

**A Study of Alice Walker's The Color Purple
from the Perspective of Womanism**

Asst. Lecturer Zahraa Mohsin Abd Ali

Alsalam university college

E. mail: zahraa.m.abedali@alsalam.edu.iq

**م.م زهراء محسن عبد علي
كلية السلام الجامعة**

Abstract

The concept of womanism was coined by Alice Walker to advocate dark-skinned women rights. Her social nature and love to know everyone and everything made her a multi-talented personality. This interest was evident in her novel *The Color Purple*, a novel that exposes multiple themes that have been highlighted. Racism and sexism in addition to patriarchy and poverty were the themes that were demonstrated in this novel. Seemingly, the application of the concept of womanism to literary works has been more widespread since its inception than has been written about it. This paper discusses how dark-skinned women in specific, Celie, the main character in the novel are portrayed in both, the black and the white community. It highlights the challenges confronting dark-skinned women. However, Being a woman and being black dark-skinned are both considered encumbrances. This paper discusses this issue and sheds light on the way that Alice Walker draws a path to let all the dark-skinned women characters be free and independent. Furthermore, this study discusses the difference between two critical concepts, namely “Feminism” and “Womanism”. It aims to show how Walker moves from a limited theory “Feminism” to a broader in scope approach to women's issues “Womanism”. To achieve this task, this research sheds light on both concepts through the behaviour of the dark-skinned women characters.

Keywords:

Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*, feminism, womanism.

Introduction

Alice Walker, who published the novel *The Color Purple* in 1982, is one of the novelists whose most of her literary works focus on the history of civil rights, particularly the history of dark-skinned women. “Self-awareness” and “self-development” were subjects that many researchers concentrate on in their discussion of this novel. However, researchers did not pay enough attention to women characters in the novel as far as the researcher knows so far. The story in *The Color Purple* is being narrated by Celie a fourteen-year-old girl, black, ugly and illiterate. She sends letters to God when her father told her: “You better not never tell nobody but God. Ifd kill your. Mammy” (Walker, 1982, p.3) and subsequently she starts sending letters to her sister Nettie. In her letters, she tried to convey her suffering and explain everything in detail. Her stepfather rapes and beats her and forces her to marry the Mr. _ to raise his children.

The novel focuses on how a woman values herself, how others value her, and what it takes for a dark-skinned woman to succeed in fighting oppression and getting out of the power of dark-skinned men. The novel features four main female dark-skinned characters. Every female character experiences oppression differently. The traditional trend among African American writers portraying dark-skinned women as victims of dominant dark-skinned men is broken in this novel. Conversely, Walker draws a sophisticated new character for Celie, who has spent her life serving others and forgetting herself and how she improves herself and overpasses all the barriers that are set up in her society.

The novel deals with the class struggle in the society of people of color on the one hand, and women of color on the other, indicating that there is conflict and racial discrimination based on gender. It also discusses specific issues in the family related to how to build it on solid foundations through cooperation and joint action between the sexes. The main challenge encountered by females in this novel is doubled because they are women firstly and they have dark skin secondly. This situation leads women to lack “self-awareness” and to lose human rights. Accordingly, because the concept of “Womanism” revolves around these issues, the novelist presents the characters and events in a way that supports this concept as a solution to all these human problems. Furthermore, this research tries to figure out the difference between “Feminism” and “Womanism”, and how the novelist displays the concept of “Womanism”. Discussing these mentioned issues that women characters encounter from the perspective of "Womanism" is the main point of the research. In addition, the research will focus on how the female personality develops in the black community and the role of the concept of femininity in this field. The researcher also intends to shed light on the concept of “interracial racism” and the importance of combating it, according to the womanist approach.

Literature review

Feminism is a group of ideologies aimed at defending the political, economic and social rights of women by seeking to achieve equal opportunities for women in education and employment. It passed through three waves. Estelle B. Freedman refers to the starting point of feminism. She asserts that in 1792 an English philosopher called Mary Wollstonecraft coined the first wave of feminism when she published

her book *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*. Her ideas were depicted by some American intellectual women in 1848 and started a feminist movement in the USA. The second wave of feminism started after WW2 when women replaced men in the military factories and kept the economy stable during the war giving them the self-confidence to work the same works that men used to do. This period was supported by many great literary works, i.e. Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* (1971), Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1971). The third wave of feminism began when a well-known feminist called Rebecca Walker book was published, "*To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Facem of Feminism*". However, these three waves of feminism discuss how male-run organizations, values, and beliefs directed at them have persisted over females for so long that they have become staunch beliefs in societies. Furthermore, Feminism indicates that all cultures and societies over time consider women to be subordinate to men, as they are mothers, wives, or daughters, and that their mental and physical capabilities are not sufficient to perform difficult tasks in society. Therefore, feminists focus their efforts to combat these outdated ideas.

Many feminists have objected to the concept of feminism, especially of people of color, claiming that it is not an adequate movement for them. According to Lois Tyson, Walker's point of view is that feminism is directed at the white race and it excludes dark-skinned women from its program, so Walker does not pay much attention to it. Tyson summarizes Alice Walker womanism point of view by stating: On the other hand, some black women feel that feminism is a divisive force in the black community. As a result, some have either abandoned feminism or sought ways to reconcile it with the concerns of the black community, as Alice Walker did when she called herself a "womanist" because she works for the survival and wholeness of her people, men and women both, and for the promotion of dialogue and community as well as for the valorization of women and of all the varieties of work women perform (Tyson, p, 103).

Alice Walker believes that feminism no longer meets the needs of black women because it focuses attention on white women's lives, forgetting what black women suffer from. So she worked to widen the concept of womanism through her novels and literary works.

Layli Phillips defines the concept of womanism in her book *The Womanist Reader* 2006 asserting that:

Womanism is a social change perspective rooted in Black women's and other women of color's everyday experiences and everyday methods of problem solving in everyday spaces, extended to the problem of ending all forms of oppression for all people, restoring the balance between people and the environment/nature, and reconciling human life with the spiritual dimension. (Philips, xx).

According to this definition, womanism is not feminism. Womanism does not focus on sex or gender discrimination; instead, it upgrades all forms of oppression, whether based on gender, race, or class, to an equal level of attention. For this reason, womanism separated and discussed everywhere, and scholars from the USA, Australia, China, Europe, and India looked for exploring its meanings.

Hudson Weems, argues in her book *Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves* (2019) that feminism is very different from womanism since:

The Africana woman did not see the man as her primary enemy as does the White feminist, who is carrying out an age-old battle with her White male counterpart for subjugating her as his property. Africana men have never had the same institutionalized power to oppress Africana women as White men have had to oppress White women (Weems, 2019, p. 54).

However, many questions were raised to determine the link between feminism and womanism. Some scholars agree that womanism is an alternative word for black feminism, "womanism was simply a synonym for Black feminism" (Phillip, xxii). But this point of view is not enough according to Layli Phillips who gives five aspects for womanism: "(1) it is anti-oppression, (2) it is vernacular, (3) it is nonideological, (4) it is communitarian, and (5) it is spiritualized" (Philip, xxiv). Finally, Womanism is a concept that focuses on social change, emphasizes harmony and consistency between the different groups of society, urges the elimination of all forms of oppression, urges addressing everything that strips people of their humanity, and emphasizes the promotion of welfare and public interests regardless of identity, social status, or ethnic origins.

The term "anti-oppression" indicates that womanism seeks liberation and that it supports the liberation of all humanity (male and female) from all forms of oppression. Womanism seeks to empower people to completely transcend relations of domination and oppression. As for the other term, "vernacular" means the everyday speech of ordinary people. Philips comments on this term describing it "As a womanist,

there is no need to be "perfect"; personhood is enough to qualify" (Philip, xxv). Furthermore, the term "non-ideological" implies that womanism does not operate in a decentralized manner. And it doesn't believe in phrases like "you're either inside or outside" and "you're either with us or against us." "Womanism" works to build positive interrelationships from anywhere. The other term, "Communitarian" means that a womanist must believe that the task of social change comes from the good of the community. Hence, the preoccupation of womanism is not black women; instead, the black woman is where this particular form of thinking about the common good originates. Finally, spirituality refers to the fact that womanism believes in the existence of a spiritual realm in which human life is intertwined with the material world. Womanists are firm believers in the importance of the existence of the spiritual world, though they are not concerned with the way it is perceived.

Literature Review

Many studies, research and articles have been written about *The Color Purple*, but all of them dealt with the events of the novel and its characters from only one perspective, which is feminism. Alice Walker was working hard to convey the concept of womanism in her novels, especially this novel, to make the concept of womanism an alternative or a developed case of feminism.

In her book, *Alice Walker's Politics or the Politics of the Color Purple* (1988), Cynthia Hamilton points out that this novel is not about black women, but rather a novel that expresses a universal concept that concerns all of humanity. It is a novel that talks about slavery in all its forms; especially slavery within the family when the female is a slave to the desires of the man and a means to fulfil his demonic desires. The novel presents a method in which it appears that everyone was a victim of society and the prevailing laws and customs. The novelist conveys the idea that the only way to escape from victimization is by escaping forward and by self-realization through work and education "the only way to escape that victimization is through Transformation" (Hamilton, 1988. p.382). So we see how black women become more independent and have their job and how a white woman depends on a black woman while teaching her to drive. Everything could happen in this life there is no impossible. The black women in this novel were designed to be universal figures.

Linda Selzer discusses in her book *Race and Domesticity in The Color Purple* (1995) the difference between feminism and womanism asserting. She focuses on Celie character describing her as a person who knows nothing about life "White people is black peoples' children" (Walker, 1982. P.23). She either has no idea about herself or her body as a female. Her stepfather rapes her and orders her to be silent and she obeys. But, at the end of the novel, Celie's character transforms to be an independent one, a strong woman as a woman must be. This transformation is part of womanism demands.

Abrams, P.H. comments in his article *The gift of loneliness: Alice Walker's The Color Purple* (1985) that Alice Walker demonstrates the importance of change and its impact on human beings. He asserts "Walker believes strongly in the ability of people to change and grow, attributing this belief to her work in registering black voters in Mississippi during the Civil Rights Movement when she saw a great deal of change." (Abrams, 1985. p.30).

Cathuan L. Nguyen (2010) in his thesis "A Joint Reading of *The Color Purple* and *The Awakening: From Feminism to Womanism and the significance of Authentic Feminism Space*" refers to how female characters exceed the barriers of "racial traumas" which is a womanist concern rather than focusing on "class struggle" which is a feminist concern.

A study by Sigrún Tinna Sveinsdóttir labelled *Breaking the Silence* (2012) refers to *The color Purple* as two stories within one. Celie is a silenced and oppressed character in the first one and a rebelled character in the second one. The transformation in her personality comes from self-knowledge. Walker believes, as Sigrún claims, that silencing in black women results from socialization because silencing does not mean an act of not speaking but an inherited social act. Alice Walker believes that the best way for women of color to overcome their problems is by putting their hands together and creating their businesses.

A womanist Approach to *The Color Purple*

Since the publication of *The Color Purple*, the concept of "Womanism" has begun to spread among literary circles. Many articles and studies were written on the modern concept of womanism. The writer Alice Walker considers herself as carrying a message to humanity because she is a woman first, a black woman second, and a black woman novelist third. She sees herself "as apologist and chronicler for black

women” (Washington, 1993. p.39). Furthermore, she is a believer that feminism does not express all the suffering of black women.

The color purple was published in 1982. Its name was taken from a conversation between Celie and Shug “I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it” (Walker, 1982. p.196). It was written in an epistolary style to make it suit the womanist requirements. Writing the novel in this style and using the vernacular came to meet the requirements of womanism. The novel talks about the main character called Celie and her voyage for liberation. Firstly, her confession to Shag about her stepfather's rape of her and secondly, her discovery of her sister's letters Nettie, which her husband hid for years, and her escape from him, heading to her home to take it from her stepfather. These two incidents refer to Celie's desire to change her life and remove all the depression. On the other hand, the novel not only presents the story of a single woman who was subjected to humiliation and discrimination because she is a black woman, but the novel provides a model for what many women are exposed to around the world. The novel also presents the condition of black women in a society where women take care of each other and take care of the children of other women.

Moreover, Celie never speaks or rejects, she is silenced or she chose to be silent because she had no idea what to do or how to respond. When her sister tells her to send letters to God, she feels shame and couldn't tell everything in her letters “I remember one time you said your life made you feel so ashamed you couldn't even talk about it to God, you had to write it” (P, 117). In her book, *Colored People* (1995), Gates, H. L. asserts that “Walker represents Celie's growth of self-consciousness as an act of writing ... Celie, in her letters, writes herself into being” (Gates, 1995. p 243). The process of writing letters to God made Celie think about her existence, and that was the start point in her transmission. As a womanist, Alice Walker creates a spiritual realm for Celie and let her life into that world to help her release her negative thoughts and put her on the road to liberation.

In contrast to Celie, Shug is a strong, beautiful and confident character “Shug Avery standing upside a piano, elbow crook, hand on her hip. She wearing a hat like Indian chiefs. Her mouth open showing all her teef and don't nothing seem to be troubling her mind” (p.7). But still, she is similar to Celie in being silent. People around here use her as a commodity and she couldn't speak. Even she was socially silenced, she was fighting to have her liberation by throwing herself into a man's world and acting as men do. Celie describes her asserting:

Shug say, girl you look like a good time, you do. That when I notice how Shug talk and act sometimes like a man. Men say stuff like that to women, Girl you look like a good time. Women always talk about hair and heath. How many babies living or dead, or got teef. Not bout how some woman they hugging on look like a good time (p.72).

This is what makes Shug different from Celie, as she takes an important step when she searches for her own distinctive identity, knowing that to be independent in such a society she must prove that she has mannish features.

Nettie, Celie's young sister, is silent too and her situation looks like Celie's one. In her voyage for liberation, she keeps running away to be safe. Firstly she runs away from her stepfather who wants to treat her as he treated Celie. Secondly, she runs away from Celie's husband when he seduces her. But, contrary to Celie, Nettie is educated somehow and a pretty girl, so she succeeds in getting her liberation faster than others.

The strongest black woman character is Sofia. She is different from other black woman characters. She is not silent. And the response to anybody who attacks her or even bothers her. Celie portrays her in one of her letters, writing “look cross the yard. I see Sofia dragging a ladder and then lean it up gainst the house. She wearing a old pair of Harpo pants. Got her head tied up in a headrag. She clam up the ladder to the roof, begin to hammer in nails. Sound echo the yard like shots” (p. 58). Sofia has mannish features. She works, wears, eats, and fights like men. She describes herself as saying “All my life I had to fight. I had to fight my daddy. I had to fight my brothers. I had to fight my cousins and my uncles” (p. 39). She is not a silent character, but she returns to being silent because of being nonviolent. She was sent to prison because she hit the mayor and refused to work as a maid for his wife. Years later, when she agrees to work as a maid she was released in a bad situation. Celie describes her when she was released saying:

When I see Sofia I don't know why she alive. They crack her skull, they crack her ribs. They tear her nose loose on one side. They blind her on one eye. She swole from head to foot. Her tounge the size of my arm,

it stick out tween her teef like a piece of rubber. She can't talk and she just about the color of a eggplant (p.92).

When Sofia leaves the prison, she returns to be another copy of Celie's character. She never fights nor speaks. She is broken and oppressed.

All black women in this novel are oppressed. Their oppression comes as a traditional part of their society. They are used to it. Also, men in this novel are already oppressors for the same reason. The problem is not that they are satisfied with their situation in this society, but because fear surrounds them from all sides. Therefore, the novelist presents the idea of escaping forward to freedom and accepting the results as they are. No matter how bad the results will be, it will never be as bad as black women living in. Trudier Harris comments in her book, *On The Color Purple, Stereotypes and Silence. Black American Literature Forum* (1984) "what Celie records – the degradation, abuse, dehumanization – is not only morally repulsive, but it invites spectato readers to generalize about black people in the same negative ways that have gone on for centuries" (Harris. 1984, p.156). She is right, but the issue is not a concern with just the black woman. It is more universal. Alice Walker assures that the novel is not about black women in specific, it is for both, white women and women of colour in general, and it concerns all black and white societies. She wants these characters to float to the surface and be visible to everyone. Characters like Celie's stepfather and her husband are found in all societies whether black or white. She wants all to stop all oppressors and let women everywhere raise their voices and talk about their experiences with sexism and racism.

Moreover, the image of God in Celie's mind is connected with a white man. Both of them are white and have power over others. She imagines God as "Big and old and tall and grey bearded and white. He wear white robes and go barefooted. Blue eyes? She ast. Sort of Bluish- gray. cool. Big though. White lashes I say" (p. 195). When she meets Shug, she starts realizing what god means as Shug explains to her, saying:

God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God ... Don't look like nothing, she say. It ain't no picture show. It ain't⁵¹ something you can look at apart from anything else, including yourself. I believe God is everything, say Shug. Everything that is or ever was or ever will be. And when you can feel that, and be a happy to feel that, you've found it. She say, My first step from the old white man was trees. Then air. Then other people. But one day when I was feeling like a motherless child, which I was, it come to me: that feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all. (p. 176)

In addition to that, Celie connects the God-image with the trees. She thinks that the power that she has and all her speech come from a tree. She tells her husband "until you do right by me, I say, everything you even dream about will fail. I give it to him straight, just like is come to me. And it seems to come to me from the trees" (p, 187). Then Shug expands Celie's idea about God and tells her that God distributes His love equally to everyone, regardless of their shapes, colors or genders.

Alice Walker, as a feminist, offers a contrasting perspective on gender, race, culture, and sexuality. She also presents her views clearly to cover general issues such as issues of human beings, regardless of their color and race in an attempt to bridge the gap between contrary, nations and civilizations. Thus, "Feminism" does not present a values viewpoint as "Womanism". Walker tries to convey the idea that race is less complex and vast than one's personality and is more important than gender, class, culture and nationality. One of the things that raise doubts about the credibility of "Feminism" is that it is based on the concept of class.

Walker focuses on the topic of beauty. She demonstrates a dark-skinned woman as an ugly and a white woman as a symbol of beauty, in an attempt to convey the idea that the beauty of a dark-skinned woman comes from a different perspective and they should enjoy their appearance and beauty. She tries to make a compromise between black and white. Thus, Celie keeps a white man working in the store that she got from her husband and asks Sofia, as a black woman, to work with him. She believes that ethnic separatism is a societal issue that can be resolved and overcome by working together, understanding and accepting each other. When the novel reaches the end, we meet a new Celie. She accepts herself and feels that she is not ugly and not weak. She is transferred. The financial potential of the man is what gives him superiority over women, according to feminist belief, as men consider themselves capable of production, while women remain consumers. The novel presents a different concept when it makes women get their free work away from the guardianship of men. Celie starts her own business and Shug starts singing. Thus,

we see the woman in this narration moving from one condition to another, better condition, and becoming a strong and free human being. It's the transition from feminism to womanism. Walker as a "Womanist" believes in the "power of change" and in women's ability to be free. All black women characters in the novel are transformed succeeded in their battle and defeated the traditional role that feminism put them in.

A womanist believes that women should support each other to be able to counteract the male domination that threatens them. It is a part of transforming from feminism to womanism. When Celie's husband tells her "You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. Goddam, he say, you nothing at all" (p, 46), Shug, Nettie and Sofia supported her and encouraged her to be strong and fight back. Nettie tells Celie "You've got to fight and get away from Albert. He ain't no good" (p, 119). Moreover, education is considered the core of womanism. Celie has no education, but Nettie helps her and teaches her how to read and write. This process combines the two factors of womanism; education and supporting each other. Walker explains that all dark-skin communities suffer from an education problem, she comments:

The African male order, just like its American counterpart, denies the validity of female expression; girl children are not permitted to participate in the education provided by the missionaries, and they are considered the property of first their fathers and then their husbands. As a sign of their entry into womanhood, they undergo a ritual of scarification, which literally marks their role in society (Walker, 1983, P.62). The transformation of Celie is clear at the end of the novel when she tells her husband, "I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook...But I'm here" (Walker, 1982, p.205). she is a confident dark-skin woman who can fight and survive.

Conclusion:

"Womanism", "Feminism", "Sexism", "Racism", and traditional gender roles are the main themes in *The Color Purple*. Walker believes in the differences that exist between humans and also believes that humans should not be oppressed and humiliated because of these differences, so she asserts that "Womanism" is the best way to make the world a better place to live.

Walker believes in the power to establish our lives and ourselves while feminists look to this novel for entrenched stereotypes. She encourages dark-skin women to be confident and love their black skin. She also inspires them to combat traditional black women's roles. She wants to nullify patriarchal society and reject all the traditional gender roles. Walker believes in the inner strength of women and attempts to awaken them from their lethargy and begin to build their identities as independent women. She portrays Celie as an example to all those women who lack education and knowledge and lead them to the point that she put it as a task for a womanist.

Moreover, The language used in the novel clearly shows double consciousness. It is noted that Celie uses the vernacular English of the black American community. This is a special language that depends more on meaning and does not adhere to the grammatical rules accepted in the English language. Even the pronunciation is different in a way that everyone who is fluent in English feels. White Americans do not consider this language a correct form, but rather they do not consider it a language in itself. In this way, however, Americans of color use this language as a way to assert their identity and culture. Tyson L. focuses on this point asserting that it "Includes a wide range of character types and folk practices and creates a sense of continuity with the African and African America past." (Tyson, 2006, p. 389). Walker chooses characters that can be met in daily life, who are culturally compatible with their behavior. Those African-American farmers who look at the present through the eyes of the past are conscious that whites treat them differently because of their dark skin. So we find a writer like Alice Walker who places more emphasis on education to contribute to the progress of "Womanism" rather than relying on "Feminism", which, according to her, is no longer as important as it once was.

Womanists defend the rights of both women and men. Walker argues that racism is more important than sexism and affects humanity more than sexism. Furthermore, womanism does not include class and racism in its agenda as feminism does, not because it has the fears that black women demand, but because it is primarily concerned with the issues of white women as well. womanism is primarily concerned with the weakness, oppression and suppression of white women by the patriarchal system. HudsonWeems asserts:

The Africana woman did not see the man as her primary enemy as does the White feminist, who is carrying out an age-old battle with her White male counterpart for subjugating her as his property. Africana men have never had the same institutionalized power to oppress Africana women as White men have had to

oppress White women. (...in the effort to fight against racial injustice) Black women cannot afford the luxury, if you will, of being consumed by gender issues. (Hudson-Weems,2019, p. 25-28)

Walker sees womanism and feminism as two forces that work side by side for women and men alike regardless of race and color, and it seems clear that Walker considers womanism to be a more advanced option than feminism, as it moves a step forward. Despite her belief in the importance of "Feminism" She believes that the concept of "Womanism" is dedicated to the safety of all, and insists on the exchange of experiences and self-actualization among blacks. Her choice of the term "woman" and not "female" stems from her belief that the term "woman" is more profound than the term "female.". furthermore, Walker calls for brotherhood, focus on family, combating injustice, spirituality, and self-realization. "Womanism" focuses its attention on the culture that affects society in general. The concept of "Womanism" works to unite blacks regardless of their national affiliation and believes that change for freedom comes from the family and that the importance of women appears through the family.

"Womanism" and "Feminism" jointly work to combat discrimination based on sex and to combat patriarchy in society, but womanism calls for strengthening the struggle against discrimination based on sex within the black community itself. Without a doubt, some whites suffer from patriarchy within the family, but blacks suffer from more serious problems related to gender discrimination within the family. For instance, dark-skin people practice internal racism in their society, which is a type of racism among blacks themselves, in addition to what they suffer from racism imposed on them by whites. Some consider that light black skin is more beautiful than dark black skin. For this reason, Walker asks women to love themselves and she believes that all women possess beauty, which makes them distinguished in their beauty, whether they are white or colored, because beauty lies in all colors. Skin color cannot be a measure of beauty. At the beginning of the novel, Celie thought she was ugly, but by the end of the novel, once she regained her self-confidence, she began to like the beauty of her skin and finds that her body color is distinctive. All the black-skinned female characters started a new life after they succeeded in drawing their lives by working without relying on any other human being, although as a group they helped each other and signs of tolerance appeared between everyone, regardless of color and race.

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