain characteristics and themes will be prominent in black women's stand point. The interrelationship of white supremacy and male superiority has thus characterized the black woman's reality as a situation of struggle-a struggle to survive in two contradictory worlds simultaneously, one white, privileged, and oppressive, the other black, exploited and oppressed.³

The black women's ability to forge the individual, unarticulated, yet potentially powerful expressions of everyday consciousness into an articulated, self-defined, collective stand point is a key to black women's survival. It is an attempt towards self-definition to indicate who one is, what one is, and what one would like to be ? Thus for the black woman struggle involves embracing a consciousness that is simultaneously

Afrocentric that reveals the black perspective and at the same time feminist.

By being accountable to others, African-American women develop more fully human, less objectified selves. Sonia Sanchez points this version of self by stating "we must move past always focusing on the "personal self " because there is a larger self. There is a "self " of black people."⁴ Rather than defining self in opposition to others, the connectedness among individuals provides black women a deeper, more meaningful self-definition.

III

Womanism :

Alice Walker prefers the term womanist to feminist. She has defined the term womanist in detail in her anthology In Search of Our Mothers' Garden (1983) subtitled as Womanist Prose, a collection of essays, articles, reviews and speeches. According to her the term womanist means :

1. From womanist. (opp. of "girlish", i.e. frivolous, irresponsible, not serious). A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, "you acting womanish." i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous

or wilful behaviour wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered "good" for one. Interested in grown up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown-up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression : you trying to be grown. Responsible. In charge. Serious.

2. Also : A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or non-sexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counter balance of laughter), and women's strength. Sometimes love's individual men, sexually and/or other women. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female.⁵

Seen in this background, we can say that David Bradley has misunderstood Alice Walker when he stated that "Alice Walker has a high level of enmity toward black men,"⁶ to which Walker responded by saying : " I just like to have words that describe things correctly. Now to me 'black feminist' does not do that. I need a word that is organic, that really comes out of the culture-. I don't choose womanism because it is "better" than feminism - I choose it because I prefer the sound, the feel, the fit of it, because I cherish the spirit of the women (like Sojourner) the word calls to mind. -"⁷

As Walker rejects the word feminist, she also turns down the word 'lesbian'. She believes :

The word 'lesbian' may not _ be suitable (or comfortable) for black women _ . Indeed, I can imagine black women who 'whole' women, from "wholly" or 'holy.' Or as 'round' women - women love other women, yes, but women who also have concern in a culture that oppresses all black people _ . for their fathers, brothers, and sons, no matter how they feel about males. My own term for such women would be 'womanist.'⁸

In addition to this, to achieve the 'wholeness' or 'roundness' in her novels, Walker tries to reveal the "whole story" of black people because everything around her is deliberately split up. As a black womanist Walker is after the "whole truth" of African- American life.

Thus Walker prefers the term 'womanist' to feminist because it is not only restricted to the genederal relationship but also to all the black community in general. In short, Walker is one who is committed to the survival of the black race in the highly charged sexist, classist and racist society of America.

IV

The present dissertation modestly attempts to make a comprehensive critical statement on the novels of Alice Walker with special reference to her four novels viz;

1. The Third Life of Grange Copeland
2. Meridian

3. The Color Purple
4. The Temple of My Familiar

It takes up the challenge of exploring all the thematic complexities in the context of her quest for meaningful black female identity in the highly charged classist, racist and sexist American society.

The approach taken in the study is purely a thematic one. The attempt has been made to explore the black feminist/womanist sensibility in the man-woman relationship found in the novels under analysis. The study uses feminist/womanist theory that is committed to the politics of exploring, explaining and validating women's experience and to ending women's oppression in the highly charged racist, sexist and oppressive society of America. It also highlights the black women's struggle for their survival and the survival of the entire black race in the American society.

The dissertation is divided into six chapters :

Chapter one : Introduction : From victimization to survival of womanist self in the racist, sexist, and classist society of America. It deals with biographical details of Alice Walker, her thematic concerns and feminist/womanist theoretical frame used for the analysis of her novels.

Chapter Two : The Third Life of Grange Copeland : From Exploitation to Self-love . It analyses her first novel. The Third Life of Grange Copeland critically.

Chapter Three : Meridian : From Subordination to a New Self. It analyses her second novel Meridian critically.

Chapter Four : The Color Purple : From Powerlessness to Empowerment. It analyses her third novel The Color Purple critically.

Chapter Five : The Temple of My Familiar : From Womanist Consciousness to Universal Consciousness. It analyses her fourth novel The Temple of My Familiar critically.

Chapter Six : Conclusion : From oppressions to Triumphs of the Black Women. It looks at the thematic statement made in the course of dissertation afresh. It also takes into account the contribution made by Alice Walker both in terms of themes and techniques. Finally it also tries to place her in the tradition of African-American women writers, like Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor, Paule Marshall who have enriched it.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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5. Alice Walker, In Search of Our Mothers' Garden, (New York : Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), p.XI.
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7. Alice Walker, "Letter", New York Times Magazine, 12 February, 1984, p.94.
8. Alice Walker, In Search of Our Mothers' Garden, p.81.