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WOMANISM IN ALICE WALKER'S *THE TEMPLE OF MY FAMILIAR*

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ABSTRACT

Alice Walker the feminist deals with the oppression of black women and men. Her quest is a new identify for black women, a self-awareness which will make them self dependent socially, emotionally and spiritually. Racial oppression, general violence, history and ancestry, Civil Rights Movement – all these form the sum and substance of her work. It was Alice walker who coined the term 'Womanism' a form of black feminism that affricates and prefers women's culture, women's flexibility and women's strength. 'Womanism' according to Alice Walker is not narrowly exclusive; it is committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. In all aspects Alice walker is the brightest star in a galaxy of black American women writers.

Keywords: Womanism, Civil Rights Movement, Black feminism, Women's strength

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AFRICAN WOMANISM

The growing influence of the post-colonial agenda since the 1980's has resulted in the creative expression of voice which was till now silenced by the Western master narratives. The painstaking efforts of non-white women from the margins has brought cross-cultural and inter-racial discussions into the arena of academic feminist theorizing which was till now based on gender. One of the primary aims of third-world feminism was to reject homogenizing impulses of Western feminists who analyzed women issues purely with regard to gender. The prominent black theoretician Bell Hooks criticizes her contemporaries Betty Friedman (whose book *The Feminine Mystique* had became a marked feature of the contemporary feminist movement) for giving only a one-dimensional perspective of women's reality by concentrating only the specific

problems and dilemmas of leisure-class housewives and ignoring the existence of all non-white women, poor white women and masses of women who are concerned about economic survival, ethnic and racial discrimination. In her path-breaking study, *Feminist Theory-from Margin to Centre*, Bell Hooks comments: White women who dominate feminist discourse who for the most part make and articulate feminist theory have little or no understanding of white supremacy as a racial politics, of the psychological impact of class, of their political status within a racist, sexist, capitalistic society.

Her achievements and success as a Writer

Alice walker is the brightest star in a galaxy of black American women writers. As a fighter against social injustice Alice walker is inspirational; as a black woman struggling with divorce, motherhood and car boxes, she is engaging and

emphatic. She is the author of the novels *The Color Purple*, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1983, *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989) *Meridian* (1976), *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992), *By the Light of My Father's Smile* (1998), *The Third life of Grange Copeland* (1970) and other famous works.

THE TEMPLE OF MY FAMILIAR

In *The Temple of My Familiar*, Walker forms two sides of the same coin. She expresses her inability to identify with mainstream (predominantly white) feminism. She has created her own brand of black feminism labelled as 'Womanism'. Through her 'Womanist' ideas she seeks to distinguish black feminist's many sided offensive against patriarchy. She believes that white feminists bulwark against oppressions falls short of the intrepidity that compels the womanist to turn every stone in the complicated masonry of power relations. Although she professes a special preference for the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties and the triumphs of black women (ISMG; 1984, 250) she is also 'pre-occupied with the spiritual survival, the survival whole of her people.' (ISMG, 250)

In her writings, Walker exposes the global scope of the objectification of women's bodies, while differentiating the racialized exploitation of woman's bodies under slavery. In *The Temple of My Familiar* through Lissie many lives she enumerates the physical horrors of the female slave experience, their hair being chopped off, their bodies branded with pieces of hot iron and put on display as well as being subjected to repeated violation, physical punishment and endless breeding leading to death. *The Temple of My Familiar* is a literary 'crazy quilt' embedded with her Womanist vision of relating Black Women experiences. It reflects the powers of relationship which call for a re-mapping. The voices are poly-vocal, multi-gendered, cross cultural and multi-dimensional. It encompasses stories by weavers, artists, painters, healers for whom art represents a means of wholeness. Through their experiences and emotions, they create a wonderful web of relationships in which Msukta, the ancient weaver assumes a pivotal position. Through this relational web which reflects Walker's vision of transformation and healing, the individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds connect with each

other drawing on ancestry and sacred feminine symbols. *The Temple of My Familiar* retells a story often misrepresented by colonial literature, the story of African people who were stripped off their land, culture and transported to America as slaves where they seek to restore the remains of their lost ancestry. Walker recovers stolen African goddesses such as Isis and Medusa and invokes their power to assist in creating a synergistic world view of healing and connectedness. She tracks how ancient African goddesses were an embodiment of earth based spirituality. She states- "The Goddess, who long before she became Isis, was known all over Africa as simply the Great Mother, Creation of All, Protector of All, the Keeper of the Earth." (*The Temple of My Familiar*: 269)

The Temple of My Familiar is a critique as well as a vision. It rises up what we as human beings in the contemporary era have to work through in order to restore a compassionate humanism as well as seeks a revisit to gender oppression. Walker calls it 'a romance of the last half million years' and has portrayed her female characters capable of breaking the bonds of oppression and discovering diversity in all human and non human elements.

Walker traces how women's role in society had undergone a devastating change, of how she enjoyed supreme status as goddesses and priests. Walker succinctly brings to the fore how role reversals took place and women were absolved of the duties assigned to them. Lissie exclaims- "The men had decided that they would be Creators, and they went about dethroning women systematically. To sell women and children for whom you no longer wished to assume responsibility....became a new tradition, an accepted way of life." (TOMF:64) Through her revival of African ancestry, Walker explains how matriarchal societies gave way to patriarchal ones and how the universal oppression of women is highlighted by Zede and Lissie. Lissie's many lives represent Walker's voice of concern over the multiple oppression afflicting women and subsequently nature as well. Lissie explains how in one of her past lives, she had been sold into slavery and states-

"There were men sold into slavery because of their religious beliefs.....they carried on

the ancient tradition of worship of the mother and to see a mother sold into slavery...was a great torture to them." (63)

CONCLUSION

The Universalist philosophy that Walker invokes as part of her Womanist theory is expressed by her image of the garden, where room is present for all flowers to blossom unvaryingly and yet in their own way, living together nonetheless preserving their cultural uniqueness and integrity. In these aspects of the concept of Womanism, one can see the balancing nature of one's personal life in relation to one's political life. Though Walker's process is allegedly de-centered, the quest for individual and collective harmony is the one aspect of the process that is most apparent in all of her novels. Besides, she envisions, "survival whole" for the entire black community. This lends credence to Ogunyemi's assertion that Alice Walker has finally emerged as a spokeswoman for black women and the black race by moving away from black male chauvinism and the iconoclastic tendencies of feminism to embrace the relative conservatism of Womanism. Womanism with its wholesomeness, its religious grounding in black togetherness is her gospel of hope [2].

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