



WOMANIST CONSCIOUSNESS IN ALICE WALKER'S *NOW IS THE TIME TO OPEN YOUR HEART*

DHAVALESWARAPU RATNA HASANTHI

Research Scholar (Ph. D), Dept. of English, Andhra University
Visakhapatnam



ABSTRACT

In her 2004 novel *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart*, Alice Walker, herself an amalgamation of African American, Cherokee and Scottish-Irish ethnicities, narrates the life of a womanist called Kate Talkingtree who is multi-ethnic like her. This paper is a modest attempt to study and analyse the womanist consciousness employed in the novel and it showcases how it betters the lives of the woman characters in the novel, primarily concentrating on Kate, the protagonist of the novel. Womanist consciousness is an awareness about the plight of being a black woman in a racist, sexist and classist world. The term inscribes in itself, the perception of being a black woman in America with an awareness of the past, present and future. Womanist perspective is also concerned with enriching the female gender through consciousness rising, while giving a human touch to the struggle for the appreciation, emancipation, elevation and self-fulfilment of women in totality, in all possible, positive ways. The novel explores the lives of marginalized women in multi-ethnic and multicultural America. Kate Talkingtree like Walker, is a true womanist who discovers and reclaims herself physically, spiritually, connects with nature, and her ancestors. She commits herself to the survival and the wholeness of all people. She becomes a Universalist by the end of the novel.

Keywords : Racism, Sexism, Ethnicity, Multiethnicity, Gender, Class, Identity

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American society since its inception has been an ethnically diverse one. African Americans entered America as involuntary migrants and made it their home. Even in the present day heterogeneous ethnic configuration, the place of African Americans continues to present a major challenge to American ethnic relations, as they face more racial discrimination when compared to other groups. Though slavery has been abolished long back in America, the legacy of slavery weighs down on African Americans and makes them a special minority as they have been subjected to more than

“two centuries of slavery” (Marger 206-207). They are swiftly coming out of the rut and rammel of covert segregation and indirect discrimination. Yet, even in the twenty first century, though Barack Obama an African American is the president of America, racist beliefs exist in a modified form. “As a collectivity, blacks in the past four decades have made significant strides in income, occupation, and education. However, they continue to lag behind whites in all measures of socio-economic status” (Marger 208). Walker through the novel *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart* has depicted this ignominy

faced by African Americans in American society, specifically concentrating on the tripartite struggle of African American women.

African American women have faced sexist oppression in addition to racist oppression when compared to their male counterparts. The intersection of racist, sexist and classist oppression has forced African American women to face complex social and psychological actualities which no other marginalized category of women has ever faced. African American women are forced to play a complementary and unequal role in their families and society. An African American woman's name has been synonymous with labour at home and outside home. Slavery did not conform African women to gender roles. But with passing time, western patriarchal set up became an accepted way of life for blacks. In a patriarchal society, gender subordinates women, to establish a man's masculinity. When this is internalized by African American women they are forced to accept the frustration of racism of African American men in addition to theirs, which itself is double jeopardy. White women are victims of only sexism from white men, while black women are victims of sexism from black men as well as white men. In addition to this, they are victims of classism as they are mules at home, most of the time, looking after all the needs of the family. The history of racism affects the experience of gender and intensifies the effects of sexism and classism on African American women.

Feminism has failed to voice or protect the interests of black women. Being both black and female, these women are "doubly marginalized" (Warhol and Herndl 741). As Elaine Showalter has pointed out, the black woman is "the Other Woman, the silenced partner" (214). This unique marginalization does not relate black women to feminism like womanism. Though feminism and womanism are related, womanism stands to feminism as "Purple to lavender" (Walker *In Search* xii). This paper showcases how womanist consciousness gives a real succour to the lives of black women helping them emerge as victors in their day to day struggle. This paper concentrates on womanism as defined by Alice Walker in her collection of essays titled *In Search of Our Mothers'*

Gardens: Womanist Prose published in 1984. The term Womanism used by Walker, has its origin in the black folks expression "You acting Womanish" i.e. like a woman" (Walker *In Search* xii). The practitioner of womanism is a womanist. Alice Walker is a thorough womanist, because of which she is a true humanist. She defines a womanist as follows:

- 1 Womanist. From womanish. (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 willful behavior. Wanting to know more and in great 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 nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist, as in: "Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige, and black?" Ans.: "Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented." Traditionally capable, as in: "Mama, I'm walking to Canada and I'm taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me." Reply: "It wouldn't be the first time."
3. Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. Regardless.
4. Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender. (Walker *In Search* xi-xii)

From the above definitions it can be inferred that womanism advocates egalitarianism starting with gender and proceeding over to race, ethnicity and class, with a universal outlook. Womanism offers a positive self-definition within historical, chronological, geographical, ethnic, and cultural contexts too. Womanist perspective is also concerned with enriching the female gender through consciousness rising, while giving a human touch to the struggle for the appreciation, emancipation, elevation and self-fulfilment of women in totality in all possible, positive ways. It addresses the racial-ethnic, class and gender identities of marginalized women. As Collins has pointed out "Womanism seemingly supplies a way for black women to address gender oppression without attacking black men" (Collins 11).

Womanist consciousness is an awareness about the plight of being a black woman in a racist, sexist and classist world. The term inscribes in itself, the perception of being a black woman in America with an awareness of the past, present and future. A black woman's identity is conformed by being a woman, a black and belonging to the unprivileged class. This triple identity of a black woman dictates her being in America to the extent that it influences her day to day life. Moreover, womanism addresses the issues associated with racism that in turn influence sexism and classism faced by black women. The aforesaid issues can only be addressed and answered when black men and women work together for each other's upliftment. Walker through the novel *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart* showcases that a black woman has to learn from the historical past, live in the present to mould it and hope for a good future doing all that, she can. This paper is a modest attempt to study and analyse the womanist consciousness employed in the novel and it showcases how it betters the lives of the women characters in the novel, primarily concentrating on Kate the protagonist of the novel.

Walker in the novel has given the prime female characters an expansive space in the novel as she has given them the opportunity to reconstruct their experiences in their life through rememory. This in fact, is very pivotal to see the emergence of the contemporary, viable African American woman

in America. Alice Walker like Toni Morrison and Gloria Naylor tries to put forth the unheard voice of women through her writings. She writes how women can be a source of strength to each other. Moreover, Alice Walker is backed by her own experiences as a black woman. The black women characters in Alice Walker's novels are physically, emotionally and psychologically abused by the oppressive environment around them. The oppressive environment makes them go for choices that aren't easy. Their plight is manifold as they are subjects of violence within the black family, the black community and the white racist society. Walker in her novels has showcased women who emerge triumphant by the end of the novel, despite all conforming odds.

An African American woman and her myriad forms is the preoccupation of Alice Walker's fiction. From her first novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* to her latest novel *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart* Walker has explored the intricacies of being a black woman in America. In *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart*, Alice Walker, herself an amalgamation of African American, Cherokee and Scottish-Irish ethnicities, narrates the life of a womanist called Kate Talkingtree who is also multi-ethnic like her. The novel explores the lives of marginalized women in multi-ethnic and multicultural America. Kate Talkingtree, the protagonist of the novel is womanism personified. Like Walker, she is a true womanist who discovers and reclaims herself physically, spiritually, connects with nature, and her ancestors. She commits herself to the survival and wholeness of all people. She becomes a Universalist by the end of the novel.

The novel *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart* begins with Kate Talkingtree's therapeutic journey, to achieve womanist wholeness that is denied to her, on account of her race-ethnicity and gender. Kate as a black artist and an African American woman of mixed ethnicity empowers herself, to resist injustice. She is courageous and willful enough, to embark on a journey to reclaim her body and spirit. She rejects materialism, institutionalized religion, and barbarous civilization that cannot redeem the plight of the marginalized. She is responsible for her own life, and is mature

enough to handle the denigration of her spirit. After having suffered the oppression of racism and sexism, Kate chooses not to follow gender hierarchy and breaks free. Right from her childhood, Kate has been aware of her invisibility, "she had felt unseen" (Walker *Now* 69). Moreover, she is fed up with her supine position as a black woman in America, and dares to alter it because of the blooming womanist consciousness in her. She treads on the path of self-discovery, as knowing oneself and realizing the strength within, is a prime womanist prerogative.

Self-knowledge and self-love are important features of womanist consciousness and Walker has made Kate possess both of them, in the novel. She loves herself and imparts love to people in her life. Married many times, to both men and women, Kate is fully aware of the shortcomings of both men and women. Kate's first marriage has been marked by domestic violence, and marital rape. She was a mere "service, a servant" (Walker *Now* 28). Though divorce has freed her from the relationship, the bitter memories of sexism linger on, in her. Kate realizes that she cannot be in love-hate relationships denying true love to herself. Furthermore, the therapeutic journey, amidst nature and nature loving women like her, gives her a clear insight into her oppressive first marriage and frees her from the bitter memories embedded in her psyche. On the journeys she takes up, she senses calmness and feels "a peace – fleeting – she had not felt in years" (Walker *Now* 31). Walker here echoes the stance of Barbara Christian, who said that Black women's "struggle emanates from a deepening of self-knowledge and love" (Christian 82). Kate overcomes the tribulations of her life with womanist consciousness that enables her develop self-determination to overcome the obstacles in her life. The blossoming womanist consciousness in her, gives her the ability to know and love herself, along with loving humanity.

Womanism advocates being whole in mind and spirit to uplift one's self and others, and Walker promotes this through the novel *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart*. Kate continues her therapeutic journey further into South America, into the jungles around the Amazon River. The nature therapy she undergoes under the supervision of a shaman called

Armando helps her in her spiritual transformation. She reclaims her body and spirit through both her sojourns up the Colorado and her stay at the Amazon forest. The spiritual discoveries that Kate experiences with Armando, Anunu and Enoba revitalize her inside out. The fellow medicine seekers Lalika, Missy, Rick, and Hugh help her open her heart and reinvent herself, and she in turn helps them discover their true personalities. With womanist cognizance "Kate develops deeper compassion for humankind by listening to her peer travellers and their heartrending tales of life conflicts. . . . She advances to a higher level of sensitivity, helping others to make the necessary transitions and becoming a healer in her own right" (Bates 164).

Walker through the novel clearly showcases that modern man has to seek solace in nature for a wholesome life. Kate with her womanist consciousness moves away from all forms of institutionalized religion and seeks solace in nature. She discourages patriarchal religiosity that thrusts away, the true spirit of an average African American woman. She realizes how preservation of the environment is very much essential for the survival of African American women and mankind. She realizes that mother nature, and nature centered culture alone, can redeem the lives of black women like her. The expeditions up the Colorado River and her stay at the Amazon forest let her experience the buzz and warmth of nature. She realizes that she is responsible for her own life, and is mature enough to handle the denigration of her spirit. Nature acts as her true redeemer and offers pragmatic solutions to overcome the dissonance in her. Kate realizes that:

on this planet, Grandmother Earth, there is no higher authority. That our inseparability is why the planet will be steered to safety by Grandmother/ Grandmothers or it will not be steered to safety at all. Grand Mothers. We must acknowledge and reclaim our true size. Dignity is important. Self-respect. We cannot lead by pretending to be powerless We're not. (Walker *Now* 211)

Walker having made Kate realize the importance of communion with nature, asks women to be powerful tools of change for themselves, planet Earth, future generations and the black community at large.

Kate although ravaged by the legacy of racism both covert and overt, and sexism is proud of being an American and loves America. She says to herself: "I am an American . . . Indigenous to the Americas. Nowhere else could I, this so-called Black person – African, European, Indio – exist" (Walker *Now* 54). She is aware of its greatness and shortcomings. She longs for a truly egalitarian America. She is concerned with the future of America and its people. Kate as a well published black writer and intellectual is fully aware of the fact that people of her fraternity don't have the money or the leisure to be on a retreat like her to resurrect themselves. She feels ill, being at ease, when her fellow community members are suffering. She stops going to Buddhist meditation classes as she feels uneasy being the only black person there. Kate undergoes therapy to put an end to the dissolution growing in her. She takes a break from the hustle bustle of city life and embarks on an expedition up the Colorado River to find answers to the questions plaguing her. Kate as a true womanist loves and appreciates her community and country. Kate with her womanist consciousness ushers in an egalitarian perspective for herself and the black community and encourages this in others.

As a womanist in the making, Kate understands that the acrimony between blacks and whites needs immediate rectification. At the same time, as a true womanist Kate is concerned with the growth and spiritual development of herself, and the black community at large. She has been an activist in the Black Freedom Movement, and is fully aware of the status of African Americans in America. She thinks:

We're considered second- and third-class citizens of a country whose government never wanted us. Except as slaves. We understand by now the world will be blown to bits, doubtless by this same government, before people of color get their fair share. We can't afford health insurance, nor will it

even ever be applicable, the way things are going. Nobody but us wants to be Black. (Walker *Now* 56-57)

Kate with her flourishing womanist consciousness is fully aware of the predicament of majority of the African Americans in America, who cannot afford many things as whites do. She understands that the relationship between African Americans and the whites in America needs a redressal, to stop the sabotage of the marginalized blacks. She believes that this can be achieved when African Americans become totally self-reliant and self-sufficient and work towards each other's progress as a collectivity. Kate is concerned about the race relations between blacks and whites. As a black artist and activist, she is fully aware of the prejudices held by both blacks and whites. Kate believes that overcoming biases needs positive inputs from either side and encourages the same.

Kate with her ascending womanist consciousness develops ancestral pride and reverence. She realizes that her generation have a lot to learn from the previous generations. As the medicine given by the shaman works on her, she has a dream in which she sees an ancestor of hers. He tells Kate about his many previous births, plagued by racism. He tells her, how to handle the anguish and menacing repugnance of racism by giving the instance of his life. He tells her: "Our job is to remind you of ways you do not want to be . . . Sometimes I think this message is the hardest to get across because it flies in the face of our need to have revenge. There is also the question of loyalty to the dead. We feel we need to avenge, to make right. To heal by a settling score. Healing cannot be done by settling a score" (Walker *Now* 100). After listening to the beatitude of her ancestor, Kate senses peace and experiences sound sleep. She realizes her role as a would be ancestor. She realizes how one can heal oneself. Connecting with one's ancestral past is a source of strength, and Kate as a true womanist connects with her ancestors. This aids her in reclaiming her spirit. She redresses her relationship with her long dead parents. She learns the value of forgiveness. She realizes the greatness of the historical past of the blacks.

As a womanist, Kate reveres women, their beauty, culture, and fortitude. She spends the initial part of her therapeutic spiritual journey with women. She helps Lalika, Missy, Hugh and Rick open up and comforts them with her words. She helps them realize their potential. The sisterhood she fosters with women on her Colorado expedition and at the Amazon forest, acts as a ressuructive bond for her and other women. Walker through the novel endorses the view of Hooks, who has affirmed that black women “ must learn to live and work in solidarity. We must learn the true meaning and value of Sisterhood” (43). Commenting on the transmutation in Kate’s character, Gerri Bates has rightly inferred that: “Her greatest needs are to regenerate her spirit, explore other avenues to greater enlightenment, find renewed inspiration in the rescue of the globe from indifferent human behaviour, and come to terms with her true lives’ purpose” (Bates 164).

Kate helps Missy and Lalika open up their wounded hearts with her womanist consciousness and helps them develop the same. Missy, a fellow medicine seeker at the Amazon forest along with Kate, is a victim of child sexual abuse at the hands of her grandfather. She becomes a drug addict owing to the lacunae in her life. She garners the strength to open up about her scary past after she develops womanist consciousness with the help of Kate. Lalika, another minor character in the novel too develops womanist consciousness with the help of the sisterhood she fosters with Kate. Lalika, a black woman in her mid-thirties has experienced a lot of pain and violence in her life for being a black woman, in a vulnerable position. She has been in prison for having murdered a man who has had raped her and her friend. Moreover, she is sexually abused by white men as an inmate in prison. Repeated rapes, and acts of violence have been a part of her life owing to her susceptible position. Lalika is overburdened by her past as it becomes difficult for her to forget her abusive past. She finds that, it very difficult to forgive those who have wronged her. But with the womanist consciousness she has developed, she becomes self-reliant, audacious and heals the scars of the past like Kate and Missy.

Kate as a woman with womanist consciousness is not against men. She loves both men and women. As a true womanist, Kate loves women sexually or asexually. Moreover, she is free and open about her bisexuality. She tells a shaman called Anunu, “I don’t understand why people have such a hard time seeing it impossible to be only one thing; and to love only one gender or one race” (Walker *Now* 70). Kate feels that “Limitation is willful and childish, . . .” (Walker, *Now* 70) and leaves it, and encourages others to do so. She accepts all kinds of sexuality and genders, as the sexuality or gender of a person does not make one good or bad. She gives a clarion call to women to erase patriarchal forces, rituals and culture that encumber and dishonour female sexuality and pleasure as they are an itinerary to wholeness. Kate, Lalika and Missy in the process of developing womanist consciousness reclaim their body and spirit by saving it from domestic abuse, nurturing it, and discovering their sexuality that is free of bigotry.

Kate as a woman with womanist consciousness is concerned about the pain and suffering of others. She believes that “One’s struggle against oppression is meaningless . . . unless it is connected to the oppression of others” (Walker *Now* 97). Kate with this concern helps Lalika and Missy. All the three women help each other and develop the same compassion for all those who are in need of womanist consciousness. Thinking about America’s foreign policy Kate opines that “America would be the true leader of the world, not its biggest bully” (Walker *Now* 192), if its foreign policy centres on the cultivation of happiness rather than pain. Womanist consciousness aims at creating joy, perfecting and spreading it irrespective of a person’s sex, gender, race, class, and ethnicity, and Walker promotes this through the novel.

Kate as a true womanist loves all the facets of life. She loves nature, as communion with it, helps her reclaim her body, spirit and soul. She loves music. She is moved by the ‘icaros’ (Walker *Now* 68), sung by Armando. Their healing quality soothes her. She loves the black woman’s struggle for egalitarianism. She loves herself and her sexuality. She loves her ancestral past and her ancestors, and is proud of their greatness and forgiveness. She is

optimistic about her future and that of her community. She dreams of a positive future for her and the black community. She believes that dreaming about good, making it happen, and passing on that ability to others is the "Medicina for a belief in the future" (Walker *Now* 193). By the end of her therapeutic journey, Kate as a womanist, with a womanist perspective, reclaims her body, mind and soul. She becomes a true humanist, a Universalist concerned with the wellbeing of all in the world. Missy and Lalika nurture the womanist consciousness that they have developed under the tutelage of Kate. With her womanist consciousness Kate achieves womanist wholeness. She is in charge of her life, and helps other women to be whole.

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