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The Expression of Gender Issues in the Novels of Alice Walker

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ABSTRACT

This article is about basic features and gender issues that expressed in the novels of Alice Walker and it also related to her suggestion of feminism as a stand-in point for black feminism to articulate its difference from white feminism was articulated in her 1983 collection of essays, "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens". This philosophy emerged as a reaction to the marginalization of women of color in mainstream feminist critical theory and politics, which focused exclusively on gender oppression. Walker focuses on black feminism as a feminist, this term based on black folk culture to make it clear that the notion of femininity comes from the experience of being a black woman.

Feminism is the ideology which seeks gender equality in economic, social or cultural fields, it also focuses on the inappropriateness and scantiness of patriarchal ideologies and stresses on the spiritual, social, cultural, economic and racial equality between women with men. It also seeks to free women of the seemingly. Interminable sexual and biological colonization. Feminism demands equal voice a freedom of self-expression and is thus a protest against male domination and subjugation of women. Black women writers analyze the complex and complicated social issues because of being black and women. They clearly express the immeasurable and fathomless pain, injustice and horror of slavery. Black women have faced many kinds of oppression both from the white people and black men. The experience has provided them enough material whereby they can vent their feelings of oppression. These writers have been deliberately made inconspicuous by both the traditions the women's literary tradition and by the African-American literary tradition.

With Walker being, as she herself indicates, "a rather ardent feminist" (Walker, 1984: 152), we might expect her novels to treat the gender issue in great detail. This is indeed the case for *The Temple of My Familiar*, although we should add that it is not as clear cut as it may seem. In comparison to her most famous novel, *The Color Purple*, for example, Walker devotes far more attention to her male characters, as they constitute fifty percent of the main characters. Although each of the male characters still has to learn something and is not quite perfect as a person yet, their portrayal is strikingly less harsh than that of Mr. in *The Color Purple*, which was criticized extensively for putting forward a very negative view on men. Yet, as she herself indicates, Mr. embodies Walker's belief that people can develop positively, a view that is present even more explicit in *The Temple of My Familiar*. However, it should not surprise that the one character having reached the status of wholeness from the beginning of the novel already and who consequently serves as a guide is a woman, Lissie.

In the same subtle way, some passages in the novel suggest that, without saying men are evil, women are one step ahead in the development towards wholeness. First of all, throughout the centuries, it is women who have had a special relationship "with animals and with her children that deeply satisfied [them]. It was of this that man was jealous." (201) Secondly, "the women alone had familiars. In the men's group, or tribe, there was no such thing." (361) With the having of a familiar being the symbol of wholeness as it implies a close connection to animal and nature, this again suggests that women were more whole than men from the beginning of history.

Obviously, this rich novel deals with sexism and the gender issue in several ways. Firstly, all of the female protagonists are or have been victims of sexism. The most obvious example probably is Carlotta, who tries to please men by behaving as a "female impersonator" (386). Yet, Fanny as well is perfectly aware of the impact of sexism, which to her is inextricably linked with her position as a *colored* woman.

[Fanny] thinks of white feminists she knows who are happy that they can at last express their anger. In their opinion, this is something white women have never done. But this seems like a delusion to Fanny. For she knows the white woman has always expressed her anger, or at least vented it, as some of her friends like to say – and usually it was against people, often men, but primarily women, of color. (391)

Secondly, the novel implicitly, yet effectively, criticizes some of the most important aspects of our current sexist or patriarchal society (e.g. religion, marriage, government, academy,) by numerous references to matriarchal systems. Such ancient matriarchies are opposed to the present-day institutions that Fanny describes as "unnatural bodies, male-supremacist private clubs." (274)[13] The present situation is traced back to the point where everything went wrong. Whereas up to that moment men and women lived in separate tribes, visiting each other regularly and living in perfect harmony with each other, themselves and the nature and animals surrounding them, at a certain moment men and women merge. It is during the lifetime in which Lissie is a lion that this happens. She experiences the consequences of the merger first hand:

In the merger, the men asserted themselves, alone, as the familiars of women. They moved in with their dogs, which they ordered to chase us. This was a time of trauma for women and other animals alike. (…) I did not know at the time that man would begin, in his rage and jealousy of us, to hunt us down, to kill and eat us, to wear our hides, our teeth, and our bones. No, not even the most cynical animal would have dreamed of that. Soon we would forget the welcome of woman's fire. Forget her language. Forget her feisty friendliness. Forget the yeasty smell of her and the warm grubbiness of her children. All of this friendship would be lost, and she, poor thing, would be left with just man, screaming for his dinner and forever murdering her friends, and with man's "best friend," the "pet" familiar, the fake familiar, the dog. Not only the animals suffer, both men and women do as well. The men now took it on themselves to say what should and should not be done by all, which meant they lost the freedom of their long, undisturbed, contemplative days in the men's camp; and the women, in compliance with the men's bossiness, but more because they now became emotionally dependent on the individual man by whom man's law now decreed they must have all their children, lost their wildness, that quality of homey ease on the earth that they shared with the rest of the animals. (369)

Ever since that moment, men and women have allowed for a patriarchal system to develop, in which women were treated badly. Even black men, who should have learned from their own oppression by white people, are guilty of this.

Thirdly, the two factors that help Celie, the protagonist in *The Color Purple* and probably the most famous victim of racism and sexism at once in literature, to throw off the yoke of her double oppression are also present in *The Temple of My Familiar*. First of all, women, in order to be fully appreciated as women, should explore themselves in every possible way, meaning: also

sexually. They have to come to terms with their own sexuality, know and appreciate their own body, before they will be able to enjoy a sexual relationship with a man. In *The Temple of My Familiar*, sex is referred to in two ways. On the one hand, there is unfulfilling sex, for example, the sex Suwelo forces both Fanny and Carlotta to have with him and onto which he projects his male-oriented fantasies. For example: he tries to force Fanny to wear sexy lingerie and tells Lissie and Hal how: "[s]he felt terrible. She cried and said she felt degraded." (281) It should not come as a surprise that Fanny later confesses to him that she has never experienced an orgasm with him. (283) On the other hand, there is the type of sex that is possible only if both the woman and the man value the woman for being a woman. It is the sex Arveyda and Fanny have at the end of the novel. But, in order for this to happen, Fanny has to come to terms with her sexuality herself. Just like Shug made Celie aware of her "little button" (*The Color Purple*: 83), Fanny is helped as well:

Fanny thinks of the years during which her sexuality was dead to her. How, once she began to understand man's oppression of women, and to let herself feel it in her own life, she ceased to be aroused by men. By Suwelo in particular, addicted as he was to pornography. And then, the women in her consciousness-raising group had taught her how to masturbate. Suddenly she'd found herself free. Sexually free, for the first time in her life. At the same time, she was learning to meditate, and was throwing off the last clinging vestiges of organized religion. She was soon meditating and masturbating and finding herself dissolved into the cosmic all.

The second important thing Shug teaches Celie is to discard the view of God she has. In that way, Walker is "attacking patriarchy (and patriarchal culture) at its Christian foundation" (Hall, 1992).[14] The same view is put forward in *The Temple of My Familiar*. It is important to note however that religion is not done away with altogether.

Walker does not believe (…) that any attempt at a redemptive system of thought will ultimately prove tyrannical and hegemonic. In Temple, the characters seek methods of connecting to their pasts and each other--through storytelling, music, massage, and of course love and sex--and strenuously avoid the traditional systems of the white male patriarchy, while asserting a philosophy of spiritual unity and balance.

Instead, traditional, patriarchal Christianity – in which both God and Jesus are representatives of the white man – is replaced by something very personal and spiritual, celebrating man's connection with other people as well as with nature. As Olivia tells Fanny:

We all begun to see, in Africa – where people worshiped many things, including the roof leaf plant, which they used to cover their houses – that "God" was not a monolith, and not the property of Moses, as we'd been led to think, and not separate from us, or absent from whatever world one inhabited. (…) The God discovered on one's own speaks nothing of turning the other cheek. Of rendering unto Caesar; But only of the beauty and greatness of the earth, the universe, the cosmos. Of creation. Of the possibilities for joy. You might say the white man, in his dual role of spiritual guide and religious prostitute, spoiled even the most literary form of God experience for us. By making the Bible say whatever was necessary to keep his plantations going, and using it as a tool to degrade women and enslave blacks. (146-147)

This is also why Fanny's grandmothers, Shug and Celie, eventually found their own church, which they called "a 'band.' 'Band' was what renegade black women's churches were called traditionally; it means a group of people who share a common bond and purpose and whose notion of spiritual reality is radically at odds with mainstream or prevailing ones." (301) Their church worked according to the following principle:

Everyone who came brought information about their own path and journey. The exchanged and shared this information. That was the substance of the church. Some of these people worshiped Isis. Some worshiped trees. Some thought the air, because it alone is everywhere, is God. (170)

This view on religion as explicitly different from the patriarchal Christianity is supported by the stories of Lissie's past lifetimes in which she relates how in the beginning of civilization people worshipped mothers and goddesses, instead of male figures.

In conclusion, being both black and female, the black woman's situation and oppression go far beyond that of either (male) blacks or (white) women. Consequently, black women find themselves socially, politically and especially emotionally situated in a no man's land, unable to identify with either Afro-Americanism or mainstream feminism. Although they belong to both minority groups up to a certain height, their specific predicament is never fully grasped by either. That is why, throughout the years, black women have claimed their own rightful place and have created a specifically black feminism.

With her strong fascination for black women, from the start of her career, Alice Walker has presented herself as one of the advocates of this black feminism, coining her own term for and creating her own approach to the issue. This paper explored both the theoretical and practical side of that approach.

Walker refers to black feminism as Womanism, a term rooted in black folk culture to indicate clearly that the concept is shaped by the specific experience of being a black woman. The four-part definition she provides at the beginning of her collection of essays "*In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens"* (1983), however hybrid, can be said to be conveying two general meanings: a very concrete and a more universally valid one. Firstly, and most importantly, Womanism specifically denotes a particular attitude for black feminists or, by extension, feminists of color.

Comparing the relation between Womanism and (mainstream, white) feminism to that between purple and lavender, Walker indicates that both share certain features, yet in the end are undeniably different. Walker further elaborates on what a "womanist" is and characterizes the attitude in both objective and more irrational ways.

Secondly, stating several times that womanists are non-separatists with regards to both race and gender, Womanism, in a less straight-forward way, seems to denote a universally and eternally desirable attitude for people in general. Admittedly, considering the etymology of the word as well as the obviously feminine frame of the definition, it may appear quite far-fetched to claim that Womanism actually refers to a unisex stance. Yet, on the other hand, the non-separatist philosophy so important to Womanism may suggest itself that it does.

Walker backs up her complex definition with the essays in the collection. Four themes return regularly in this "womanist prose" and are therefore presumably central to Womanism as well. The importance of the first two themes, race and gender, to the issue of black feminism is very straight-forward. The themes of the black (female) artist and of (biological as well as spiritual) motherhood, however, are less self-evident in that respect. Yet, Walker convincingly illustrates how these aspects function in her philosophy.

Besides her theoretical reflections on the issue, Walker's Womanism also shows in her fiction, which is comprised of several novels, numerous short stories and poems. This paper illustrated how that works for her novel *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989) solely. Although it is beyond dispute that the analysis of only one novel is not a sufficient basis to draw general conclusions on the issue, the scope of this paper did not allow for a larger scale investigation. Moreover, the choice for exactly that novel as a test-case can be easily defended. First of all, *The Temple of My Familiar* is probably Walker's most contentious novel, as the reactions to it range from enthusiastic praise to utter disapproval. Although it was beyond the scope of this paper to touch upon evaluative matters, I still believe this divide in the critical reactions to the novel makes it an interesting object for analysis.

Secondly, being (although only superficially) acquainted with the rest of Walker's work as well, I suspected that *The Temple of My Familiar* belongs to the part of her fiction that is not that

straight-forwardly womanist. In the novel, as opposed to say *The Color Purple*, the protagonists are not all black women, nor are black women's experiences exclusively at its core. Therefore, in a way, it could be suggested that if *The Temple of My Familiar* proved to be womanist after all, the suggestion that Walker's literary work in total is would seem appropriate.

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.

So, Walker refers to black feminism as Womanism, a term rooted in black folk culture to indicate clearly that the concept is shaped by the specific experience of being a black woman. The four-part definition she provides at the beginning of her collection of essays "*In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens"* (1983), however hybrid, can be said to be conveying two general meanings: a very concrete and a more universally valid one.

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Beginning with her first novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, Walker has focused on a matrix which includes sexual and racial realities within black communities as well as the unavoidable connections between family and society. For exposing the former, she has been criticized by some African-American male critics and theorists; for exploring the latter, she has been awarded numerous prizes while winning the hearts and minds of countless black and white readers. Perhaps her most famous work is *The Color Purple*, brought to the attention of mainstream America through the film adaptation by Steven Spielberg. In that novel of incest, lesbian love, and sibling devotion, Walker also introduces blues music as a unifying thread in the lives of many of the characters.

Refusing to ignore the tangle of personal and political themes, Walker has produced half a dozen novels, two collections of short stories, numerous volumes of poetry, and books of essays. Though she has attained fame and recognition in many countries, Walker has not lost her sense of rootedness in the South or her sense of indebtedness to her mother for showing her what the life of an artist entailed. Writing of this central experience in her famous essay, "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," she talks about watching her mother at the end of a day of back-breaking physical labor on someone else's farm return home only to walk the long distance to their well to get water for her garden planted each year at their doorstep. Walker observed her design that garden, putting tall plants at the back and planting so as to have something in bloom from early spring until the end of summer. While not knowing what she was seeing at the time, the adult Walker names her mother an artist full of dedication, a keen sense of design and

balance, and a tough conviction that life without beauty is unbearable.

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