



ISSN

INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print):2321-3108 (online)

## WOMANISM: BLACK FEMINIST THEORY WITH A DIFFERENCE

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### ABSTRACT

The Postcolonial world has seen the emergence of many theories expounded by marginals the world over. John Comaroff and Jean Comaroff's treatise about the Theory from the Global South also talks about the need of the day for theories to come out of the excluded sections of our increasingly shrinking world. The question that we encounter is whether these people have anything to say or not? Or whether they can only be talked about and never heard? Before Edward Said the prevalent ideology about the marginals had always been condescending and negative in general. But since Said, there has a sea change in both the execution and acceptance of the hitherto neglected area of human understanding. Now the marginals from all over the world are creating their own version of history and self-definitions. There are times when these theories seem just theories and do not get translated into reality. But that is where Womanism differs.

Alice Walker's Womanism is a theory that discusses both the lived experiences of the Black women in America and the need to develop such a theory. Walker like many other Black women of her generation felt left out of the theoretical terrain. She felt like an outsider in the theoretical realm, which conveniently and deliberately excluded the Black women from its canon. Walker discussed the tabooed topic of unspeakability of the black body within Eurocentric thought in Womanism. She owned up not only herself but also her Black body so very convincingly that there was no scope for any doubt. She did not give any excuse for being herself nor does she give any reason for the Black women in general.

Womanism the name itself comes from the Black folklore. It has been derived from a form of retribution used by Black mothers for Black girl-children, "You being womanish (like a woman, way beyond your age)" (Walker 1967).

A Black woman's humanity has been denied for too long for too many reasons. Walker tells us what it is to be a Black woman in a world that constantly tell her that she does not matter, in fact does not exist as a human. She tells us why a Black woman seems to be audacious and uncontrollable to the "others". She defines both a Black woman's culture and her strengths for the world. This article is an attempt to highlight the above-mentioned issues both within the Womanist theory and its application.

**Key Words:** Womanism, Black Feminism, Racism, Sexism, Women's culture.

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African American women writers and thinkers are one of those Postcolonial groups that have asserted their voices and experiences in a world, which has denied them the right to exist. The Patriarchal fathers have silenced women from even the dominant communities into submission, so it was nothing new for Black women to be muted for centuries together by the all powerful white patriarchal powers. Black women have been facing oppression on more than one count. There has been covert resistance and resentment from these women, which have been beautifully depicted in the 2012 movie *The Help*, but it was only in the late 60's and early 70's when Black women overtly came to forefront with the establishment of The National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO).

Writers like Patricia Hill Collins and bell hooks have given us a thorough insight into the making of a Black Feminist or Feminist of Color. Womanism is a theory that is an offshoot of Black Feminism. Alice Walker and Chikwenye Ogunyemi have individually arrived at the name 'Womanism' as both have felt it more close to the lived experience of the Black women than the term 'Black Feminism'. Their theory is rooted in the Black women's culture and history. Both these aspects have not found any mention in the theoretical realm of the Eurocentric theories. Black women like all the marginals of the world have been reduced to non-entities by the dominant White centers. In the pyramid of power in the American society the Black women were on the bottom; superseded by Black men, white children, white women and ultimately the white men. Black women have participated in the Civil Rights Movement lead by Martin Luther King Jr. and in the Feminist movement of the 1960's. But in both these forums their specific issues, which included both racism and sexism were not given any space and acknowledgement. There was a sense of frustration that made these women come up with their own theory.

The most important aspect of this theory was its source. These women fell back on what they knew instinctively through their mothers and foremothers. There is no need to take this theory into the realm of reality, as it is as real as it could be. The term Womanism itself comes from the recalled

past of the Black women's childhood. The Black girl child was always reprimanded by her mother for being "Womanish" i.e. for being grown up, behaving like a grown up. Alice Walker is taking her own past and also the collective experiences of the Black women to create a world, which strives to be holistic and all-inclusive.

Womanism as a theory challenges the preconceived ideas about the Black women and their lives. Virginia Woolf had laid down four pre-requisites for a woman to be a writer. These included the need for women to be fearless and talk about their body. It is the physicality of a woman's body, which initially differs her experiences from that of a man. Whenever a woman talks about her body she is ridiculed and silenced but Walker insists that a Womanist not only owns up her body but also appreciates and loves both sexually/or nonsexually other woman's body. Lesbian concerns are present in almost all her fiction except the early ones. Walker does not shy away from taking up all those issues that would make other women uncomfortable. Women especially Black women have been marginalized by all who have occupied the realm of theory, have seen to it that Black women and their lives are never taken into account. The Concept of this conference notes the "unspeakability of the black body within Eurocentric thought" (FCT Newsletter 14), which is what Alice Walker and other writers like her have been highlighting through their writings.

Black women have had their bodies mutilated and abused in America for almost two centuries; they have rarely been made proud of the basic element that makes us human. The American beauty myth has been one more way in which the white dominant class has successfully created monsters out of the Black women. These extremely vulnerable women have hated their very being because of the accumulated systematic pogrom. The onus of returning the Black women their dignity and self-exulting identity fell on the Black women writers who would through their works bring back would bring back the lost glory of being a woman. They are now claiming the ownership of their bodies, which for a long time was never theirs to own. During slavery the white master owned their bodies and after the end of slavery the Black men had absolute control over them. The Black women have been made to feel insignificant except for their

bodies and that too in an extremely negative manner. bell hooks highlights this point thus:

To justify White male sexual exploitation and rape of Black females during slavery, White culture had to produce an iconography of Black female bodies that insisted on representing them as highly sexed, the perfect embodiment of primitive, unbridled eroticism. Such representations impressed on everyone's consciousness the notion that Black women were all body and no mind (hooks, *Breaking* 154).

Alice Walker has in her Womanist theory described the sense of being a woman of color. She writes, "[She] Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. Regardless" (SMG xii). Walker insists that a Black woman does not need to adhere to the standards of beauty laid down by the dominant culture. She can "Love food.....love roundness", as the physique is differently built from the white women they are beautifully endowed in all the "wrong" places. This has made generations of Black women devalue themselves and try very hard to change something they just can't- their looks. Black women's dehumanization is evident in audio-visual media since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

It is only in the later part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that Black women have gained the consciousness of questioning this extremely demeaning system of hierarchy and atrocity. Alice Walker began her celebration of the Black woman's culture and being right from the publication of her non-fiction work titled *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* (1967). *The Color Purple* was her first fictional attempt to upholding the existence of a Black woman. Celie, the protagonist of *The Color Purple* loves another "Black like tar" woman Shug not because she is as white as possible but because Shug is the prettiest woman she has ever seen. Celie never feels the need to be anything but a Black woman. For her 'Black is Beautiful'. For Black women it was very difficult to be a Lesbian, as even their 'straight' identities were non-existent to the dominant white world, and so they were certain that their Lesbian selves would be heavily condemned and ridiculed by these very powerful forces. Walker introduces Lesbianism in

*The Color Purple* through the two traditional archivals, the wife and the mistress. Shug reveals the pleasures of the body to her lover's wife, because she wants Celie to be happy. Walker believes that Black women have to "love" regardless of what others say. They have to claim their share of the happiness laid down for the whole of humanity.

Alice Walker's two other novels namely, *By the Light of My Father's Smile* and *Possessing the Secret of Joy* pay homage to the Black female body and its sacredness. Walker demystifies and upholds Black woman's body through her theory and fiction both. *Possessing the Secret of Joy* deals with the issue of female Genital Mutilation being practiced in many African Tribes. It traces the psychological aspect of a woman who has undergone this horrific and extremely unhealthy procedure. Tashi is a woman who under peer pressure decides to take revenge by killing the woman who performed this operation on her and many girls like her. In this novel Walker discusses the inhuman practice of stealing women's sexuality in the name of tradition. The grave psychological danger that these women are exposed to as one of the consequence of the Genital mutilation is at the center of the novel. Walker does not believe in having separate spheres for men and women but feels that in matters of health there can be a departure, she writes: "Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health" (SMG xi).

*By the Light of My Father's Smile* is a novel, which is as much a tale of father- daughter relationship as it is of a man woman relationship. Here Walker celebrates the act of making love by hailing it as sacred as worship. The respect that the fictional Mundo tribe gives to a woman's body is truly remarkable. Walker writes:

But by then his (Manuelito's) father and uncles and older brothers had taught him .... How not to impregnate anyone. I was safe. Worshipped is how it felt. To know myself so thought of, so cared about (BFS 28).

This value that the people accord to the limitation of a woman's body is something that Walker hopes will be transmitted from the fictional world into the real

world. Walker's theory is basically about women and their marginalization. Women's bodies are neither respected nor worshipped in the true sense of the term. Women have been under the patriarchal for centuries together which has deprived them of the basic sense of being an individual. In fact, most of the times women's bodies are used against them as a weapon to control and abuse her.

Womanism is a theory that is rooted in the Black woman's culture, Walker writes, "Womanist appreciates and upholds woman's culture and tradition" (SMG ix). Woman's culture is rarely discussed in the realm of theory. Showalter has in her Gynocentric theory discussed these issues but there are some differences between Gynocentrism and Womanism. The Black woman's theory speaks, when it is only supposed to hear. It challenges both the Black and White male canon and knowledge. It gives space and identity to millions of women who have been missing the world of theory. Black women are some the most subaltern sections of the world community. They are now writing back and creating their own "registers and meaning" in the world of social sciences and humanity. Womanism is a theory that values tears as much as it values laughter, Walker says, "values tears as natural counter-balance of laughter" (SMG xi)". She feels that women's emotional flexibility lends her the strength that men neither want to acknowledge nor appreciate. In fact women's tears have always been ridiculed and condemned. Walker gives new meaning to women's physiology.

Men have had control over all kinds of discourses including HIS/tory. Women have been systematically excluded from history books. They play second fiddle to men even if they are present in the historical tales. In her novel *Temple of My Familiar* Walker has created a new understanding of women in the story of our existence. The protagonist of the novel Lizzie remembers almost all her previous births. She takes an alternate path to the one we are familiar with. Lizzie is a woman who remembers living with animal in absolute communion and having a great understanding and respect for people of both the genders. Though there are some contentious issues in *The Temple*, like men shown to be in awe of women's power of

procreation something opposite of "Penis Envy" and their unsuccessful attempt to be "like" women. But that is something Walker; the fiction writer has taken liberty with. But one feels that if men feel and try to historically substantiate it, that women are jealous of men then women can feel that they have one power that men can never have, the power to procreate, then they are the right subject of envy and not the other way round. Anyway, what Walker has tried to prove, both in her theory and fiction, is the fact that women have a culture of their woman, a history of their own and they are as proud of being women of all colors, sizes and shapes, as the men around them.

Womanism is a theory that enables women to repossess their lost glory and helps them create their own set of meanings and discourses. These discourses are not based on the canonical discourses, neither are they on polar ends of the established patriarchal theories. Womanism only opens up the field for women to bring their won perspectives and opinions about the world they inhabit alongside the men. Women are equal stakeholders and so their voices and opinions do matter. Feminism was the initial reaction to thousands of years of patriarchy and so it became the opposite end of the pendulum but Womanism has learnt from the experiences and failures of the Feminists and therefore has tried to balance not only their theory but also their worldview. Womanism is a theory, which celebrates and upholds the "wholeness" of all men and women. While describing this concept of wholeness Chikwenye Ogunyemi writes:

Black Womanism is a philosophy that celebrates black roots, the ideals of black life, while giving a balanced presentation of black womandom..... Its ideal is for black unity where every black person has a modicum of power and so can be a "brother" or a "sister" or a "father" or a "mother" to the other. This philosophy has a mandalic core: its aim is the dynamism of wholeness and self-healing that one sees in the positive, integrative endings of Womanist novels (Ogunyemi 72).

Womanism understands the world in its various hues and also the Postcolonial nature of the world that we live in and thus while declaring the motives, objectives and significance of the black feminist ideology Deborah King comments:

A black feminist ideology, first and foremost, thus declares the visibility of black women. It acknowledges the fact that two innate and increasable traits, being both black and female, constitute our special status in American society. Second, black feminism asserts self-determination as essential. Black women are empowered with the right to interpret our reality and define our objectives. While drawing on a rich tradition of struggle as blacks and as women, we continually establish and re-establish our own priorities. As black women, we decide for ourselves the relative salience of any and all identities and oppressions, and how the extent to which those features inform our politics. Third, a black feminist ideology fundamentally challenges the interstructure of the oppressions of racism, sexism, and classism both in the dominant society and within movements for liberation. It is in confrontation with multiple jeopardy that black women define and sustain a multiple consciousness essential for our liberation, of which feminist consciousness is an integral part (King 295).

Walker also pledges allegiance to the feminist thought. In her definition of Womanism she attains a closure by calling Womanism a different shade of feminism, she writes, "Womanism is to feminism as purple to lavender" (Walker xii). Womanism opens the boundaries of feminism and brings in the entire race, class, national and even gender elements that seem missing in the popular concept of feminism.

In conclusion we can say that, Womanism is not just a theory but also a way of life as it is rooted in the real life experiences of Black women. In her essay titled "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens" published in the book by the same name, Walker tracks the history of all those unsung warriors of Black community, who could not leave behind a

treasure of art and literature simply because they were systematically kept away from these artistic pursuits. Womanism is a voice that calls out to all the lost creators of art and also those mothers who relentlessly gave up their creativity in order to take care of her own as well as her master's family. It is a theory, which highlights all those characteristics of Black women that have hitherto been invisible to a majority of people except the Black women themselves. Womanism transforms the "weaknesses" into "strength" and gives a new outlook to the Black Feminist movement.

#### Abbreviations

BFS- *By the Light of My Father's Smile*

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