

RACIAL OPPRESSION and GENERAL VIOLENCE in ALICE WALKER'S WORKS

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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. Sexism, Racial discrimination, general violence, history and ancestry, civil Rights Revolution – 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 communicated 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.

INTRODUCTION

Afro American Woman writer Alice Walker is a novelist in English. 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 Revolution – all these form the sum and substance of her work. It was Alice walker how 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 communicated to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female.

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 carboxes, 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), *You can’t keep a Good Woman Down*, *In Love and Trouble*. The Way Forward is with a Broken Heart and now is

the lime to open your heart. Her non-fiction, *In Search of My Mother’s Garden*’ is both a memory as well as a series of observations on African American women’s culture. She is also the author of several collections of short stories, essays and poetry as well as children’s books. Her books have been translated into more than two dozen languages. Born in Eatonton Georgia, Alice walker now lives and teaches in San Francisco.

The first book to be published by a slave in America was *An Evening Thought Salvation by Christ with Penitential Cries* by Jupiter Hammon. It was in the year 1760. Hammon was followed by a delicate girl called Philis Wheatly who not only produced a fair amount of poetry, but also won the attention of George Washington and Thomas Jefferson as well a number of prominent people in England. Another slave who was employed in the home of president of the University of North Carolina was George Moses Horton who composed poems and published them in 1829. His biography by Richard Walswer was published in the 1970s under the title *The Black Poet*. In 1845 an anthology of Black poetry was published in Paris. This book was called *Les Ceneles* and contains poems of those free men of colour who had migrated to France and had come under the influence of Alexander Dumas who encouraged black arts like sculptor, music, painting and poetry in France.

Whit these brief historical facts, we shall come down to contemporary African – American literature. We shall not dwell much upon the Harlem Renaissance, though an important cultural event in the history of African – Americans let us recall hurriedly the 1940s, and 50s when three great Black writers made invaluable contribution to what at that time was called ‘Literature of the Blacks in America’ and to the American literature in general. *Native Son* by Richard Wright, *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison and *Go Tell It on the Mountain* by James Baldwin produced new vistas for mapping racial prejudice through a genre which subverted all the accepted notions about the blacks in America. The three novels not only offer a graphic account of the black life in America during those days but also they are essentially interrelated thematically as well as in their narrative structures.

The three novels are the record of a common experience. They reveal attitudes of the whites

towards the blacks and its devastating effects on the psychology of the blacks. They expose what Richard Wright calls, Bigger Thomas' Behaviorist Pattern resulting out of frustration and alienation. These novels have as their heroes three adolescent boys dazed by the stark realities at home and the inimical, almost hostile society which they look up to with great expectations. Though the novels have three different stories to narrate, they end up with similar conclusions. Bigger Thomas in Wright's *Native Son* is to be hanged, the invisible anonymous narrator boy in *Invisible Man* and John Grimes in *Go Tell it on the Mountain* has strange visions in which he experiences intense feelings of shame, despair, guilt and fear. Despite being concerned with the same pattern of life, each one of these novels has its own canons of judging the pattern. Richard Wright's protagonist hates the white to the extent of rejoicing the murder of a white girl even though she knows the consequences. The invisible man shrinks back into the hole 'humiliated and crestfallen'. John Grimes' strange vision towards the end of the novel places him somewhere between anger and frustration. The three different stages, in fact, individual efforts on part of the novelists decode the paradigm, hence intrinsically related with each other.

African – American literature projects a similar scenario on the horizon of contemporary world literature. Like India, the United States is also a plural society and like our own society in India, there are several cross – currents operating within the nation. We all know that people from different nations in Europe had come to settle down in America in the 16th century.

African – American literature today opposes several things in the literature of the white Americans. 'Negro' now is no larger a marginal character and a protagonist who asserts his racial identity. He opposes even the earlier image of himself as portrayed by the Harlem writers - a docile self –conscious, submissive black man knocking at the door.

Though they practiced the same religious faith and had similar racial features and appearance, they had brought with them the national identity and ethos which in each case is unique. In this already existing heterogeneity was added the black race with the Negroid features. It was, as it seems now, a mole on a beautiful bright face of raw Virgin land.

Freedom without bread is meaningless. The blacks felt that slavery with bread was better than freedom without bread. But it was also true that bread with slavery is a poisoned bread. The option before them was obvious and clear. They chose freedom because it gave them strength to struggle. "All men were created equal". This was the cornerstone of the American Constitution. Here 'all men' did not include 'black men'. That was the

unfortunate reality. The American blacks have fought long legal battles in American courts to affirm their rights.

America always cherished the dream of liberty, equality and happiness. These are the irreducible and inalienable rights of the citizens of the U.S.A. They are guaranteed by the Constitution. But often they were violated. The American Dream remained illusive. American blacks also preserved that dream under their heavy swollen eyelids and held it tightly between their thick bleeding lips. But it was snatched from them time and again. This racial dilemma remained unresolved. The black American was caught between the American Dream and the American Dilemma. What it means to be an American Negro is a perplexing problem entangling him into a predicament. Black literature is concerned with this situation.

American blacks as well as Indian dalits were the sons and daughters of darkness journeying through untold sorrows and sufferings. Dalits are the native sons of India. They were the salt and savour of this ancient land. But unfortunately they were disowned by the high caste Hindus for centuries together. Today the Dalit writer asks: What is India to me? An enigmatic land? A dream or a nightmare? Or a puzzling riddle? He is in search of answers to these questions. What it means to be an untouchable or a pariah? He knows very well that his forefathers sprang out from the same womb as the Brahmins. Why then was he rejected by the mother? Why and how? Who is responsible for this inhuman act? His questions are many. They issue forth from what, who, why, and how. The questions he asks seem to be simple but their answers are amazingly complex. Once Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar told Mahatma Gandhi in a fit of anguish and anger, "Gandhiji, I have no homeland!" The Dalit writer today is trying to answer these questions. Dalit literature, inspired by Dr. Ambedkar's thoughts, is defining and redefining the dalit conditions. His pen is like a sharp axe with which he is cutting the weeds thickly grown over the centuries in this ancient land.

The American Black writer faces the same dilemma. What is America to me? A deep well of sorrow? A land of travail and trauma? But he knows at the same time that his forefathers were brought to America in chains and auctioned on the shores of Atlanta. The black Americans have irrigated the fertile and of liberty with their blood, fears and sweat. The white settlers defiled their women and lynched them to death. The development and progress of America owes a lot to their labour. They increased the fertility of American agricultural land and made it a Cotton King. They strengthened the sinews of American industry too. Their tragic laughter and steaming

tears have made America what it is today – a land of crowning glory.

But Africa, the land of his ancestors, cannot altogether disappear from their memories, however faint these might be. Africa occupies a special place in their hearts and souls. Their conscious minds are filled with America but Africa is stuck forever in their psyche. That is the reason why they call themselves Afro-Americans. Their identity has traveled from coloured to Negro, from Negro to Black, from Black to Afro – American and now from Afro-American to African-American. They are full – blooded African-Americans. Their long dark shadows fall across two continents-America and Africa. Their history is a long passage of time telling a tale of two continents. They were thrown out of their own history, faith and culture. African history has given them a full page, but American history has given only a small and narrow margin on its page. However, their tale of two continents is not a midsummer night's dream. It is indeed a story of an endless hallucination of agony. Nevertheless, they have not lost their hope. They regard this endless hallucination of agony as a kind of liberation through which they regenerate their energy. One has to read Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* to understand this. The essence of American black personality is found in their spirituals, Jazz, Blues, poems, plays, short stories and novels. Marginal is their existence. From Richard Wright's *Native Son* to Alex Haley's *Roots*, the Black American literature deals with the essence of black identity caught in perpetual crisis. But of late, it has revealed the core of optimism. 'We shall overcome someday'.

We are witnessing today an extraordinary spectacle of women's liberation movements all over the world. It is a universal world phenomenon in the sense that it pervades all the countries and cultures, races and religions. In India too, women writers are writing with a feminist view. Numerically women do not constitute a marginal or minority group. We have fifty percent female population in the country. But women here and elsewhere do not enjoy equal status and individual dignity in the male-dominated world. That makes them marginal socially, politically, sexually and culturally. Their sexual exploitation ultimately leads to social, political and economic exploitation. Women who belong to the weaker sections of society such as Dalits, Adivasis etc. face double exploitation, double inequality and double injustice. Theirs is a double jeopardy. They face degradation and even dehumanisation. Gender is at the base of their marginality. They face domestic violence too. Husbands and wives are unequal partners in family life. One of the best creations of man is the relations or relationship: mother, father, sister, son, daughter, husband, wife

and in-laws. This gives some protection to women. Otherwise, women would have been victims of male lust. And yet they suffer a lot at the hands of men. They move under the dark phallic shadow of man's lust. Feminism deals with all these problems. We often talk about women's empowerment. Their empowerment can be achieved only through education, employment and equality.

Women today find themselves in two worlds the old one is gradually dying and the new one is powerless to be born. There is every danger of miscarriage. The new world should not be a stillborn baby. Women have been standing at the crossroads of history for centuries with tears in their eyes and milk in their breasts. Ours is a man-centered world. Should we make it a woman-centered world? Neither man-centered nor woman-centered, we must build a human-centered world. That is the dream spread across the pages of feminist literature. Kamala Das says:

Bereft of soul
My body shall be bare,
Bereft of body
My soul shall be bare.

Women writer's concern is women's bare body and naked soul. The male-dominated world has used religion, culture and social order to keep women in bondage. As a matter of fact, all marginalised and oppressed groups of people face the problems of human rights violation which ultimately leads to dehumanization, if it not resisted and fought ruthlessly.

There is a nexus, though weak, between the dalit problem and the women's problem at least in Indian society. Both the problems are the products of the Chaturvarna. Women too were regarded as Shudras by the Hindu smritis, especially the Manusmriti. They were denied access to education. They were not allowed to touch the Vedas. Women were not *dwijas* (twice born) like the Shudras. The aspect has not yet been dealt with in the Indian feminist writing. Women writers have not yet delved deep into the psyche of the male orthodoxy. There is an awakening in Muslim women writers also. Taslima Nasreen is a voice of rebellion.

As Barbara Christian says, clearly sexism and racism are systems of societal and psychological restrictions that have critically affected the lives of Afro-American women (*Black Feminist Criticism* 71). Since sex and race have been so interrelated in the history of America, it is not surprising when black women published novels, they necessarily reflected on that relationship, whether they intended to or not. From Frances Haper's *Iola Leroy*, published in 1892 to Toni Morrison's *Tar baby* published in 1981, the tradition of Afro – American women novelists as an entirety is a stunning expression of various

configurations of societal definitions that have been inflicted on the black women. In the contemporary period black women novelists have continued to analyze the relationship between class race and gender. (Barbara Christian, *Black Feminist Criticism*, 71)

Alice Walker has more than any other contemporary writer in America exposed the Twin Afflictions"- the racism and sexism-that affected the black women in America Alice walker is one of the first black women writers., to explore the problems of sexism when most other blacks were declaring that racism was the cause of all the ills of African American people. Perhaps the most controversial of her subjects is her insistence on investigating the relationship between black women and men, black parents and children with unwavering honesty.

Her early poems, novel and short stories deal with themes familiar to readers. rape ,violence, isolation, troubled relationships, multi-generational perspectives sexism and racism.. Alice Walker's works typically focus on the struggles of African Americans particularly women and their struggle against a racist, sexist and violent society. Her works deal not only with the problems of black women, but also with the possibility of change and progression, even though it is a slow process. The history of black women in the United States began with the forced migration of millions of African women from the interiors of the west coast of Africa. They were transported as human cargo across the Atlantic Ocean to plantations in the West Indies. The enslaved Africans were then sold to European colonies. The story of female slavery of Black Women and their evolution is in some way similar to the story of phoenix. They story of female slavery of Black. Women and their evolution is in some way similar to the story of phoenix. They faced misery and suffering and yet were successful In redefining themselves. The African American women as a group proved resilient enough to triumph against the trauma.

During the sixties there was a perceptible change in the attitude of writers on account of the cultural renaissance. For a long time, many blacks deliberately attempted to forget their painful past or leave it to the deliberations of the white writers. But, after the cultural upheaval African – American literary traditions took a new direction. Writers started making conscious attempts to go to the roots and re-link the present with the past. This radical change in the attitude of the writers in the late sixties manifested especially in the works of Alice Walker.

Alice Walker prefers to call herself a 'womanist' because 'womanism', in her opinion, expresses women's concerns better than 'feminism'. It appreciates "women's culture, women's emotional flexibility and women's

strength". (*In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, xi.) As a womanist she is certainly concerned with the liberation of all womankind from the psychology of oppression. But as an African-American woman writer she is more "committed to exploring the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties, and the triumphs of black women. John O' Brien, *Interviews with Black Writers*, 192. This is made clear when, in an interview with John-O' Brien, she unequivocally expresses. "I am preoccupied with the spiritual survival, the survival of whole of my people. But beyond that, I am committed to exploring the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties and the triumphs of black women" (Ibid).

What Alice Walker professes in theory is practiced in her novels. *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970), for instance, demonstrates that the violence that the men and women and children of the Copeland family inflict on each other is the direct outcome of the internalization of racist hatred. The basic principle that Walker highlights is that the change in a person is linked with the change in the society. Walker gives expression to the tension that prevailed between the need for black man's self-love and his sense of shame. Her masterpiece, *Meridian* (1976), is about a woman protagonist 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 the larger black community. She finally rejects the status of a biological mother, but tries to become the community's mother.

Thus, by the mid-seventies, African-American women writers like Paule Marshall, Alice Walker, Toni Cade Bambara, Gayle Jones and Toni Morrison had not only defined their cultural context as a distinctly African-American one, but also probed many facets of the interrelationship of racism, sexism, and classism in their society. They not only demonstrated the fact that these three sources of oppression existed in black communities but also challenged the prevailing definition of woman in male-dominated American society, especially in relation to motherhood and sexuality. Furthermore, they insisted on the centrality of black women to African-American history as well as on their pivotal significance to the contemporary social and political developments in America. Their novels invariably look at ways in which the quality of black women's lives is affected by the interrelationship of racism, sexism and classism. Race, gender and class are not separate entities, at least in America, but closely linked with each other. As Barbara Christian observes, "like the images of a kaleidoscope, these elements are so organically connected that one must understand

their interrelationship in spite of their ever-shifting appearance. (*Black Feminist criticism*, 79)

Racism, sexism and classism signify the traumatic conditions under which African-Americans lived in white America. There are systems of societal and psychological restrictions that have critically affected the lives of blacks, in general, and African-American women, in particular. Right from the days of slavery, the blacks, irrespective of sex had realized the cruel reality of racism. Judged from the white man's standards of life and beauty, the black man's life became unbearable. Sexism, more oppressive physically and mentally was the cause of grievance to the black women who were sexually exploited by both the black and white men. Just as blacks as a group were relegated to an underclass by virtue of their race, so were women relegated to a separate caste by virtue of their sex. Confronted on all sides by racial and sexual discrimination, the black woman has no friends but only liabilities and responsibilities. Responsible for their own and their children's well-being and future, these women had to face daily the reality of their relationships with white men, with white women, and, above all, with black men. But, within the separate caste, a standard of woman was designed in terms of a class definition. The ideal southern lady image of eighteenth century America has been one of the dominant factors in America's conception of woman. She was expected to be beautiful in an ornamental way, chaste, pious, married, and eventually, a mother. She was obviously a white, beautiful and rich woman who did not work. The ideal concept of woman in the society, then, is not only racist and sexist but also classist. And because black women were, by nature of their race, conceived of as lower class, they could hardly approximate the norm: "They had to work ; most could not be ornamental or withdrawn from the world; and, according to the aesthetics of this country, they were not beautiful. But neither were they men. Any aggressiveness or intelligence on their part, qualities necessary for participation in the work world, were constructed as unwomanly and tasteless". (*I bid: 72*) Thus, African women could not achieve the standard of womanhood on the one hand and on the other, they were biologically females, with all the societal restrictions associated with that state.

So, to be black and female is to suffer from the twin disadvantages of racial discrimination and pronounced gender bias. Possibly no other social group has been subjected to such an unedifying spectacle of human debasement and depravity. Being black, the African women suffered from racism; being females they were the victims of sexual atrocities at the hands of the white patriarchs as well as the blacks and being slaves, the white establishment

forced them to live on meager resources and were compelled to remain poor. In short, the black women in America were made victims of triple jeopardy – racism, sexism, and classism.

As sources of oppression of blacks, racism and sexism are allied and have a parallel existence. They are mutually interdependent and hence they arise from the same set of circumstances. Gloria Wade explains this interesting phenomenon through the imagery of circles.

Racism started in America when white masters of the land brought the first Africa in chains and used their labor to enrich their coffers. As a result, black people soon ceased to exist as human beings in the white world. In an illuminating study of the origin of racism in the United States, Joel Kovel says that the white master "first reduced the human self of his black slave to a body and then the body to a thing; he dehumanized his slave, made him quantifiable, and thereby absorbed him into a rising world market of productive exchange. (*White Racism :A psychohistory*, 18)

Sexism, with its accompanying horrors, mutilated the backs and minds of slave women and defiled their sexual beings and scarred them psychologically for all time. Suffering at the hands of both black and white men, the African-American woman had to fight for survival both inside and outside her house. Thus, her story, even in modern America, is fraught with the perils of navigating between the Scylla of racism and the Charybdis of sexism. Impeded from attaining social, political and economic independence and prosperity, black women have had to fight hard for just the basics. With emancipation and induction at the lowest levels of the work force, these women have selected education as their one strong weapon for integration. Despite gradual progress, they are still far behind black men and white women. Racism and sexism should be blamed for this hapless situation.

This fact reveals that even in such distant times, men had been cruel to women. In a systematic and organized manner, they went about trying to subjugate women to an inferior position. Soon after mother worship died, it became part of almost all cultures that patriarchy and male superiority became the accepted norm. And thus, slowly, through the years, women have continued to be ill-treated by males.

Another glaring example of traditional cruelty within the black community itself is the custom of female circumcision a kind of most painful memory. Walker could never get rid of. She handles this theme with its serious implications for life in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992). The plot of this novel can be simply told as that of Tashi, a tribal African woman, who has been harmonically circumcised. Female circumcision is

the most extreme form of genital mutilation practiced in Indonesia, Malaysia and many African countries. Tashi agrees to have this done out of a sense that it will reaffirm her connection to her own culture, which has been destroyed by colonization. For Walker, some form of blame is necessary to break the cycle of adult women's complicity in the subjugation of each new generation of women. For example, the death of Tashi's sister Dura during circumcision is subject to a silence in which her mother cooperates. The suppression of the reason for her sister's death condemns Tashi to an ignorance that helps her submit to the ritual in her turn. The first step in Tashi's rethinking includes the idea of responsibility:

I had been going to say, before the boulder barred my throat: my sister's death; because that was how I had always thought of Dura's demise. She'd simply died. She'd bled and bled and bled and then there was death. No one was responsible. No one to blame. Instead I took a deep breath and exhaled it against the boulder blocking my throat: I remembered my sister Dura's *Murder*: I said, exploding the boulder. (*Possessing the Secret of Joy* 1992:83)

This shadow on black life cannot be lifted unless these traditional methods of female oppression and the patriarchy's determination to control women's productivity and sexuality are totally stopped. Alice Walker is reminded of "little girls... being forced under the shards of unwashed glass, tin-can tops, rusty razors and dull knives of traditional circumcisers" (ibid: 284). She calls these traditional circumcisers *tsungas*. Her novel may be considered as a pedagogical tool to educate women and girls, men and boys about the hazardous effects of genital mutilation, not simply on the health and happiness of individuals, but on the entire society in which it is practiced. Thus Walker's depiction of the black experience in America ranges from various kinds of evil starting from white prejudice to age-old oppression of women in human societies.

Conclusion:

Thus there are two important strands in Walker's fiction under the formally organizing image of the shadow the first being racial violence and the second being black experience. They are part and parcel of American life whether white or black. The former originates in the whites and the latter has its roots in the blacks. And both can be cured or removed only by the sources then selves in a reformist tendency to be adapted by the individuals of races concerned as they learn from their mistakes and try to reform themselves for a better America.

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