CHAPTER-II

FEMINIST PRAGMATISM IN ALICE WALKER’S FICTIONAL WORLD

African American women writers have always tried to assert the unique nature of their experiences, which they felt were distinct from the white woman’s situation since they had to battle on more fronts—white patriarchy, against white women’s racism and sexism of Black men. They have always militated against the tendency of white feminists to take their own situations as the paradigm of women’s position. Alice Walker’s major themes in her fiction and poetry is about vulnerability, having a mind of one’s own, the price of childbirth, friendships among women, the problems of loving men who regard women as less than themselves, sensuality and violence. She comes at universality through the black American woman’s experiences and is brave enough to write about such delicate fictional themes as interracial sex and oppression of women by many cultures in Africa. The exploration then of the process of personal and social growth out of horror and waste is a motif that characterizes Walker’s works. She specifies the mission of the artist as recovery of female forbears: “We must pull out of ourselves and look at and identify with our lives the living creativity, some of our great grandmothers were not allowed to know”
(1983:107). The authentic art of the Black woman then produces not only her own voice but also that of her matrilineal line.

Since the 1960s when she was a civil rights activist to the 1990s when she became a spokeswoman for women subjected to ritual genital mutilation and Earth subjected to waste and depredation, Walker through her poetry, short stories, novels, essays, feature films and documentaries has always championed the right to live freely and fearlessly. Alice Walker’s novels deal with the human experience from the perspective of the suffering and the downtrodden, the hurt and the oppressed. Many of her characters are victims of racial, sexual and economic oppression and exist under degrading circumstances. Nevertheless, these characters, particularly the women do not lie down and suffer passively in the face of such trauma; rather they manage to transcend their desperate and painful circumstances in order to affirm life. Love in its various forms offers an avenue for regeneration and healing. Another source of empowerment is resistance. Third source of power is through connecting oneself to one’s ancestral past for understanding the cultural history, though the past reflected in the songs of the people is necessary for an understanding of the present and also for a sense of identity. As Walker writes in the novel *Meridian*: “For it is a song of the people transformed by the experiences of
each generation that holds them together and if any part of it is lost the people suffer and are without soul”(56). Central to Walker’s thinking is the idea that all living things must love themselves and try to be free: that spirit will eventually triumph over convention no matter what the cost.

*The Color Purple* that emerges out of Alice Walker’s central concern with defining the existence, experience and culture of Afro-American women and the brutality of complex systems of oppression that shapes these. It deals with the role of male dominance in frustrating the black women’s struggle for identity and independence. It shows how women are oppressed and manipulated by men and humiliated into powerlessness. It is also a novel of liberation and redemption showing women oppressed by violence moving from victimization by society and men to a growth in consciousness that allows them to control their own lives. It celebrates the courage and resilience of the indomitable female spirit.

While shaping black feminist theory, African American women writers have always tried to assert the unique nature of their experiences, which was different from that of white women, as they had to struggle against white patriarchy, white women’s racism and the sexism of Black men. They have seriously questioned the stand of white feminists who tried to take their own situation as the paradigm of women’s position. Frequently
white feminists act as if black women did not know sexist oppression existed until they voiced feminist sentiment. They do not understand that black women as well as other groups of women who are oppressed often acquire an awareness of patriarchal politics from their lived experience, just as they develop strategies of resistance.

Black feminist writing has its roots deep in African culture, religion, values and language of Black communities and also on the cultural significance of mother and female bonding. Their texts are different from white feminist texts because African American writers share a collective legacy of racist and sexist domination. In *The Color Purple*, Celie symbolizes the epitome of abused suffering right from an early age by her step father which continues into her marriage with Mr. Domestic. Violence perpetrated by sexual violence and the horrors of traumatic childhood abuse was brought out by Walker into the public domain in the story of Celie. The sharp reaction of the Black American society, particularly men, who protested against the depiction of black men in this novel almost drove Walker to being ostracized. Celie, the protagonist, survives the daily abuse, both physical and mental. She moves from being the victim to become the protector of her younger sister Nettie, and learns to be strong for the sake of the other. The entry of Shug Avery into her life in the midst of marital
discord changes her life forever. Walker brings out the importance of the effect of the woman bonding on both these two women and the forging of a relationship based on respect, friendship and passion.

As a Black woman centred story, *The Color Purple* is written in an epistolary form, collecting the memories of Celie’s black woman experience, her inner conflicts and sufferings and the gradual change in her outlook and life, a growing internal strength. It is a celebration of a woman’s struggle against racism and sexism and Alice Walker’s identifying mark is her deep concern for the lives of black women. As a civil rights activist, deeply engaged in social issues of the black Americans, Alice’s experiences are ingrained into the web of stories that build up *The Color Purple*. She explores the oppression, the insanities and the loyalties of black women and depicts the oppression faced by women in their relationships with Black men. The need for Sisterhood and the liberating possibilities for black women are defined within the relationships of Celie, Shug Avery and Nettie.

The specific systems of oppression that operate in Celie’s life symbolizes the subtle operations of patriarchal power in the lives of women .She represents the plight of many other Black women who do not have the courage to come out of oppression. Her sexuality is controlled by
men and her submission is enforced through violence. In her terrified acquiescence to such brutality, Celie symbolically mirrors every woman. Here is a strong celebration of her roots and her Black ancestry in the language Alice Walker uses for Celie. Celie's letters to God reveals her sense of her world, but also reveals what has been done to her by a racist and sexist system. It is to be observed here that to confront the body is not only to confront an individual’s abuse, but also the abuse of women's bodies throughout history. The necessity for women to assume responsibility and have self esteem to appreciate and love oneself has been explored by most black women writers.

Walker expands her canvas and tackles the taboo subject of lesbian relationship between Celie and Shug Avery and the positive effect it has on Celie’s growth as a strong woman. In this novel, Walker reduces the system of compulsory heterosexuality to its basic level, making it abstract. Her women refuse to become objects of exchange between men and Celie is rescued from an identity crisis by Shug who tells her “Use each other’s peoples now” (189):

Shug becomes the embodiment of feminist existential freedom in choosing her career as a blues singer and in refusing to settle down
to a life of domesticity. Shug has grown strong and independent by being true to her own experience. As Celie says, “When you look in Shug’s eyes you know she been where she been, seen what she seen, did what she did. And now she know”. (276)

Celie’s narrative is about breaking silences and appropriately its formal structure creates the illusion that is filled with unmediated voices. Trapped in a gridlock of racist, sexist and heterosexual oppressions, Celie struggles towards linguistic definition. Her story represents the story of the most marginalized of heroines, the black lesbian who challenges the patriarchal constructions of female subjectivity and sexuality. Walker’s narratives of black women’s experiences of racism, sexism and the ability to strike a balance between the politics of her time and the aesthetic sensibility gives her works an extraordinary validity. *The Color Purple* exemplifies not only the political strains in her thought but also those essential values which impel the human psyche to overcome the constraints of power politics and reach out to formations of relationships in life.

Embracing the womanist theory, Walker adopts a better feminist stand, which is more distinctive and appreciative referent as it
encompasses men, women and children in the social structure. The debate over the political and apolitical reading of her works will take on a timeless perspective because her personal aesthetics enhances her political commitment as it transforms the tragic struggle of the black community and the larger concerns of humanity as a whole to a positive vision.


Alice Walker’s *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* is her first novel. Her major concern in this novel is black man–woman relationship. In an interview, Alice Walker has stated about her aim behind this novel: “And I wanted to explore the relationship between men and women and why women are always condemned for doing what men do as an expression of their Masculinity. Why are women so easily “tramps “and “traitors” when men are heroes for engaging in the same activity? Why do women stand for this? (1983:244)
Read in the light of the above comment, we realize that all the major women characters in the *Third Life of Grange Copeland* such as Margaret, Mem, and Josie are abused as whores by their own people, and especially their men. Walker, therefore, tries to tell their side of the story in the novel. Though apparently it is the life story of Grange Copeland, it is also the story of the sufferings, pains, and hardships that the black women—Margaret, Mem, and Josie face in their life. Their sufferings lead them to understand their situations to launch a struggle to gain a meaningful place in the black world. These three characters, Margaret, Mem, and Josie, have been victimized by the black men. Margaret was left behind, discarded and abandoned by Grange, to die a silent death: Mem was killed by her own husband, Brownfield and Josie was driven out by her own home by her own father, a man who stood for religion. This is how the white man becomes a symbol of the black women’s oppression.

This novel is the story of Grange Copeland’s metamorphosis. It is also a story about the awareness of Margaret Copeland, Mem Copeland, Josie Copeland and Ruth Copeland. In addition to this, it is also a story of three different women: Margaret, the most illiterate and submissive: Mem, literate and ambitious, who dreams of her own world: Josie, an enterprising black woman who creates the world of her own and establishes her
economic empire where she dictates her terms to others as a boss. It is also about Ruth, the fourth woman character, who is yet to grow and yet to create her own world.

Like *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, *In Love and Trouble* (1973) highlights the problems of black women in their day-to-day life. They are led to self-discovery and self-knowledge and ultimately attain regeneration. These stories present a kind of gallery of black women and their moves towards self-discovery, to tentative uncompleted exploration: to disillusionment: to recognition of their own worth, to rage, peace, death, and life. As the title suggests, love for these black women portrayed in this anthology is synonymous with trouble.

Roselily, the heroine of “Roselily” marries a Black Muslim to realize that her husband’s hand is no less confining than that of “the clasp of iron gate” that prevents her from enjoying freedom. Similarly, Myrna’s husband does not pay attention to her artistic temperament which ultimately suffocates her so much so that she goes insane. In “Her Sweet Jerome” we come across a black woman who goes mad because of the negligence of her husband. *In Love and Trouble* has nineteen stories that tell the tales of thirteen black women who are mad, raging, loving, resentful, hateful,
strong, ugly, weak, pitiful and magnificent, and who try to live with the loyalty of black man that characterized all their lives.

Similarly, Walker’s You Can’t Keep a Good Woman Down is a collection of short stories. However, compared to Walker’s previous women characters, her black women in this anthology are slightly independent and advanced. They do what they want to do without any compunction, and whatever they do, they do with confidence and full trust in themselves and their own men in some cases. They are a bit conscious about their own status, position, power in the world and they want to enjoy what they have without any inhabitation. Unlike the black women of The Third Life of Grange Copeland and In Love and Trouble, the women of You Can’t Keep Good Woman Down are black women, the theme that Walker explores predominately in Meridian and The Color Purple.

Meridian is about a female protagonist of the same name who gradually awakens from her subordinate status as a black female, daughter, wife and mother to her own self and tries to become the maternal provider of larger black community. Unlike Sula, the protagonist of Toni Morrison’s Sula, Meridian never declares: “I don’t want to make somebody else {babies} but I want to make myself”(Sinha46). On contrary she experiences the motherhood in the initial stages of her life and then
decides to get rid of her own baby Eddie Jr to seek admission in a college to find out her own path and identity. This new way and identity enables her to attain, “the highest point of power, prosperity, splendor, health, vigor, etc. As a result, she develops “a completeness of being” (ibidem). Hers is a journey from most ordinary position as a high school drop-out to a self-illuminated person who has attained selfhood and knows what is the purpose and mission of one’s life. To begin as an ordinary black female and to end as a self-assured person is not an easy development. To gain the glimpse of herself which is full bloom she had to undergo innumerable trails and tests. As a result, she is evolved from woman raped by racial and sexual oppression to a revolutionary figure effecting action and strategy to bring freedom to herself and other poor disenfranchised blacks in the South. In fact, Meridian’s quest for wholeness and her involvement in the civil rights movement is initiated by her feelings of inadequacy in living up to standards of black motherhood.

Alice Walker’s novel The Temple of My Familiar presents the saga of a black woman called Lissie Lykles who has taken birth in different races and at different times. It is a chronicle not only of the life of a black woman but also of the women of different races. It is the story about the manner in which women were brought under control of patriarchal social order. It is
also an analysis of how the women lost their happiness and were pushed into unhappy life style. *The Temple of My Familiar* is basically an oral history, written in the tradition of the African griots who were living encyclopedias of their culture in non-literate societies. These poet-priests memorized and stored prodigious amount of information, passing down the stories of their ancestors from one generation to the next, and thus keeping the communal identity alive. The groits were almost invariably men, but Alice Walker who has spent much of her literary career projecting womanist consciousness in her writing inserts women into a male role and portrays female story tellers.

The groit of *The Temple of My Familiar* is Lissie. The story of her life is the story of thousands of lives, each one touched by the doubled concern of race and gender. She has been many women: an African peasant sold into slavery by her uncle, subjected to the horrors of the Atlantic crossing, raped and brutalized, a Moorish witch burned by the inquisition, a lesbian living in a harem, a pygmy living in a prehistoric forest that covered the whole earth, etc. The novel opens with an epigraph of Lissie: “If they have died about me/they lied about everything” (1). Lissie suspects that the people were wrongly informed about her. She believes that without knowing the black woman’s story, no story about the world
could be complete and authentic. Thus, hers is the only true story about herself and by implication about the black women around her.

Walker brings out some of the most horrifying truths about the way women are treated. Lissie tells that they were possessed by men like any other commodity. They were forcibly pushed into slavery and branded with their master's name, of which Lissie herself is a victim. Lissie tells us that she, along with other slaves, was dragged to a ship. At that plank that led up onto the deck, their last remaining garment, the strip of cotton around their hips, was snatched away and they were forced onto the ship bald, branded and naked as they came into the world. Lissie fought to hold on to that last small badge of modesty but a white man struck her with a blow to the head almost without looking at her and because he had blue eyes, she fancied he must be blind and she reeled onto the ship with the rest. When the ship landed, they were sold to the needy planters. Lissie, her sisters and brother were sold to different planters; thus, making them impossible to see each other in future. As Lissie is the story of woman who was born time and again, she uncovers different types of atrocities committed on women.

Alice Walker firmly believes that one of the chief reasons of women's exploitation has been the male's greed for possession. She tells us that because men were stronger, at least during those period when
women were weak from childbearing, began to think of owning women and children....when man saw he could own one woman and her children, became greedy and wanted as many as he could get"(28). Through a set of such relationships, *The Temple of My Familiar* unfolds the womanist meaning of freedom and the perpetual attempt by men to dominate women and other men. As stated earlier, the history of the war between the sexes is dramatized through the stories told by Lissie. Thus, Walker recapitulates the history of woman since the days when human civilization began and describes how the society which was based on the egalitarian principles was transformed into a society of male dominance. Walker projects in *The Temple of My Familiar* her own vision of a more complete, harmonious and healthy human beings, healthy in body and expansive in soul. To do so she re-interprets history by initiating an alternative myth- the goodness before God, the mother before the father, womb envy rather than penis envy and presents her perspectives on race, feminism, love, marriage, and Africa.

The women in *The Temple of My Familiar* are depicted as risk takers and adventurers, men passive and diffident. Women force, instruct and prevent men from colonizing sexuality. Fanny, for instance, advocates a new sexual freedom and finds herself dissolved into the cosmic all. Naturally, by the end of the novel, Carlotta and Fanny are inventing less
constricting forms of marriage and the lovers achieve oppression-free happiness. Consequently, these women do not turn to men for aid and comfort but they turn to each other. It is only after the feeling of one’s own self, one of young woman dares to wear a T-shirt that denotes: “A woman without a man is like a fish without bicycle”(90). We can clearly notice here that even the male, patriarchal idiom has been undercut.

Her black women characters, in earlier works, who depend on their husbands are depicted to be devoid of any sense of self. Walker portrays black man as an exploiter of black woman. It is he, the black man, who is responsible for the plight of the black woman. However, the black women who decide to live an independent life become self-conscious and develop love for own self and from self-love, they begin to love others, especially the black women. This enables them to create a strong sisterhood which empowers these once weak women.

Though Alice Walker exposes patriarchal hegemony, she does not reject the black man completely. Her women characters do reject the atrocious black men but the moment these men change their way of life, they were welcomed in their company. In fact, Walker creates such a world of black men and women based on equality and mutual understanding and peaceful co-existence which is full of happiness and prosperity. Thus,
Walker creates a New World defined and determined by the female of the species. The new empowerment confers on these women responsibilities that she is capable of shouldering with compassion and dignity. Walker wants women to walk tall in all spheres of human endeavor.

*The Color Purple* insists in its visionary form on black women’s struggle to continue the heritage of Womanism in resistance to male-sexism and homophobia of the black society. Womanism is an interrelated fight not only against sexism, but also against racism—Sophie in the novel is victimized by racism; she is tortured and out into jail because she refused to submit to the Mayor’s wife. Walker emphasizes that sisterhood among black women is the necessary beginning of the sisterhood across racial lines, even among black women and struggling white women. Matrilineage is a significant perspective and theme of Walker’s feminist dialectic. Walker expresses the significance of the theme in her famous essay “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens” and another essay on her foremother Zora Neale Hurston.

In *The Color Purple*, this theme has become both the content and form of the novel unlike the white feminists, as Gilbert and Gubar have analyzed in *Mad Woman in the Attic*. Alice Walker shows no signs of anxiety or melancholy in acknowledging her predecessor Zora Neale Hurston. She
believes that she writes because Zora’s texts of black legend and female liberation enable her to “re-vision” her perspective through her own writing. Adrienne Rich calls such “re-vision” central to a female literary tradition for the women as reader and poet, “look(s) an old text from a new critical direction” (Rich 31). Because of her underlying concern regarding the singularity of black woman writer in white and male-dominated literature of America, Walker searches out her model in Zora Neale Hurston’s writing.

The matrilineal heritage for black women is a different experience and different history. The special task of black women writer to seek her motherhood originates from her lost history of slavery. Walker recreates the idealism of matriliny to counteract the psychic deformity, conscious anger creates. She re-establishes the lost tradition of mother culture in order to erase the history of black women’s oppression and subjugation because of double victimization of race and gender. Thus in *The Color Purple*, Walker expands this theme of motherhood and sisterhood that she time and again analyzed in her various critical writings. As we come to know through Celie’s letters, paternal incest has metaphorically killed her mother and made her “big.” In *The Color Purple*, Walker defines Hurston’s subversive anxiety about motherhood and critique of heterosexuality by emphasizing
on the positivity of women bonding, women loving each other, sexually and spiritually and their economic independence.

This theme of matriliny is also manifested through Walker’s specific form of the novel. Through the epistolary form of the novel, Alice Walker has attempted to signify a new mode of representation to make the black women’s voice speak. Walker revises Hurston in Celie’s written voice to God, the reader. Hurston interprets the free indirect discourse as a written voice, as an oral “hieroglyphic.” In Celie’s voice, Alice Walker combines a mimetic voice as a dialogue voice and at the same time a dialogic voice as mimetic one. Celie’s self-awareness is here symbolized as an act of writing. Thus Walker has renovated a black pioneering text to claim literary ancestry or motherhood, not only for theme but also for structure. Henry Louis Gates in *The Signifying Monkey* insists on this doubled-tripled and multifarious voice of black women (James 2000:4) writing and analyses this mode of significance in Zora Neale Hurston’s and Walker’s narrative mode. Walker rejuvenates Celie’s erased consciousness in introducing the epistolary form of the novel – Celie’s dialogue with God in the first person. Celie constantly struggles against the dominant language of patriarchy and racism and renovates her lost expressivity in terms of her mimetic expressions. So for a black woman like Celie, mimetic voice of
self-awareness symbolizes her dialogic expression and in this process Walker restructures a specific feminist expressivity in terms of black women’s resurrected consciousness.

The two different representations, Celie’s private world of growing consciousness and Nettie’s feminist critique of the public world, that of Africa against imperialistic social structure constitute the feminist structure of the novel and emphasize the global oppression of women. Nettie’s narration of Olinka experience in Africa and Celie’s self-narration of her physical and spiritual dehumanization both constitute together the ‘womanist’ ideology of Walker. The imperialism of Africa and racism in America are both here marginalized in order to insist on the subterranean history of sexual oppression of black women throughout the world. The womanist ideology in the novel is here focused through Celie and Nettie’s expressivity of the suspended and silenced voices of women like Mem and Margaret. The specific epistolary form of the novel reconstructs images and representations associated with women’s oppression, and thus establishes a mode of feminist consciousness within the dominant discourse of racism and imperialism in the novel.
In *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart, (2005)*, Alice has created a work that ranks among her finest achievements: the story of a woman’s spiritual adventure that becomes a passage through time, a quest for self, and a collision with love. Kate has always been a wanderer. A well known writer married many times, she has lived a life rich with explorations of the natural world and the human soul. Now, at 57, she leaves her lover, Yolo, to embark on a new excursion, one that begins on the Colorado River, proceeds through the past, and flows, inexorably, into the future. As Yolo begins his own parallel voyage, Kate encounters celibates and lovers, shamans and snakes, memories of family disaster and marital discord, and emerges at a place where nothing remains but love. Walker dedicates this story to her murdered paternal grandmother, Kate Nelson, citing the novel as a “memorial to the psychic explorer she might have become.”

An intense commentary on the human spirit and what can happen when it is neglected, *Now is the Time to Open Your Heart* asks the reader, among other things, to acknowledge the existence of mother earth and her powerful healing power. This theme of being healed by nature is undoubtedly the predominant theme in the book, yet Walker also touches upon other issues including relationships, the wisdom and the seemingly endless current of violence in the world..
She writes that when one witnesses the various that occur on a daily basis somewhere on the earth and how far everyone is from peace, and how they get no nearer the longer they talk, this gives an indication of the problem. She also questions humankind that if one sees a human being, really see them ... how could one kill them? Walker writes and targets a multicultural adult audience, with her message that if you get your mind and body right the rest will follow. The message of universal peace is one that can be understood by people of all ages. The novel is written in the voice of the third person, except for certain segments in italics where the Mother Earth concept (known in the book as “Grandmother”) speaks in first person. The story follows a woman named Kate Nelson whose existence is changing into something unknown. Past her mid-50s and already married many times, she is a loving mother as well as an extensively published and popular author. Still, something is not quite right with Kate’s life. She is beginning to care less and less about the material world. One day she burns several hundred-dollar bills just to demonstrate to herself that these items were not the God/Goddess of her life. She’s no longer worried about her house and all the things about it that need fixing. In fact, she’s even contemplating selling it. She is unconvinced of the need to do anything further with her life. So when a recurring dream of a river
spurs her to go out and find the real thing she journeys, with several other women, to travel the Colorado River, crossing the Grand Canyon. From the very beginning of the trip, Kate undergoes a literal purging as hidden memories and repressed emotions surface, forcing her to confront them and neutralize their negativity. Eager to continue her personal evolution, she travels to the Amazon on another discovery of the spiritual side of her life. Under the guidance of the Devic Kingdom and a powerful shaman, Kate and several others ultimately transform themselves into newer, cleaner and more balanced versions of the people they once were. At the same time, Kate’s partner, whom she has left behind in America, is undergoing his own spiritual metamorphosis. The trip to Hawaii originally intended to be a regular vacation, quickly becomes much more valuable an experience than Yolo could ever imagine.

In this alternate storyline we learn about the island’s history and it’s previous rule thousands of years ago by Hawaiian Queen Lili’uokalani. (Who knew?) We also learn about the importance and reverence placed upon land and nature by the Hawaiian people. The story created with deep imagination echoes the experiences of Alice herself. She states in the preface to the book that her father’s mother was murdered and this is a dedication to the psychic she would have been. The strong portrayal of the
grandmother brings into focus the story of Alice’s own grandmother. The reference to dreams and the importance of the environment and nature flows through the story of Kate. The novel includes characters who are Makus—women that are really men and Alice Walker plays with the notion of a fluid gender identity. Through the intricacies of the narration and story she explores the notion of female power and a matrilineal society.

All the fictional narratives of Walker uphold the multiple issues of women oppression, thereby exposing the eternal subalternity of African women. Alice is a firm feminist and ecofeminist. Her writings expose her message to the World for a crusade for justice, equality, prosperity and peace for the cause of Black Women as a whole and for all the women of the world who have been suffering since time immemorial.
References


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