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The Analysis of Basic Womanism Novels Written by Alice Walker

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ABSTRACT

A theory formulated by Alice Walker, "womanism" focuses on the unification of men and women with nature and Earth. This book explores womanism in regard to its specific concerns with African American women's rights, identities, and self-actualisation, and points towards its more overarching concerns with human relations and sexual freedom, as expressed in each of Walker's seven novels. The seven novels discussed in the book are *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970), *Meridian* (1976), *The Color Purple* (1982), *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989), *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992), *By the Light of My Father's Smile* (1998), and *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart* (2004). Although Walker introduced the term "womanism" in 1983, this book traces the development of the concept across her canon of fictional works. By analysing the novels written in the 1970s, I establish
how the term came to be coined, and, by investigating how themes and issues addressed early on can be mapped onto analysis of her later works.

This article examines how Alice Walker's own theory of womanism is reflected through the oeuvre of her fictional works, and considers where tensions arise in her application of what is intended to be a universalist, humanist, project. For, in many of her novels, it is women's sexuality and sexual power that are the focus, often at the cost of developing the potential for male characters' equivalent attributes. However, as will be argued, it is in Walker's later, less appreciated works that womanism is more fully developed in its universal claims. The integration of spiritual themes and concepts into her narratives reduce or remove the tensions that arise in the reconciliation between woman and man, as well as between humanity and nature.

Alice Walker is best known for her Pulitzer Prize–winning novel, *The Color Purple* (1982). One of the most significant female African American writers working today—as a novelist, poet, short-story writer, journalist, and activist—what distinguishes Walker from her peers are the themes she focuses on. Firstly, Walker puts great emphasis on female sexuality as a source of female freedom, and, even further, Walker explicitly illustrates female homosexuality. Toni Morrison, her contemporary, also accentuates female bonding and female friendship; however, she never depicts female homosexuality, which Walker presents as the (positive) fruition of such relationships. For Walker, the female body and female sexuality are essential parts of a process of self-actualisation, and, as such, the treatment of this subject matter takes on a socio-political dimension. Walker, not only an advocate of but also once an activist in the Civil Rights Movement, crosses lines of taboo in her literary works with the aim of erasing them; she aims to effect change as much through her novels as with direct action.

The second theme that makes Walker so significant in African American literature is the integration of spirituality in her works. Concerning this, the author writes: "Life is better than death, I believe, if only because it is less boring, and because it has fresh peaches in it. In any case, Earth is my home—though for centuries White people have tried to convince me I have no right to exist, except in the dirtiest, darkest corners of the globe" (*Only Justice Can Stop a Curse*). In a theme that advances over the course of her writing career, Walker argues for the necessity of religion in women's growth, and such a growth is reflected in the author's own canon. It is with her fourth novel, *The Temple of My Familiar*, that Walker introduces religion into her fiction in a newly central way. Here, she incorporates Buddhist beliefs into her already evolving concepts of female freedom and female individuality, and the theme of spirituality would continue to be foregrounded in the works that follow.

Walker is an author who appears unpredictable for the diversity of themes that she addresses across her seven novels. Her first novel, for example, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970), deals with a male protagonist and the legacy of slavery, while her most recent novel, *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart* (2004), concerns a couple who undertake a pilgrimage. Here the female protagonist, Kate, goes on a river trip in order to find out the contours of the river within her—to know herself better. However, while these different themes may seem unexpected, or even irrelevant, at first glance, close reading across her canon reveals that Walker interweaves such themes in a manner that connections between these ideas can be enjoyed, resulting in enriched readings of her works. Nevertheless, within this myriad of thematic connections between her novels, there is one obvious common point in all of Walker's works: her interest in writing for/about women, in order to elevate women's position in society. In *Meridian* (1976), she writes about women's influential role in the Civil Rights Movement; in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, she explores the destructive effects of female genital mutilation; in *The Color Purple*, she makes her readers aware of the significance of female sexuality and the female sexual body; while, in *The Temple of My Familiar*, a new church is established, in which women are the leaders, the preachers of a womanist gospel. This focus on women might pose a challenge for male readers, but it is an intentional challenge—Walker not only writes about women but also perhaps invites her male readers to know more about women. Her male characters are mostly irresponsible, careless, and brutal—yet while this may seem an unfair belittling of one gender in order to emphasize on praise towards another, it is notable that Walker always offers a ray of hope for male characters at the very end of her novels, whether it be Grange in *The Third Life*, Truman in *Meridian*, Mister in *The Color Purple*, or Robinson in *By*
the Light of My Father's Smile. Walker might exaggerate the negative side of her male characters by

depicting many unsuccessful Black males in her novels, but as a writer she does so in order to draw her readers', especially her male readers', attention to the point that there is need for them to change in their relation to women.

This book focuses on tracing female bonding across Walker's novels through the lens of womanism. There are various types of female bonding shown in her novels, some of which help female characters forge their individuality; however, there are some female connections that are apparently constructive but actually aim at destroying female selfhood and female self-actualisation. The following sections cover four areas: firstly, what womanism is and how it is related to female bonding; secondly, how Alice Walker's works have been influenced by other African American writers such as Zora Neale Hurston, Paule Marshall, and Toni Morrison;

thirdly, Walker's narrative style will be discussed.

Walker introduced the new term "womanism" in 1984 through her nonfiction book *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*.2 "Womanist is to feminist," Walker writes, "as purple to lavender" (xi). Womanism and feminism are related to each other; however, the former exhibits features that feminism lacks. In *The Womanist Idea*, Layli Maparyan writes of this passage, noting that while purple is the analogue of womanism, the lavender analogue Walker attributes to feminism is also "a color that has historically been associated with lesbianism," given this, she writes that Walker's sentence "is often interpreted as a suggestion that womanism is a more intense (literally, more saturated) form of woman-centeredness than is lesbianism". The term was introduced in one page, but through this brief introduction Walker makes womanism stand as a new term, although still sharing some common elements with feminism. Working on Walker can be a challenge for, as mentioned, her novels are like a river, and these twists and turns apply to her treatment of the concept of womanism as much as they do any other theme. Walker introduced womanism in her non-fiction text, but her novels sometimes depict themes that appear to oppose her definition of the term. There are different types of female bonding in her works, some are functional and lead women into self-actualisation, and some are dysfunctional. An example of dysfunctional female bonding, and one that is consistently depicted in her novels, is that of the mother–daughter relationship. The mother–daughter relationship is the first, and the most significant, relationship in a woman's life; however, Walker's female characters largely do not benefit from this primary female bond. The narrative quest is such that the female characters, like Celie, Meridian, and Susannah, who lack success in this initial act of female bonding, aim to fill this gap later in life; they are looking for a surrogate mother. Sometimes this surrogate mother can be a singular person, as Shug is for Celie in *The Color Purple*, or it can take the form of a broader community, such as the Civil Rights Movement for Meridian, the eponymous character of Walker's second novel. This book uncovers how these female characters, either in or reaching adulthood, attempt to replace their failure to achieve a substantial bond with their mothers by way of developing female bonds to various degrees—whether as friendships or open sexual relationships with females or males—in later life. It explores how the development of Walker's concept of womanism can be traced in her works, and aims to answer several questions: how the theme of women's individuality as born out of sexual freedom, and the theme of spirituality in the development of women's selfhood, both relate specifically to womanism; how her male characters are constructed as benefiting from and/or are harmed by the employment of Walker's womanistic ideology in her narratives.

Alongside Alice Walker, Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi and Clenora Hudson-Weems have attempted to develop the concept of womanism. Ogunyemi's article "Womanism" (1985), offers the following definition of the term: More often than not, where a white woman writer may be a feminist, a Black woman writer is likely to be a "womanist." That is, she will recognize that, along with her consciousness of sexual issues, she must incorporate racial, cultural, national, economic, and political considerations into her philosophy.

In her novels, Walker, after showing that mothers can also be encaged by patriarchal ideology, often presents her female characters as searching for a surrogate mother to fill the gap left by the dysfunctional mother–daughter relationship. The surrogate mother in Walker's novels can be actual or symbolic; sometimes it can be another woman, as with Shug for Celie; or even "Mother Earth," as it is for Kate in *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart*. The search for female role models can also be observed in Walker's literary career as well. Carolyn Heilbrun, in *Reinventing Womanhood*, writes of this phenomenon in general terms: "women literary scholars set out to bring before the consciousness of their critical and scholarly colleagues the work of formerly unknown women, new interpretations of the life and work of women writers, and a sense of relationship between the major literary women of the past" (93–94). The search for this figure is more challenging, even, for African American women writers.

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