Abstract

Alice Malsenior Walker, born on Feb. 9, 1944, is an African American author, essayist and poet. She has written both, fiction and essays about race and gender. She is best known for her novel *The Color Purple* (1982) for which she won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1983. She is the first black woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for fiction, as well as the American Book Award. She is awarded with Rosenthal Foundation Award and American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters Award in 1974 for *In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women*. She also received the Guggenheim Award of 1977-78 for her novel, *Meridian*. As an activist, she took part in The Civil Rights Movement in 1960s. As a poet, novelist, essayist, biographer, short fiction writer, publisher and educator, Alice Walker has achieved a great success to become one of the most gifted and influential African American women writers.

African American literature is literature written by African Americans, about African Americans and sometimes specifically for African Americans. Today African American literature, with the books, such as *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker, is achieving both best selling and award winning status. Alice walker has used black women as the protagonists of almost all her novels. She proposes an ideology of womanism and communicates it with the help of her novels. The present work studies the novels of Alice Walker in relation to the discourse of womanism.

Chapter I

Introduction

The first chapter deals with the introduction to the term womanism. It deals with a brief survey of Afro-American literature, detailed notes on womanism and its presentation in the novels of Alice Walker. It also studies how Walker presents women’s love, man-woman relationship, womanist elements and womananism in her novels. She defines womanist as a woman that appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s flexibility and women’s strength. A woman, who loves men and women, is committed to survival and wholeness of entire mankind and who lives women’s culture, is considered to be womanist. Alice has further explained that the womanist loves music, dance, the moon, the spirit, loves love, food, folk, herself and
struggle. Finally, she describes that womanism and feminism are different from each other as purple colour differs from lavender. She also states that womanists are traditionally universalists because they do not differentiate people on the basis of their religion, race and colour. It offers an excellent critique of both womanism and feminism. Walker’s definition manages to invoke three important, yet, contradictory philosophies that frame black social and political thought, namely black nationalism, sufferings of women under racial and gender oppression and her claim that black women are traditionally universalist. Womanism is a term commonly used in the context of academic theological studies. Womanist theology is concerned with the well being of the entire African American community, male and female; adults and children. Womanism deals with the black women’s struggle for survival and for the development of life with the family’s freedom and well-being.

Chapter II

Discourse of Womanism in The Third Life of Grange Copeland and Meridian

The present section deals with the discourse of womanism in Alice Walker’s first novel, The Third Life of Grange Copeland (1970), depicting the cycles of male violence in three generations of an impoverished southern black family, the Copelands. This novel displays Walker’s interest in social conditions that affect family relationships. It deals with the sufferings of black women at the hands of men. Alice Walker has presented the contemporary social aspects, such as oppression, racism, sexism and poverty in the black community. The males are oppressed by the white landlords and in return these black males oppress their wives at their homes. This causes violence in the family. Grange treats his wife, Margaret, and Brownfield treats his wife, Mem, in an inhuman way. These treatments make the women struggle for their survival. Margaret and Mem, in the efforts of survival, show their courage to oppose their male partners. Margaret comes to know about her husband’s affair with Josie, a whore, and takes courageous step to have a number of lovers. She develops sexual relationships with different people. The behaviour of Margaret is considered to be courageous and wilful. Unlike Margaret, Mem becomes furious and takes gun against her husband, Brownfield. On the gun point she makes her husband accept her decision to shift to a house taken on lease. She loves her husband and daughters and demands for survival with wholeness. Though, Margaret and Mem express their practical views, they cannot survive. The only woman character, Ruth, survives with
the help and support of her grandfather, Grange. Grange wants to have not only survival but wholeness also for Ruth.

Meridian, in *Meridian* (1976), is presented as a more powerful character as compared to other women. She violets her community’s traditions and gets sexually involved with Eddie. When she is impregnated by Eddie, she gets married to him in her early age. But her husband, Eddie, deserts her by getting married to another woman. She gives her child for adoption and gets a scholarship for education. She cannot contribute a great deal to the education and participates in the Civil Rights Movement in desire to do something better for her people. In this relation the characters, such as Margaret, Mem, Ruth and Meridian contribute a great deal to the womanist view of Alice Walker. Margaret and Mem cannot do something good and cease to exist before the achievement of their goals. Ruth and Meridian survive and support their community. Their behaviours are womanist in nature as they like struggle and revolt against the established ideologies of their community. They behave in a responsible or accountable way as far as their actions are concerned. Some of the women characters, in these novels, cannot succeed in their struggle. Margaret commits suicide after poisoning her baby and Mem is murdered by her husband. Ruth and Meridian survive with their womanist struggle.

Chapter III

**Discourse of Womanism in *The Color Purple* and *The Temple of My Familiar***

The present chapter discusses *The Color Purple* (1982) presenting ‘black-on-black’ oppression as well as bisexual and lesbian love. It exposes the internal disorders causing the spiritual decay of the African-American women. The women bear abusive male dominated relationships silently. This novel is always taken as an example of a ‘women’s novel.’ This is a story of Celie’s growth from an abused, silenced and suspended woman to a woman with independence, liberation and a purpose. She develops a liberated spirit, fights her battle and acquires her inner strength. She develops bonds with other women, like Shug, Sofia, Squeak and Nettie, to fight against the sexism and economic deprivation. As a womanist character, Celie develops a lesbian relationship with Shug. Her quest for self and her journey towards wholeness and survival begins at the age of fourteen. In this age her physical and psychological development is in the process, therefore she lacks the stamina to resist
the sexual and physical abuse by her stepfather. Her early marriage to Mr.— or Albert, against her will, is another hindrance in the way of her development. She has no way to express and speak her inner. She starts writing her views to God who is not receiver of her letters. Yet, she fights her battle for the survival and forgives all who abuse and torture her. These women are mothers who try to protect and bring together their families for the sake of future generations. The women characters, such as Celie, Shug and Sophia are portrayed with their womanist way of life in the novel. This novel won the 1983 Pulitzer Prize for fiction and the 1983 American Book Award.

*The Temple of My familiar* (1989) revolves around three couples. Each character is spiritually fragmented as they all struggle with a fundamental and destructive fear, frustration or conflict in their lives. The characters, Arveyda, Carlotta, Suwelo and Fanny, have to be reconnected with their past which helps them to shape their present and future. They seem to be spiritually weaker. This novel deals with sexism and the gender issue in several ways. All of the female protagonists are victims of sexism. The most obvious example is Carlotta, who tries to please men by behaving as a ‘female impersonator,’ this is because she is deceived by her husband, Arveyda. Fanny wants to get divorce from her husband, Suwelo, because of miscommunication between them. Mr. Hal and Miss Lissie bring them together with the help of their universalist views. Along with the spiritual union of the major characters, many of the families, tribes and cultures are talked about in the novel. These families, tribes and cultures are the forms of social organisations in which women are central and have power. The novel talks more concretely about motherhood and motherly figures. It suggests the importance of the mother-child relationship, the place of love in the life of a person as well as human relatedness.

**Chapter IV**

**Discourse of Womanism in Possessing the Secret of Joy, By the Light of My Father’s Smile and Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart**

In the present chapter the novels, *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), are discussed with reference to women facing antisocial, racial, sexual and gender problems. *Possessing the secret of Joy* tells a story of an African woman who is victimised under an inhuman religious practice of female genital circumcision.
Walker has uncovered certain facts that are agonising in this novel. She has tried to expose the way of male domination to suppress the sex and race of woman. She also has uncovered a fact that American doctors practice circumcision on white women as a cure for female hysteria. The same practice is there in Olinkan tribe in Africa because of the religious reason. Tashi, the protagonist of the novel, chooses to undergo circumcision as she is a woman torn between two cultures, Olinkan and Western. She wants to honour her Olinkan roots. When she comes to know the causes and the results of scarification and female genital mutilation, she revolts against these inhuman practices as a womanist.

*By the Light of My Father’s Smiles* (1998) deals with the theme of power of sexuality and reconciliation. It is a manifesto demanding the liberation of women from all forms of oppressions which deny them the knowledge of power of the body. In this novel Walker emphasise the need that the fathers must assume a central and meaningful role in the sexual education of their daughters. She also tries to tell that the fathers must recognise that their daughters may express the wish for pleasure. She also clears that the sex is considered to be a vehicle for this pleasure. She wants to save black women from the dangers disguised as pleasure. By the end of the third decade of the century it is noted that the average victims of AIDS are black females. Therefore Walker gives emphasis on the responsibilities of the fathers to prepare their daughters for the dangers of terminal sex. This novel is a deeper exploration into the domain of female sexuality. Magdalena and Susannah, major characters in the novel, are ill-treated by their father, Mr. Senor Robinson. They are hurt by this treatment and keep themselves away from their father. Though they distance from their father, they desire to have reconciliation as womanists. They reconcile with each other after the death. Alice Walker has communicated her womanism with the help of behaviour of the characters, like Magdalena, Susannah, Pauline and Langley in this novel.

*Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart* (2004) is the first novel in the new millennium by Alice Walker. It is a story of Kate Talkingtree and her lover, Yolo, and their spiritual journey towards individual wholeness. It is a quest for self. The protagonist of the novel, Kate, is portrayed as a well-known author and as an often wandering woman. When she confronts the signs of age and her inner peace gets disturbed by her past memories, she decides to find a new sense of life. She rejects Christianity, Buddhism and other religious philosophies and tries to get connected to
the real world. She dreams of a dry river in the middle of an ancient forest, every night. Her friends suggest her to undertake a real journey of a river. She takes her journey down the Colorado river to know her past and future as well as for self discovery. In this campaign Kate neutralises her past memories and repressed emotions. But this journey does not remain much fruitful, therefore she undertakes another journey to the Amazon river for her personal evolution. In this journey she is guided by a shaman and accompanied by several women medicine seekers. With this journey all of them get transformed themselves into newer, cleaner and more balanced people than before. At the same time Kate’s partner, Yolo, undertakes a trip to Hawaii. He learns and understands about the history of Hawaii and the nature of people living there. By these journeys both of them conclude that every pain has a solution of connectedness to the ancestors, the nature and personal relations. Finally, both of them meet each other with a new knowledge than they have before. They get connected to each other and celebrate their union in the presence of all their friends.

Chapter V
Conclusion.

The study of the novels of Alice Walker notes that the term womanism is concerned with the well being of the entire human race, male and female, adults and children. Womanist theology challenges all oppressive forces causing black women’s struggle for surviving and for the development of positive and productive quality of life. Womanism opposes all oppressions that are based on race, sex, class, physical ability and caste. It is observed that all the novels by Alice Walker present what she observes and wills to reform and support black women in American society. Her novels have black women as protagonists supporting and empowering black men. Her womanism is unique because it does not imply any political position or value system other than honouring black women’s strength and experiences. The presentation of womanism seeks to celebrate the ways in which women negotiate all the oppressions in their individual lives. It seemingly supplies a way for black women to address gender oppression without attacking black men. The study of Alice Walker’s novels throws light on the women characters, such as Celie, Margaret, Josie, Mem, Ruth, Meridian, Carlotta, Fanny, Tashi, Magdalena, Susannah and Kate Talkingtree, as womanist black women. With these female characters she reveals her inner conflicts
and some events in her life that have made the person she is. All her novels communicate her womanist views with the help of her protagonists.

From the study of all these characters it can be concluded that Alice Walker has presented rigid womanism and man-woman relationships in her novels. The present research focuses on Alice Walker’s theory of womanism and its reflection in her novels. On the whole, it evaluates Alice Walker’s contribution to Afro-American world of literature as a womanist writer.