

# Womanism and *The Color Purple*

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## ABSTRACT

**This paper aims at studying Womanism and Womanism in *The Color Purple*. Alice Walker's Womanism is originated from feminism and it has new demands and different perspectives to feminism. This paper elaborates Womanism in *The Color Purple* from the following three perspectives: the dilemma of the black women in *The Color Purple*, the revival of the female consciousness, and the subjectivity rebuilding of the black women. The novel gives a full expression of the ideological connotation and vivid description of black women's struggle for liberation and nationalities' striving for equality based on Womanism. This paper reveals Walker's intention to awaken the female self-consciousness of being self-respected, self-supported and eventually self-liberated, as well as her dream of building a harmonious society in which men and women, white and black live in harmony.**

**Keywords:** *The Color Purple*, Womanism, female consciousness, the subjectivity rebuilding

## I. INTRODUCTION

The racial problem always hold a central position in traditional African American literature. Though the slavery was abolished a century ago in America, even today in 21st century, the black are still discriminated by the white. They have no equal rights and have an inferior figure in the heart of American. The miserable suffering when they were brought over by the white to live as slaves, the confusion of their social status after the civil war, their movement to the cities where their life began to be polarized — all these events in history made the African American literary tradition be drastically different from the mainstream American literature.

For a long time, the images of the African American in the mainstream American literature had been presented in a distorted manner. In a matter of fact, under the situation, the black women are facing both racial and sexual discrimination. The male writers depict the racial discrimination they experienced and the female writers depict the racial and sexual discrimination they suffered, while Alice Walker brings the two missions together. Her novel *The Color Purple* has aroused great reverberation since its publication in 1982. *The Color Purple* is an epistolary novel. *The Color Purple* won the 1983 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the National Book Award for Fiction. It consists of 90 letters, of which over two thirds (61 in number) Celie wrote to God, 14 to her sister Nettie, and 15 Nettie wrote to Celie. The story centers on Celie's life,

with Nettie's African adventure as complementary.

The mission of the African American literature is to expound and mould the figure of the black again. Influenced by the background of the African American literature, the black women writer Alice Walker proposed a new concept — Womanism, which reveals the dual oppression the black women are facing: racial discrimination and sexual discrimination. Her work *The Color Purple* is the representative announcement of Womanism. Walker is the defender and speaker of the black women. From the gradation of sexuality, *The Color Purple* reflects the social cultural concept of Walker, especially the concept of harmonious coexist of Womanism. From the gradation of politics, *The Color Purple* is a novel reflects "American prosperities". Womanism in *The Color Purple* has an active function to the development of the black racial consciousness and national reconciliation.

## II. WOMANISM

As Walker (1976:94) noted in the New York Times Magazine in 1984: "I choose Womanism because it is better than feminism, I choose it because I prefer the sound, the feel, the fit of it; because I cherish the spirit of the women and because I share the old ethnic-American habit of offering society a new word when the old word it is using fails to describe the behavior. Only a new word can help it more fully seen". The term Womanist first appeared in Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983). Walker insists that the black feminist as womanist are originated from feminist and they have new demands and different perspectives to feminism. What's more, they are more perfect both in theory and practice. If

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feminism were not able to fully account for the experiences of black women, it would be necessary, then, to find other terminologies that could carry the weight of those experiences. It is in this regard that Alice Walker's Womanism intervenes to make an important contribution.

Walker's construction of Womanism and the different meanings is an attempt to situate the black woman in history and culture, which made her far away from the negative and inaccurate stereotypes in American society. First, Walker describes the black woman as a thinking subject who is always in pursuit of knowledge, "wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered good for one", thus, interrogating the epistemological exclusions she endures in intellectual life in general and feminist scholarship in particular. Second, she highlights the black woman's agency, strength, capability, and independence. Being different from feminism which centers on gender separatism, Womanism presents an alternative for black women. It frames the black women's survival in the context of the survival of their community where the fate of women and that of men are linked together. In 1993, the word Womanism was added to The American Heritage Dictionary, together with the meaning Alice Walker bestowed on it. After that, the concept has made a great influence in the formulation of theories and analytical frameworks in many studies. Such as gender studies, religious studies, black studies and literary studies. Many African American female theologians have incorporated womanist perspectives in their work as a result of the linking of black women and spirituality in Walker's research. The impact of Womanism goes beyond the United States to Africa where many women scholars and literary critics have embraced it as an analytical tool.

Alice Walker's Womanism has also generated debates and controversies. However, Walker's definition thus manages to invoke three important contradictory philosophies that frame black social and political thought. First, she presents Black Nationalism through her claims of black women's moral and cognitional superiority. Second, she tells the plural oppression the black women are facing. And third, she stresses women's universal love.

Despite the debates and controversies of Womanism, Womanism has developed a lot and is accepted by most of the people, for it seeks to give a voice, a standpoint to black women, as well as the unite of the black.

### **III. WOMANISM IN *THE COLOR PURPLE***

The *Color Purple* presents the reality that the black women are facing both the racial and sexual oppression vividly. If the black women want to survive under the

dual oppression, firstly they should seek self and status. In *The Color Purple*, the several women figures are all facing their own dilemma.

#### *A. The dilemma of the black women in *The Color Purple**

Under the influence of feminism in the 1960s, many protagonists depicted in *The Color Purple* reflect the living condition of the women. The first who cannot be ignored is Celie's mother. Her former husband was killed by the white with a groundless reason, but she has no power to revolt. She has no choice to marry the second husband and becomes callous to his cruelty. And Celie's sister Nettie also couldn't escape the threatening of the unsafe elements on this society. When Celie's husband has an evil design for her, she runs away and gets through many difficulties outside home. Another one is Shug, Mr.\_'s old lover. Compared with other women in this novel, she may be the one who is outstanding and independent. For she is loved by Mr.\_ and has a prominent character. But she is still controlled by the society. She has no opportunity to marry Mr.\_ because of the prejudice of Mr.\_'s father, in other words, the prejudice of the society. The most preventative figure is the heroin Celie who live under kinds of violence and even couldn't survive. Celie lived in violence for decades. When she was abused by her stepfather, she was told that except the God, she could not tell anything to other people, or it will kill her mom. The bitterness of the life made her only has one way to communicate with the God. Later she was sold to Mr.\_ just like selling a beast, and Mr.\_ thought twice to marry her only to find a mother for her kids, a woman who could do the heavy housework for him and he could gain a cow. When she stands outside the door towards the sunshine and was ordered to turn right or left to let him see clearly, the setting has no difference with selling slaves. On this trade, Celie has no choice and opportunity to rebel, and no right to speak. Since then the violence continued to be a part of her life.

#### *B. The revival of the female consciousness*

When Celie meets Shug Avery, Celie becomes increasingly fascinated by her because of her ability to control the vicious power — Mr.\_. Celie discovers the God in her heart. To get rid of the cruelty and controlling of Mr.\_, Shug and Celie ran away from home and help her building her career and living an independent life. The independences on economy make her own herself and discover herself. She gets esteem, care and love from Shug.

It can be seen clearly from the novel that the female consciousness of Celie has undergone three phases. The first phase is from the beginning to Celie's touch with Shug. In this phase, Celie's female consciousness lies in a vague state. She is vague for her status and being humiliated, nevertheless, she doesn't know how to

change and revolt, which can be seen from the first 20 letters to the God. She suffered the seducement of her stepfather, the blame of her mother, the cruelty of Mr. \_, but only knows to pour out to the God. The second phase is from the 21st letter to the decision that Celie makes to leave home to make a living by her. By the enlightening and influence of Shug, it can be seen Celie's female consciousness becomes active. The callous, loneliness was replaced by her feeling of revolt. She is envy of Mr. \_'s care and love to Shug, feels angry with the unfair treatment and is eager to gain love and help. The last 18 letters is the third phase of Celie's female consciousness. On this phase, we can see Celie's female consciousness is just like a powerful soldier. She criticized the false of the God: "What God has done for me? If he ever heard the crying of the black women, the world would change into another appearance!" At this moment, the consciousness of Celie has improved to a higher level. She can speak with man at an equal status. As Bracks L (2019). comments, each phase "becomes a step of the journey that paves the way for the development of self and sexual awareness, the beginnings of religious transformation and the creation of nurturing places like home and community".

A fourteen years old girl only dares to tell her bitterness in front of the God. Though she became callous by the oppression, she didn't hide her attitude in her letter. From writing letters to the God to writing letters to her sister, from pouring out her confusion and frightening to narrating her attitude to the people and surroundings, all those reflected the process of her growing up. Her voice became more aloud and confident. She proposed such questions: "the Gods belong to the white or black?" or "the God belongs to the male or female?" Besides, at the beginning of the letters, she only narrated the things that happened and scarcely touch her inner sorrow. But when she knows she has the right to fight for happiness in her letters, she gets the courage to pour out the bitter feelings. She appreciates her friends, approves with their behavior, extols their care and help in the letter, which makes the novel not only present a woman's maturity, but also presents how a group of women improved their interpersonal relation, behavior and virtues. All those have developed the relationship of women, strengthened their power.

### *C. The subjectivity rebuilding of the black women*

The voice is the representative of status and rights, together with communicating with others. At the very outset, when Celie writes to the God, she never signed her name on the letters to the God. But later with the help of Shug, Celie acquires knowledge, gives scope to her competence, abandons fatuousness and regains confidence. With her narration, she is no longer an oppressed, exploit, maltreated object, but a mainstream of language who can speak aloud her inner heart. She

rebuild her principle part of female and become a woman who can support herself by her own labor, who is full of confidence, who has self-esteem and who has specific character. At the end of the novel, Celie writes letters to everyone: "Dear God, dear the star, dear the trees, dear the people, dear all things in the world! (Walker, 1982: 393)"

At this time, she becomes the public voice. Though she says her own words, her self-consciousness and female's subjectivity consciousness become more clearly. Those mean that she convinced a new self-status and that she is no longer the woman who is stuck in the oppression on the patriarchy society. The signature is the symbol of self-improvement, self-affirmation and rights. The new language experience has a key effect of building the female's subjectivity.

## **IV. CONCLUSION**

The novel gives a full expression of the ideological connotation and vivid description of black women's struggle for liberation and nationalities' striving for equality. It argues that love and salvation is the soul of Walker's Womanism and it finds profound expression in her writings. In explaining how to develop the novel concept — Womanism, Walke believes that the women should put the key point of improving women's condition into seeking oneself, emancipating one's thinking, caring and supporting each other. Women's self-respect and self-love could influence the men and promote them to change their thought, and then show respect to women. Relationships among women form a refuge, providing reciprocal love in a world that once was filled with male violence. And this reveals the author's intention to arouse women's self-consciousness and to call on them to be self-respected, self-supported and eventually be self-liberated. From the bisexual confliction to bisexual equality, Walker tries to discuss the possibility of man's growing and the transformation of bisexual relationship. In fact, the bisexual unbalance, the bisexual confliction always makes both sides suffered, which influence the progress of human's civilization. So *The Color Purple* is heavy for the human being who is waiting for the real harmony. Walker's dream is to make a harmony society on which men and women, the white and black live in harmony with each other.

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