
RACE ,GENDER AND IDENTITY IN THE ALICE WALKER'S FICTION

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Abstract: Alice Walker was born on February 9, 1944, in Eatonton, Georgia, the eighth child of Willie Lee and Minnie Tallulah Grant Walker, who were sharecroppers. Of her childhood Walker remembers being different from the other children, spending more time along, more than reading. While she was of eight years age, one of her brothers shot her in the right eye with a BB gun and she has been blind in that eye ever since.

“Walker came to see this wound as a “patriarchal wound” convinced that her brother intended to shoot at her, drawing a parallel to other injuries, physical and psychological, inflicted on women because of their gender”. (Smith, 2001).

Education : Educated at Spelman and Sarah Lawrence Colleges, Walker was an active participant in the Civil Rights Movement, working on a voter registration in Georgia and for the Head Start program in Mississippi, as well as for the department of welfare in New York City.

The insistence on education, the community working towards education, the seventy-five dollars the community raised to help Walker to attend Spelman College – all of these elements shaped her as a writer, and are one reason for her love of the people of her parents’ and grandparents’ generations. Through the stories they told the gardens they grew, and the quilts they pieced – furnished her with material for her art “.... No song or poem will bear my mother’s name. Yet so many of the stories that I wrote, the we all write, the we all write, are my mother’s stories...” (Ibid P.742)

Walker received a scholarship for the handicapped that allowed her to attend Spelman College in Atlanta. After two years (1961-63) she transferred to Sarah Lawrence College in Bronxville, New York, an elite, mostly white school. In her essay “The Unglamorous but Worthwhile Duties of the Black Revolutionary Artist” Walker said of her move to Sarah Lawrence, “I was fleeing from Spelman College in Atlanta, a school that I considered opposite to change, to freedom” As a result of the Eurocentric curriculum she was influenced by the great works of European tradition. She has won several awards for her work, most notably the Pulitzer Prize for fiction and the National Book Award, both for *The Color Purple* in 1983.

On Motherhood : In Mississippi Walker met Melvyn Leventhal, a white civil rights lawyer, whom she married on March 17, 1967. The marriage caused criticism among blacks. Critics of her writing tended to focus on her marriage as a betrayal of the black community.

Walker had a child Rebecca, who was born in 1969, three days after she completed her first novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*. In her essay, “One child of One’s own”, Walker discussed her misgivings

about becoming a mothershe found that having a child “joined me to a body of experience and a depth of commitment to my own life hard to comprehend otherwise.. The ability to see the world as a mother deepened her understanding and the duties of motherhood did not stop her writing.

Walker acknowledged that a mother in this society is often “buried alive, walled away from her own life, brick by brick”.

The Third Life of Grange Copeland tells of three generations – Grange, Brownfield, and Ruth – from 1920 to the arrival of the Civil Rights Movement in a small Georgia town. The novel is told in chronological order.

As A Writer : Walker has published five novels, and it is her novels that have secured her reputation for the larger public; *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970), *Meridian* (1976), *The Color Purple* (1982), *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989) and *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992).

Walker became pregnant while visiting Africa when she was a senior she wanted to commit suicide in despair. An abortion was arranged, and she felt her life had been given back to her. During this period Walker wrote compulsively almost all of the poems in *Once*, her first volume of poetry. It was published in the year 1968. “I was delighted to learn that in three or four lines a poet can express mystery, evoke beauty and pleasure, paint a picture – and not dissect or analyse in any way”) (Ibid p.743)

Walker in her fiction and poetry speaks out by creating characters that are incorrect enough to refuse to be measured by others’ standards. Walker’s achievements as a writer are characterized by an astonishing versatility. She is equally at home with poetry and fiction; as an essayist alone she would be a noteworthy presence in American letters. But it is her novels for which she is best known, and it is her novels in which the full complexity of her vision is most evident. She incorporates elements of traditional folklore into her fiction.

Walker completed her second novel *Meridian* (1976) which includes some obvious similarities between

Walker's life and that of her title character. Walker was deeply involved in publicizing the horrors of female genital mutilation, also known as female circumcision or excision.

Concern For The Black Women : The special identifying mark of Walker's writing is her concern for the lives of the Black Women. Since she began publishing in 1966 her main preoccupation has been the souls of black women. Walker herself, as a writer, has declared herself committed to "exploring the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties and the triumphs of black women" (O'Brien, 1973).

In Walker's creation one can find from the slave woman to a revolutionary woman of the sixties. Walker examines the external realities facing these women as well as the internal world of each woman. She says in her interview with John O. Brien, "I believe in listening – to a person, the sea, the wind, the trees, but especially to young black women whose rocky road I am still travelling".

The Color Purple :The Color Purple is a woman's story about pain, suffering, endurance, and friendship, a story of hardship and hope, of reunion and reconciliation.

The novel which won both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award, is the story of Celie, a barely educated black woman, who is raped by her stepfather and then married off to Mr., who needs a good worker to look after his children. Told by her stepfather that she had better tell no one but God about the rape, Celie starts writing letters to God. After her children by her stepfather have been taken away and her sister Nettie has been forced to leave, Celie is wholly alone. However, she slowly develops an extended family that includes Shug Her husband's mistress and only true love....and Sofia, who marries Celie's stepson. The love that Celie and Shug come to share not only awakens Celie's sexuality but also allows her the freedom to say what she thinks and to develop as an independent woman with a sense of self and a creative talent that she eventually expands into a business.... Making the most comfortable pants available. Eventually, with Shug's help, Celie discovers the letters that Nettie has been writing her for years and that Mr.has been hiding. Reading the letters, Celie finds out the truth about her family, and is so disgusted that God would allow such wrongs that she stops writing to him and starts writing to Nettie. She explains to Shug, "he give me a lynched daddy, a crazy mama, a lowdown dog of a step pa and a sister I probably won't ever see again. Anyhow, I say, the God I been praying and writing to is a man. And act just like all the other men I know. Trifling, forgetful and lowdown" (p.89)

The Color Purple ends in happiness, reunion, and celebration. Walker has said that she took her great-

grandmother's life, which included rape and childbearing eleven, and gave it happy ending.

Struggle For Identity : Celie, the narrator and protagonist, tells the story of her struggle to find an identity through entries written in her diary from the age of fourteen, when she is barely literate.

Shug Avery, Albert's mistress, an independent city woman and blues singer. She becomes Celie's most intimate friend and teaches her how to free herself from the dominance of her husband by taking Celie to Memphis, where she encourages Celie to start a business making pants. Shug is tremendously important for the way in which she teaches Celie about love and sexuality. Sofia represents the struggle against Southern racism.

Celie, a fourteen-year-old African-American girl in rural Georgia, describes her life and troubles by writing letters to God in diary that she keeps. She has been molested and raped by Alfonso, the man who she thinks is her father but who is in fact her stepfather.

Liberation : The Color Purple became a controversial novel because of its strong indictment of the racism and sexism that victimized African-American women in the rural American South. Yet it is also the story of the growth and development of the central character from an ignorant, abused teenager to an accomplished woman who has learned to stand up for herself and cope with her hostile surroundings. The theme is liberation, as brought about by Celie's desire to learn and to improve her.

Feminism : The Color Purple is Alice Walker's attempt to embody her own particular vision of black feminism in a work that transcends ideology. Searching for a basis for living that rejects dead orthodoxies and oppressive system its energy from what it advocates. What it condemns. The novel displays a typical feminist analysis: by the own passivity and will end that oppression when they bond together in affirming their refuse to participate in the inhumane male system.

Assertion Of Freedom : Turning point of Alice Walker's The Color Purple occurs when Celie, the Principal Character, asserts her freedom from her husband and proclaims her right to exist : "I'm Pore, I'm black, I may be ugly, and can't cook... But I'm here" (p.187). Celie's claim is startling because throughout her life she has been subjected to a cruel form of male dominance grounded in control over speech. The novel's very first words alert us to the prohibition against speech served on Celie by her father "You'd better not ever tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy." "Celie's language exists through much of the book without a body or audience, just as she exists without a self or identity". (p.201)

The process of discovering or developing desire

begins, for Celie, with the re-appropriation of her own body, which was taken from her by men—first by her brutal stepfather and then passed on to her husband, Albert. The repossession of her body encourages Celie to seek selfhood and later to assert that selfhood through spoken language. During this process Celie learns to love herself.

As the subject of repeated rapes and beatings, Celie tries alternately to ignore and to annihilate her body. The latter is her strategy for defense against her husband's assaults: "He beat me like he beat the children....It all I can do not to cry. I make myself wood. I say to myself, Celie, you a tree." (p.13)

But Celie's ignorance of her body is even more shocking than her desire to annihilate it, as her language makes clear. She describes her own hysteric letters (she soon discovers), to Sofia, and Mary Agnes. With her newfound identity, Celie is able to break free from the masculine prohibition against speech and to join a community of women, thus freeing her from dependences on subjection to male brutality.

Search For Identity :After Shug's recovery the roles shift, with Shug becoming Celie's nurse. Celie's illness, however, is not physical but psychological. Celie lacks an identity. Shug awakens Celie's desire for identity most explicitly when she sings a song she has written just for Celie. As Celie gratefully notes, "first time somebody made something and name it after me" (p.75).The act of naming something after Celie assures the integrity of Celie herself; she must be somebody to be subject of a song. This act is also Celie's first clue that language need not come under the jurisdiction of male authority.

At the end of the book Albert is a new man capable of loving and sharing. The change in him is symbolized by his partaking, with Celie, the traditionally feminine activity, sewing.

This crisis is evident in Celie's almost catatonic announcement ----in which, uncharacteristically, all of her verbs are disrupted ----"My daddy lynch. My mama crazy. All my little half-brothers and sisters no kin to me. My children not my sister and brother. Pa not pa" (p.163)

The appearance of the Fourth of July in the novel's final moments appears to be a ratification of Celie's own personal liberation at the nation's mythicopolitical origin, the birth of the American "people".But what Independence Day resolves for the identity of Anglo-American it has raised as a question for Afro-Americans: along with narrating Celie's history, *The Color Purple* stages, in its journey to this final day, an instance of black American's struggle to clarify its own national identity from the point of view of American populism.

Literacy As A Tool :What saves Celie and Nettie from disenfranchisement is their lifelong

determination to learn, to become literate: Nettie's sense that knowledge was the only route to freedom from the repressive family scene gave her the confidence to escape, to seek "employment" with Samuel's family, to record the alternative and positive truth of Pan-frican identity, to face the truth about her own history, to write it down, and to send it to Celie, against all odds. Writing was not only the repository of personal and national hope; it became a record of lies and violences that ultimately produced truth.

Liberation : Walker asserts that the American society is a racist, sexist and colourist capitalist society which operates on the basis of unnatural hierarchical distinctions. The oppression of Black women by their husbands, brothers, lovers etc. is an outcome of this system.

Historically the burden of Black man's rage against the oppression by the white man, has always been carried out by Black women who are used as their 'punching bag'.They are easier to knock out than the sharecropping system. Brownfield dramatises the tension inherent in this system. He is mean. Walker dramatises his meanness in order to contrast it with the tough resilience of Mem. Black women like Mem, generally, plain, ignorant, God-fearing and church going, developed a resilience to the system. They, according to Walker, circumvented the system by their 'creative sparks expressed in such crafts as quilting, gardening, cooking etc. Mem, initially expressed her creativity through these arts, but she cannot hold on to them for long on account of dehumanization of Brownfield because of American sexism and racism.

As a 'shadow confidant' God, however, performs the dual functions of listening to her story and also of providing a repository for her confessions. The first letter combines these two functions when she writes.

Search For Identity : Even *The Color Purple*, a mixture of the primary colors red (rage) and blue (depression), suggests Celie's mood in the initial letters. The color is also symbolic of the bruises resulting from the beatings inflicted upon Celie first by Alphonso (whom she later learns is her stepfather) and then her husband Albert.

Even though Celie's sensuous "female bonding" with Shug leads to a deeply experienced and lengthy lesbian relationship between the two women, Shug continues to serve Celie as a "good-enough mother" who ministers to the unconscious developmental needs of her child. Celie describes the first of many such moments following their first night together: "Me and Shug sound asleep. Her back to me, my arms round her waist. What it like? Little like sleeping with mama, only I can't hardly remember ever sleeping with her. Little like sleeping with Nettie,

only sleeping with Nettie never feel this good. It warm and cushiony, and I feel Shug's big tits sorta flop over my arms like suds. It feel like heaven is what it feel like, not like sleeping with Mr._____ at all" (p.81)

Quest For Wholeness :Meridian explicitly addresses the paradoxes of Afro-American identity. Meridian participates in an oratorical competition at her high school, reciting a speech that extolled the virtues of the Constitution and praised the superiority of The American Way of Life. The audience cared little for what she was saying, and of course they didn't believe any of it, but they were rapt, listening to her speaks so passionately and with such sad valor in her eyes.

Meridian is Walker's most explicitly and narrowly "political" novel. It exposes the gap between the official claims of American democracy and the state's exploitative and repressive practices and views "personal" relationships as symptoms of the strained political situation.

In Meridian Barbara Christian scrutinized that tradition which is based on the monumental myth of black motherhood, a myth based on the true stories of sacrifice black mothers performed for their children. But the myth is also restrictive, for it imposes a stereotype of black women, a stereotype of strength which denies them choice, and hardly admits of the many who were destroyed.

Meridian's quest for wholeness and her involvement in the Civil Rights movement is initiated by her feeling of inadequacy in living up to the standards of black motherhood. Meridian gives up her son because she believes she will poison his growth with the thorns of guilt and she has her tubes tied after a painful abortion. As many radical feminists blamed motherhood for the waste in women's lives and saw it as a dead end for a women. Walker insisted on a deeper analysis: she did not present motherhood in itself as restrictive. It is so because of the little value society places on children, especially black children, on mothers, especially black mothers, on life itself. In the novel, Walker acknowledged that a mother in this society is often "buried alive, walled away from her own life, brick by brick. "Yet the novel is based on Meridian's insistence on the sacredness of life. Throughout her quest she is surrounded by children whose lives she tries to preserve.

Walker has examined to date the relationship between violence and revolution, a relationship that so many take for granted that such scrutiny seems outlandish. Like her heroine, Meridian, who holds on to the idea of nonviolent resistance after it has been discarded as a viable means to change, Walker persists in struggling with this age-old dilemma-that of death giving life. What the novel suggests is that unless such a struggle is taken on by those who

would change society, their revolution will not be integral.

Battle For Individuality :Meridian traces the moral and psychological development of Walker's title character, Meridian Hill. Born into a middle-class southern black family, Meridian is taught to accept the racist and sexist quo of the 1950's. She is not encouraged to question segregationist policies, sexist traditions, or her own sexual ignorance- all of which deny her autonomy.

Recalling the climate before and during the civil Rights movement, Meridian brings readers to an awareness of the relationship between racism and sexism and their consequences for the individual and the community. It is Meridian's battle for her individuality that is the novel's focus.

Meridian does not tell Truman of the Professor's fondling her, but she thinks about his insistent rubbing against her body in the return for tins of tuna and other small gifts that help her eke out her Scholarship:

"He clasped her in his arms, dragging her away from the door, the long bones of the thighs forcing her legs apart, attempting to force her to the floor. But she smiled and struggled and struggled and smiled, and pretended she knew nothing of his intentions.... a thought which no doubt aroused him all the more. That black women encounter incredibly demeaning situations, involving not just their pride but their bodies as well, from black men." (p.78)

Exploration Of The Racial Past :Meridian in vision transcends both racial and sexual barriers as Walker forces her characters to go beyond the boundaries of the black community to see themselves in relation to the white community as well. In this manner she has her female protagonists travel in the fullest sense by exploring their personal and racial past in order to create a future without racial barriers.

Many critics regard **Meridian** as Walker's fullest most beautifully crafted novel. Its unusual structure reflects the novel's revolutionary theme and spirit. Throughout her career, Walker has committed herself to exploring obstacles to human freedom particularly as they apply to women

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The Temple Of My Familiar : Walker's fourth novel, *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989), continues the expansion of scope in her novels to include all people. In this "romance," as Walker calls it, we find American, Caribbean, south American, and African

people, many of whom have ancestors who were white, black, Native American, or Asian. Also, Walker deals here not only with working-class people but also with college professors, the middle class, and artists.

Primarily the novel tells the story of two marriages. The Temple of My Familiar clearly states Walker's belief in the necessity of seeing the world, and all its people, as a whole.

Women In Walker's Fiction : The women in purple build a wall of camaraderie around themselves. They share in each other's pain, sorrow, laughter and dreams they applaud each other's achievements. And they come to each other's rescue. They are sisters in body as well as in spirit and the spirit cannot be broken they found god in themselves and "they loved her fiercely".

The women in Alice Walker's fiction do not understand the complexity of their problem, and because their limited worlds cannot assist them they are destined to operate haphazardly. They vacillate

between the bottle and the bible and spend a lot of time on their knees. The distinctive feature of these women is the tremendous quality with which they carry their suffering. Some are generous and proud. Some are forgiving even to the men who mistreat them. Some are trusting and patient. The new women overcome insurmountable odds to change their condition. They are all resilient to a point. All of these qualities contribute to the success of Walker's literary style and effect.

The novel is based on Meridian's insistence on the sacredness of life. Throughout her quest she is surrounded by children whose lives she tries to preserve.

Alice Walker's gallery of women is living examples of man's inhumanity to women: Sophia, wife of Harpo, Albert's eldest son, who only wanting to be herself and not the fantasy women, happy woman to a bitter paranoiac who only wants to get through her life without killing anyone.

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