

The Notion of Black Womanhood in the Creative Work of Alice Walker

Narimanova Jamola Yuldashbayevna

English teacher at Uzbekistan State World Languages University, Tashkent city, Uzbekistan

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ABSTRACT

The position of black women in the history was always influenced by the society. Their social status has been harmed since the times of slavery and the way of recovery has not been easy. Even though the two novels analyzed in the practical part pictured the position of black women in different time periods, the same things were observed – black women are influenced by their background which usually binds them and their journeys of finding a freedom are full of obstacles. Nevertheless, once these women take enough courage to fight for their rights they can find the long-desired freedom.

The womanism movement can be defined as an attempt to bring about fundamental social reform; it is based on collaboration. This is also true of the struggle for black freedom that was happening during the 1960s. Its main focus was set on changing the way in which black people were treated in the United States. African American artists and writers attempted to change the portrayals of black people in literature and the arts. Larry Neal (1968, p.29) saw this art as one that speaks to the needs and aspirations of Black America. In order to satisfy these needs and to accomplish these aspirations, the Black Arts Movement came up with a proposal to change the cultural aesthetic of the western world. Neal supported the merging of the Black Arts with the concept of Black Power. This helped to incorporate the political values of the concept of Black Power into the work of African American poets, dramatists, novelists, and many other artists.

Fine (1971, p. 374) described what it meant to be a Black Arts artist. Those artists were obliged to use past actions to evoke new revolutionary ideas, to have knowledge of recent political and social events in order to defend themselves from the enemy, and lastly, to depict the future that could become a reality after the fight was finished. According to the author, artists were supposed to be involved with black community and try to repair the damages visited upon them by the white community.

Gates and McKay (1997, p. 1797) state that one of the literary genres that was highly used during this period of time was poetry. The reason for it was simple - poetry does not require as much time to create as novels or short stories. The writers saw the need to create quickly and so they expressed themselves in poems. They believed poetry could be used in the campaign to set the black nation free. They formed a new type of poetry by combining sermons, music, and speeches. The verse was free, also described as jazzy, conversational or bluesy. Amiri Baraka,

with his volume *Black Magic Poetry* (1967), was one of the most influential poets at that time.

As we come to the short stories of Walker, Petry (1989, p. 12-26) gives a review of two of Alice Walker's major collections of short stories "In Love & Trouble" (1973) and *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down* (1981). This overview tried to give an evaluation of Alice Walker as a short story writer and to answer questions that were asked in connection to these two collections, especially why there is such a large disparity between these two works.

One of the epigraphs in the "In Love & Trouble" (1973), which was an extract from Elechi Amadi's *Concubine* (1966), helped explain that Walker focuses on women that were really in love and trouble, because of the relationships, their self-image, and the fact that society did not care about them. All of the mental suffering of female characters, all examples of bad marriages which ended up in women attacking their husbands, was just a way of bringing to light that society refuses to accept the fact that women became suicidal and homicidal due to their position.

Nevertheless, Walker was able to lead most of the female characters in each of the short story to the recognition that struggles and crisis can help one to grow. And the women of these stories really tried to face their life situations and to deal with them, even though it seemed sometimes, that they were insane, anti-social, or ignorant. Johnson (1996, p. 223-224) and Petry (1989, p. 14) agree that there was a big shift between the female characters from *In Love & Trouble* (1973) and women in *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down* (1981). The second collection portrayed females whose courage would not be crushed, who would not be kept down but when down they would rise again. They were women who struggled a lot but were not defeated nor oppressed. They knew their value, beauty, and authenticity, and they insisted on getting their own needs met. However, Petry (1989, p. 22) and Bradley (1984) were in agreement that the second collection of short stories was not as successfully written as the first, for which according to Gates (1997, p. 2376), Walker won the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters' Rosenthal Award.

At the age of twenty-three, she wrote her first collection of poetry which she entitled *Once* (1968), with this she committed to explore the lives of black women as an African American woman writer. This piece of work was influenced by her time in Africa, where she went during the summer while she attended Sarah Lawrence College in New York. Walker came back home pregnant, and abortion was still illegal at that time. She knew that her family would have to face the shame this would cause, so she decided to commit suicide. However, she changed her mind and published this book. Her second collection was titled *Revolutionary Petunias* (1973) and Walker focused on the theme of resistance that African American women have against injustice towards them. (Gates, H. L., McKay, N. Y., 1997, p. 2375-2376)

Munro (1984, p. 161) states, that during her life, Walker, continued to explore the oppressions, the loyalties, the insanities and the victories of African American women. Gates and McKay (1997, p. 2377) agree with this statement and present the collection of essays *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* (1983), as a best example of this. Munro further presents that the collection is put together from thirty six different essays, from which thirty four were published in numerous magazines during the years between 1966 and 1983. According to her, these essays are evidence of Walker's humanism and wit.

McMillan (2004, p. 107-108) praises Walker and her ability to write on multiple levels, which she demonstrated in the collection, where she used personal testimonies and also literary criticism without letting the personal part fall into essentialism. Moreover, Munro (1984, p. 161) is impressed with the range displayed in these essays. Walker dealt with the work of the most known writers and evaluated the work of Civil Rights Movement as well as she tried to lift up the voices of less known people e.g. Mathilda Moseley, who knew Zora Neale Hurston in person.

Womanist/Womanism

Gates, McKay (1997, p. 2377) and Munro (1984, p. 161) could not omit one more important thing about the collection of essays *In Search of our Mother's Gardens* (1983). By writing these essays and publishing them together, Alice Walker coined a new term *womanism*. According to Gates and McKay, she replaced the word *feminism* and simply replaced it with a word that was derived from the folk expression *womanish*. Munro states that Walker defined the collocation *to be a womanist* as to be courageous, outrageous, brave, deliberate, and to always speak one's thoughts even when those ideas are not considered to be appropriate by society. Walker (1983, p. xi) herself gives definitions of the word *womanist* at the beginning of the collection *In Search of our Mother's Gardens*. According to her, the first meaning is: the black feminist or a feminist of color. The second one is: a woman who can love other women, either sexually or non-sexually and appreciates women's culture, strength, and emotional flexibility. The third definition which Walker gives is: *womanist* loves dance, music, the spirit, the moon, struggle, love, food, roundness and all of this regardless. For the last meaning, she says: "*Womanist is to feminism as purple to lavender.*"

To conclude this comparison, it is important to mention Alice Walker's intentions. She definitely had many reasons for writing these two novels, some of them will be mentioned now. In *The Color Purple*, she obviously takes readers back to a different time in history and recalls the situation of women at that time in order not to forget what was happening then and in order to encourage others to join one of her life's fights which is not to forget history and one's ancestors. In the novel *Meridian*, it can be seen that Alice Walker was disappointed with the movement itself and how it treated black women. Yet, in the midst of that, she again portrayed the fight of *Meridian* who was able to stand up and face the situations that were influencing her. Both of these novels convey, among others, the themes of growing on the way to personal freedom.

Walker's images of African American women are in stark contrast to the previous stated controlling images. Her women do not fall into any one category and throughout her novels some women shift from role to role with their increasing awareness of their positions in society. Lindsey Tucker examines the way Walker gives a voice to African American women through her artistic literary creations. In her essay, she gives Walker's description of the African American woman that was shared during an interview with Mary Helen Washington. She says, "Walker describes three types of black woman: first, the suspended woman, characterized mostly by immobility; second, the assimilated woman, a woman "still thwarted," ready to move, but without real space to move into; and third, the emergent woman, a woman "making the first tentative steps into an uncharted region (Tucker 83). These three descriptions will guide my study of Walker's women and show how the delineation from the popular stereotypical images of African American women represent a break from the prescribed to them.

Alice Walker, in the true African American literary tradition, presents the realities of Southern living in her fictional accounts. She highlights the struggles, miseries, and agonies that Margaret, Mem, Celie, and Sophia face as wives. This includes their suspension, which parallels with the way Black women are trapped by the stereotypes used to classify and define them. Walker's depictions of Southern women naturally include characteristics associated with the mammy stereotype. However, through the lives of Margaret, Mem, and Celie, Walker highlights the suspended effect of a lack of self-identity and departs from the mammy image by presenting dynamic characters that are more than loving, caring, and strong women.

As with many images, the historical presence of the mammy was not the image now used to portray African American women. In her research Carolyn M. West mentions that enslaved women often were beaten, overworked, and raped. In response, they ran away or helped other slaves escape, fought back when punished, and in some cases, poisoned slave owners.

In order to deal with this uncomfortable reality, historians and authors rewrote history to create

the image of the loyal, happy, mammy (West 289). This reimagining of the Black women shows a societal need to create their own definition or ideas that better suit what they wanted to believe about Black women, the treatment they received, and the actions they did in response to that treatment. This particular assignment of definition has stuck in American cultural references to Black women and the mammy image continues to be used and reintroduced in various forms. Like West, bell hooks also address this rewriting of a historical account of Black women.

According to her work the mammy stereotype developed around the desire to create an image of Black women that would not pose a threat to the dominance of white patriarchy. In spite of the reality that most housekeepers were young single women, white people chose to construct the image of the caretaker/housekeeper as fat, asexual, unhygienic, falling out of her shoes, and most importantly possessing an overwhelming love for white people (hooks 84). This new image presented little challenge to the dominant white society, and its popularity has permeated American culture for years inspiring popular figures such as Aunt Jemima in all of her head—wrapped goodness.

In the Black community, the most prominent characteristics associated with the mammy image are those that are positives, but are restricting when used to define or generalize. West continues her analysis of the mammy stereotype by suggesting that by being nurturing, Black women have aided their race for decades (290). It is this responsibility that has added to the trial Black women face. The stereotype bolsters “the belief that Black women happily seek multiple roles rather than assuming them out of necessity, that they effortlessly meet their many obligations, and they have no desire to delegate responsibilities to others” (West 290). The role

Black women play in their families even in today’s society develops out of necessity, and to believe that all Black women are strong and capable is what perpetuates the mammy stereotype.

The idea of the strong Black women is so prevalent that Black women continue to struggle with living up to this aspect of the mammy stereotype. The mammy image’s ability to permeate all levels of society encourages authors such as Alice Walker with her womanist views to deconstruct these limiting definitions for Black women and women as a whole. Barbara Christian credits the 1960’s for inspiring Black women “to illuminate [their] own situation, reflect on [their] own identity and growth, [their] relationship to men, children, society, history, and philosophy as [they] had experienced it” (Christian 16). Black women writers were beginning to portray their existence in a way that earlier male African American writers had not done. Christian mentions how Black male writers of the past depicted Black women who very nearly resemble the stereotypes popular in southern white fiction (15).

However, the growth of Black woman’s experiences in fiction changed stereotypes like the mammy image; Walker shows this in the lives of Celie and Sophia from *The Color Purple* who contradicts the mammy. According to Christian, the mammy stereotype “is carefully and continually moved from the level of stereotype to that of a living human being with her own desires and needs” (16). It is this changing stereotypical image that leads to the characters in Alice Walker’s work that are trapped by their inability to fulfill their own needs and desires because they are wives.

With the emergence of a movement geared towards an acceptance of the natural aspects of the Black woman, there needs to be a movement in society working to reevaluate the lessons shared by authors like Alice Walker to further encourage opposition to stereotypically defined identities. The mammy, jezebel, and sapphire stereotypes evolve and continue to be enabled through the prejudice and ignorance that exists in American culture in regards to ethnic people. The use of these controlling images may come to an end if people are willing to see how limiting they are and realize their participation in carrying them out.

A lack of knowledge of the truth of these images allows Black women to be in the dark and

never realize that they are giving the patriarchal society the position and power to determine who they are. Scholarship needs to continue the work started by leaders in the past who knew the detrimental effects of not having a self-defined identity. Also, Black culture as a whole will need to accept not only the positives of the culture but the negatives as well. Walker addresses her role as Southern writer saying, "We must give voice to centuries not only of silent bitterness and hate but also of neighborly kindness and sustaining love" (Walker 21).

Similar to how Southern Black writers accept the responsibility of sharing every aspect of their experience living in the South, Black culture needs to accept the rape, incest, and abuse that has become taboo topics in Black culture. The secrecy compounds the degradation of Black women suggesting that it has not and does not occur, and limits a true understanding of identity and self. This article focuses on encouraging and demanding the movement towards a self-defined identity, which includes the positivity and negativity involved. Eventually, this will return to Black women the power and strength to be more than a stereotype and to return the humanity that was taken away from them when society deemed it necessary to subject Black women to a degrading position that allowed people to see them as less than human.

To sum up, Womanism reflected the decision of colored women to clearly state their objections to such an exclusive position of white feminists and to create a paradigm which would incorporate values important to them. Not only did womanism distance itself from feminism, it also presented itself as stronger and more original thus applying the feminist strategy of distancing in order to underscore the restrictiveness of their paradigm. Womanists wanted to decenter white feminists and challenge the 'normality' of their perspective (Bryson 2003:228). As an alternative to dominant patriarchal and feminist models, womanism served as an example of different modes of behavior and thinking, and retrieved the submerged history which led to the transformation and redefinition of existing norms and to the broadening of traditional views. According to Valerie Bryson, black women's analysis of the interlocking and interdependent nature of oppression has constituted a paradigm shift in feminist understanding: "Placing African American women and other excluded groups in the center of analysis opens up possibilities for a both/and conceptual stance, one in which all groups possess varying amounts of power and privilege in one historically created system" (Bryson 2003:229).

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