



Emancipating the African Female without a Fuss in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple, Everyday Use: for your Grandmama and in Search of our Mother's Garden*

Blessing Adedokun-Awojodu & Oluyemisi Adebola Oladejo

General Studies Department, Federal Polytechnic, Ilaro, Ogun State, Ogun State Teaching Service Commission
 blessing.adedokun@federalpolyilaro.edu.ng, oluyemisioladejo@gmail.com

Abstract

The African woman, feminist or not, at home or in the diaspora, has always strived to identify with the African social order—a legacy of submission even in self-assertion. This study interrogates the several marginalizing experiences of the African American woman, viz a viz, her various harrowing and dehumanizing experiences in America, first as black, and then as female, and how she has evolved over the years in her struggle against this background. This study was carried out within the theoretical purview of Womanism and by analyzing three of Alice Walker's works: *The Color Purple*, *Everyday Use: For your Grandmama*, and *In Search of our Mother's Garden*. The study has established that the inability of the African American woman to identify with the Western variant of Feminism birthed Womanism which is an African-American variant of Feminism and more liberal. The tenets of Womanism and how they are reflected in Walker's works are also considered in this study. Walker preaches that an egalitarian society can result from a dialogic complementarity between the man and the woman and that this is always a more rewarding approach to gender differences for both genders. It is finally established that Womanism is a veritable tool against patriarchy.

Keywords: African-American, woman, double-marginalization, womanism

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1. Introduction

The black slaves in America had many harrowing experiences as fallouts of being jettisoned from their homeland to become slaves in a foreign land where the Africans lost their true identity and were subjected to redefinition by their masters. Bell (1987) observes that however diverse their situation and their time of writing, black people's experiences "of Africa, the transatlantic or Middle Passage, slavery, Southern plantation tradition, emancipation, Reconstruction, post-Reconstruction, Northern migration, urbanization, and racism – have produced a residue of shared memories and frames of reference". (p.5)

The earliest generation of African American writings started with Phillis Wheatley's *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* published in 1773. Then followed a troupe of black American writers, including females, who pictured the unique experiences of the female slave such as incest, and rape. This was in an effort to free the black slave from double form of oppression through literary tools. Literacy among the African Americans began to increase and more writings that condemned slavery, sexism and racism emerged. The most influential female writers of this period were Ida B. Wells-Barnett and William E.B. Du Bois. In 1894, there emerged National Association of Colored Women magazine called *Women's Era* which afforded the women the privilege of expressing themselves. It



should be noted however that at this time female writers did not enjoy as much popularity as their male counterparts who were more recognized.

From the sixties, there began to occur an interplay of politics and literature. People began to use writing as a political tool. Resistance against political oppressions were non-violent but governance that did not favour the masses were criticised with literary tools. According to Dickson-Carr, “African American art and politics often inspired each other” (2005, p.12) In the 1970s more black writers came to the stage and began to write award winning literatures. This era found Alice walker on the literary scene. It was at this time that more women writers who have been silenced and considered irrelevant for ages came to the limelight. They began to show in their writings the diverse experiences bordering on being an African, a slave and a woman in America. They began to create a new image for themselves in literary texts and most of these texts depict the African women as leaders, creators of culture, mothers and lovers. Alice Walker, like other women, did not only write fiction but played her role in the literary scene by writing essays on several subjects that hinged on the plight of the black, the slave and the woman. And womanism continues to evolve.

2. Theoretical Framework

The theory employed in the analysis of the selected texts of this paper is Womanism.

Womanism or Feminism?

Though it might be right to say that women all over the world have been in consistent struggle against patriarchy, decrying the state of inequality between the man and the woman in the society, African women cannot claim to be completely in the same shoe with the white women, because the experience of being a white female is different from being a black female. Hence the approach of the African woman towards fighting patriarchy is different from that of the white woman. Williams Sherley (1986) opines that feminism is as divisive as the experiences of white women and women of color are different. She goes on to say that black women’s literary experiences were excluded from the literature of white feminists. This position is corroborated by Abney Angela (2014) who also opines those Feminists perspectives offer limited viewpoints that do not go beyond the scope of Western paradigms and are void of the race component.

An African woman neither belongs here nor there. She cannot identify with the white woman on the basis of sex because the white woman is different from her in many respects. Neither can she identify with the African man on the basis of race because the African man knows that the woman does not have the same sex with him, so he sees himself as superior. There then arises the need for the African woman to assert her personal identity and uniqueness. Torps Elisabeth (2008) argues “that black women are undeniably different from their black *male* and *white* female “allies”. Critics have argued that patriarchy cuts across strata- race, class, geographical boundary, so that being black or being a slave does not make the black American slave male to be less hostile to the women in their lives. The experience of being black and female is different from being black and male. Hooks Bell’s (1994, p.148) position is that the institutionalized structure of male dominance encourages males of all races and classes to define their masculinity by acts of physical aggression and coercion toward others, women and children.

Torps (2008) further explains: “Many black female scholars have pointed out that although it is certainly true that black people are faced with racism as a community, black women are faced with sexism not only from outside, but also from within that same community.” The need for womanist writings is premised on the fact that African women not only endure the oppression that comes with their status as “black”, but they also endure the subjugation that comes with their status as female, as patriarchy is an ideology that makes abundant provision for the oppression of women regardless of race. African female slaves suffer more within the spectrum of slavery, as she is oppressed



both by the slave master and her fellow slave who is a male. The black American women has had to endure both the social discrimination against the black and domestic violence of patriarchy perpetrated by their husbands, fathers or any male figure in the life of the black American woman as is depicted in most works of Walker. Bülent and Yasemin (2012) say “If they are not only females but also colored, it becomes much more difficult to live in any community. They are separated from the society. They have to endure all the violence and racist behaviors of both white men and women.”

The birth of Womanism was also premised on the lack of portraiture or the negative portraiture of the black women in the writings of black men (Williams, 1986). Hence, the Womanist concerns herself with seeking out injustices within and outside of the Black communities and finding human and equitable solutions for the good of the whole community, rather than simply the good of women (Taylor, 2009, p. 4). Walker belongs to this generation of black women that have resisted and protested the double marginalization of being both black and female. She has defined the womanist as a black feminist who is committed to the survival and wholeness of an entire people male and female.

Walker’s womanism is a form of black feminism. According to Torps (2008) Alice Walker coined the term “Womanism” in her collection of essays entitled *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*, published in 1983. In this essay, walker expatiates what being a womanist means to her. For her, womanists are not separatists. They are committed to the welfare of the two genders and to her, motherhood is an essential part of being a woman. Womanists love struggle and they refuse to give up easily. The term “womanist” can also refer to various types of relationship that exist among women in the society. Walker paints the portrait of the black woman as a beautiful and strong creature without underestimating the power or importance of the whites and the men.

In the words of Crumpton, S.M, (2014: 16) A womanist tries to find God in the face of emotional, physical, sexual, cultural and spiritual pain.

3. Methodology

This paper analyses the primary texts using the womanism theory. Other literatures are deployed towards data explications and in validating the theory used for the data analyses.

Analyses

Alice Walker, A Black Aloof

Alice walker was born on 9th February 1944 as the eighth and last child of Willie Lee Walker and Minnie Tallulah Grant Walker. Her childhood experiences as a sharecropper’s child in Eatonton, Georgia where the black slaves, especially women, were oppressed influence and are reflected in all her works. She attended Spelman College in Atlanta between 1961 and 1963. Her first novel was published in 1970. Alice walker is a social activist. She also has a passion for using her literary skills to condemn sexism and racism. But because Walker finds it difficult to identify with the Western form of feminism, she pitches her tent with black feminism which she gives the tag “womanism”

Despite the literary position of walker as an African American female writer, there is a sense of universalism in her works, as her subject matters and themes are not always farfetched in every human society. This is especially because the condition of the woman has not really changed despite the dawn of civilization and modernization.



Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*

Synopsis

Celie, a fourteen-year-old girl is often beaten and raped by Alphoso, the man she thinks is her father. Twice she becomes pregnant and have babies that are taken away from her. She surmises that her father kills them. Celie cannot tell anybody what she is passing through, so she writes letter to God through which we get to know about her situation. Later her father marries her off to Albert who originally has his eyes on Nettie, Celie's younger sister. Nettie comes to live with Celie and when Mr. Albert begins to harass her sexually, she flees. When Celie does not hear from her sister for a very long time, she surmises that Nettie has died. Albert continues to brutalize Celie even during sexual intercourse. Meanwhile Mr. Albert whom Celie refers to as Mr. – has another lover, Shug Avery, whom Celie initially sees as a rival but later comes to accept to the point of an inclination towards lesbianism. Mr. Albert's son, Harpo, marries Sofia. Sofia is a strong woman who gets jailed because she trades slaps with a mayor. Meanwhile Nettie has been writing letters to Celie which Mr. – has been keeping away from Celie. Through Nettie's letters, Celie later gets to know that Alphoso is not her real father and that her presumably dead children are actually alive and are adopted by the missionary couple that Nettie befriends.

Celie and shug later leave Mr. – and relocate to Tennessee. Sofia also leaves Harpo.

Shug later gets married to another man. Celie and Sofia reconcile with their respective husbands and Nettie marries Samuel when he becomes widowed.

Analysis

With *The Color Purple*, Walker has captured the various experiences of the black American woman. The novel exemplifies the life of a typical African woman – the social and domestic violence she is exposed to. Crumpton, Stephanie (2014) has observed a culture that normalizes violence against black women, and she notes that this violence begins even when they are still girls. Walker reveals to the world the place of racism and sexism and how it affects the woman negatively. The life of a typical African American woman is exemplified in the character of Celie who initially is so voiceless that she cannot express her pains and the violence she is passing through underneath and only takes solace in writing letters to God. This is a coping mechanism as Crumpton (2014) also observes that black girls and women have developed a sub-culture of their own that allowed them to navigate their double binds. That was the life of the African American woman, the type that Walker would later picture in *In search of our mother's garden*. They had ideas they could express but they were voiceless and were not given any place to air their thoughts, so they resort into telling their children stories. Walker has said that most of her stories are her own version of her mother's stories which her mother did not have the opportunity of telling the world but told her children. The same way, Celie cannot tell anybody her story but tells it to God. Celie however, later changes from being voiceless to a state of emancipation which signals the era of the African American women of protesting sexism and airing their plight through literary means.

Walker indicates that the individual success of the women folk in fighting patriarchy is limited except they unite and fight this common evil together. This is what is suggested in the love triangles that involves Celie, Nettie and Shug and by extension Kate and Sofia. The women are able to surmount their individual and collective problems and at the end of the day, everyone becomes a winner – both the oppressors (male characters) and the oppressed (female characters). This is achieved through the combined effort of the women to unite and fight patriarchy. With this, Walker is implying that the battle against patriarchy should not be left in the hands of a few individuals, rather, that all hands should be on deck. And by making sure that the male characters too become happy at the end of the day, Walker is implying that being fair in the treatment of the woman does not reduce the man in any way.



Walker frowns at violence against women. In the height of patriarchy, Mr. – brutalizes Celie even in the act of sexual intercourse. In Africa there is this notion that sex is not to be enjoyed by the woman; rather it is to be given by the woman for the gratification of the man’s libido.

In African societies it is considered normal for a man to have two or more women, but an abnormality for a woman to have more than one man, hence two women – Shug and Celie - in Mr.–’s life. This is a pointer to the objectification of women, the fact that men see women as mere possessions and that they can acquire as many as they want.

Despite the prevalence of patriarchy, Sofia dares to challenge it. She displays strength at every point in time. She trades slaps with a mayor for his attempts to subordinate her by making her work as a maid, though she is later jailed.

Another instance of patriarchy is Mr. –’s denying Celie access to her sister’s letters which he hides away.

The story takes twists and turns as it is revealed through letters that the children of the missionary couple who Nettie befriends are actually Celie’s children and that Mr. Alphoso is not Celie’s real father but step-father.

African women submission to and endurance of hardship does not imply that they are physically and emotionally weak. Women are strong and can make a life of their own. Shrug and Celie move away to Tennessee, and Celie makes a living from sewing.

Abney Angela (2014) has also noted that African American blacks have difficulty showing affection in a traditional way. The inclination towards lesbianism between Celie and Shrug who later comes to live in the house is worthy of note. For one, we can say that the frustration that both women experience from Mr. - leads to defense mechanism. Then we can also say there is the desire to explore the “second” sex if the man is not good enough.

Another exposure of feminist torture is the circumcision and facial scarring done for Tashi, the African girl that Adam marries.

Also, there is a tendency towards finding a fault in all the women characters. The woman is never praised no matter what she does. Celie grows up being told she is inferior, Shrug Avery told she is evil, Sofia pays for daring. Through the character of Sofia, Walker shows that self-assertion is not without its price.

Cecile’s referring to her husband as Mr. - is symbolic. It shows a state of anonymity which suggests that the man that brutalizes Celie can be any man in time and space. It can also suggest Celie’s total reference for him.

Walker has clearly suggested that radical feminism, the type that Sofia practices, is not the best for the African women as it can have consequences - Sofia suffers twelve years of servitude.

Everyday Use: for your Grandmama

Synopsis

Mama has two daughters - Dee and Maggie – who are different in their manners. Maggie is reserved, almost shy, and tolerant while Dee is bold and has an aura of authority around her. Dee goes to school, becomes enlightened and when she comes to visit her mother and her sister, she makes them know that she has changed her name. And she tries to dominate both her sister and her mother by trying to acquire possessions that belong to her mother and her sister including the quilt which is Maggie’s heritage. Maggie, because of her submissive nature, decides to let her sister have the quilt, but her mother fights for her helps her have her quilt back.

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is a contrast between the character of Maggie and Dee. Maggie is shy and reserved and will not hold too much on to things. Dee on the other hand is bold daring and believes so much in herself to the point of self-obsession.

Walker continues to celebrate motherhood as she sees motherhood as an essential part of the woman's life. Motherhood is also an essential tenet of womanism. Mama has unconditional love for her two daughters despite the differences in their behaviors. Mama talks about the love that exist between mother and children. "On TV mother and child embrace and smile into each other's faces" (p.2)

Walker also asserts that motherhood has a way of changing the woman, making her more tolerant and forbearing. Mama confesses:

"In real life I am a large, big-boned woman with rough, man-working hands. In the winter I wear flannel nightgowns to bed and overalls during the day. I can kill and clean a hog as mercilessly as a man. My fat keeps me hot in zero weather. I can work outside all day, breaking ice to get water for washing; I can eat pork liver cooked over the open fire minutes after it." (p.2)

This is to say that she used to be like Dee, but motherhood has made her to have a tendency towards Maggie's timid personality.

Walker also uses this to suggest that African women are strong, not only emotionally but physically. Mama goes on confessing "One winter I knocked a bull calf straight in the brain between the eyes with a sledgehammer and had the meat hung up to chill before nightfall." (P.2)

While Mama is a replication of the old generation of African women, who though strong, had been forced to put their strength under check so that they went on enduring hardship, Dee is a generation of the new African women, equally strong and maximizing the strength for her own advantage. Here a contrast is made between the old generation and the new generation of strong African women:

"Who can even imagine me looking a strange white man in the eye? It seems to me I have talked to them always with one foot raised in flight, with my head turned in whichever way is farthest from them. Dee, though. She would always look anyone in the eye. Hesitation was no part of her nature." (P3)

These lines suggest that while the older generation cannot challenge male dominance and patriarchy, the younger generation can.

Another fact that can be deduced from this story is that unpleasant experiences have their ways of making one lose their courage. We are made to know that the incidence of the fire outbreak which burnt down the family's former house is responsible for Maggie's reclusive nature.

Dee's education also has contributed to her outspokenness and her believe in herself. Education is an eye-opener. Dee is self-important and always believes that she deserves the best, always wanting to have the good things for herself. Though her character might not be found alluring to an average African, she contributes to the overall effect and the point that Walker is trying to make.

Walker also uses this story not just to talk about the female strength but also to highlight the dominance of the whites and the oppression of the black as captured in Mama's words "Don't ask me why: In 1927 colored asked fewer questions than they do now." (p.3)



Worthy of mention is the idea that men cannot tolerate women who are too daring. Alice Walker might be using this as a subtle condemnation of radical feminism as Dee pays the price of being too daring. According to the story:

When she was courting Jimmy T, she didn't have much time to pay visits to us but turned all her faultfinding power on him. He *flew* to marry a cheap city girl from a family of ignorant, flashy people. She hardly had time to recompose herself. (p. 51)

This is one of the motifs in Walker's works that, in as much as the African women need emancipation, men in Africa and in the world at large can hardly stand being made to feel less a man, so in the same way that Sofia in *The Color Purple* pays for her daring, Dee too pays for her daring.

Dee's change of name to Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo is significant, and this fact should not be glossed over. It signifies the strength of the African woman at self-re-assertion and redefinition. By making a firm decision to change her own name, Dee (Wangero) now establishes that the society or family does not have the right to determine the definition of her existence and she alone reserves the right to do so. This is also in line with the black women reaffirmation of identity by way of literary expression. Her courage to ask questions about the epistemology of her renounced name shows that African women have now begun to question and challenge structures that do not put them in to consideration in deciding their definition. When her mother expresses a displeasure about her changing her name because she was named after her mother's sister, Dee (Wangero) replied, "But who was *she* named after?"

She demands to have the chun top and the dasher. Education has made her to ask for what she needs rather than groan in desperate need.

She decides to have the quilts which the mother has reserved for Maggie. After a series of argument with her mother in which Wangero gives good reasons why she and not Maggie should have the quilt, Maggie intercepts and tells her mother to let her sister have the quilt. This is by way of total submission to patriarchy, subjugation, and marginalization of the woman. Alice captures this in: "She can have them, Mama," she said, like somebody used to never winning anything or having anything reserved for her. "I can 'member Grandma Dee without the quilts." (153)

But Mama collects the quilt from Dee, only then did Wangero bring out the lesson she has been trying to teach both Maggie and her mother to embrace the new way of trying to fight for what is by right theirs, rather than stay always cheated.

Mama's non-conditional affection for her daughters, irrespective of the fact that they are poles apart, is an indication of the womanist inclinations.

In Search of our Mother's Garden

This essay is what Walker uses to relate the problem of the African woman. The image and portrait of the woman shows that the woman is strong, beautiful, rich and intelligent, but these good qualities of the woman is viewed in the negative light. The good qualities of the woman make the man idolize the woman; perceive her as a saint rather than a woman. The tone of the essay shows how angered Walker is with this system:

"Instead of being perceived as whole persons, their bodies became shrines: what was thought to be their minds became temples suitable for worship." (p.4)



She argues that though these earlier black women possessed great skills and talents for artistry, which were not explored, they were sentenced to household shores while they had as much creative ability as their male counterparts. Walker asks rhetorically: “Or was she required to bake biscuits for a lazy backwater tramp, when she cried out in her soul to paint watercolors of sunsets, or the rain falling on the green and peaceful pasture-“These women with as much creative ability as the men, the women in the age of the Walker’s grandmother and mother did not have the privilege of being artistically creative like the privilege the generation of Walker and subsequent generations enjoyed. She argues that these women could have been novelists, dramatists, or poets. But they die “with their real gifts stifled within them.”

The black women of that time were condemned to carry the burden that everyone else refuses to carry. Walker gives accounts of how hardworking her mother was, always working beside and not behind her father at the field, cultivating her orchards and doing her household chores from dusk till dawn, yet finding time to tell her children stories. This is a good potential that she could have fully utilized to express herself, earn a name for herself as well as a living. Alice confesses that most of her stories are the revised versions of the stories her mother had told her.” Yet the woman never gets any fair treatment from the man. The man decided the world and the definition of his woman and the portrait of the woman in text is not good:

Black women are called, in the folklore that so aptly identifies one's status in society, "the *mule* of the world," because we have been handed the burdens that *everyone-else* refused to carry. We have also been called "Matriarchs," "Superwomen," and "Mean and Evil Bitches." Not to mention "Castraters" and "Sapphire's Mama." When we have pleaded for understanding, our character has been distorted; when we have asked for Simple caring, we have been handed empty inspirational appellations, then stuck in the farthest comer. When we have asked for love, we have been given children. In short, even our plainer gifts, our labors of fidelity and love, have been knocked down our throats. To be an artist and a black woman, even today, lowers our status in many respects, rather than raises it and yet, artists we will be. (p.405)

Women did as much grueling labor work as men did, yet they are regarded as less of human than the man.

Women also had sense of beauty. Walker recounts her mother’s penchant for flowers. And she claims that she owes her heritage of love and beauty to her mother.

Alice Walker’s Motif of Womanism

Apart from the fact that Walker’s works often discuss racism, as a result of the harrowing experiences suffered by the blacks in the house of the white masters, her works often capture the tenets of womanism. For example, she preaches in subtle way in both *The Color Purple* and *Everyday use: For your Grandmama* the danger inherent in being too radical in fighting patriarchy. Sofia has to work as a slave for the mayor for twelve years because she radically challenges patriarchy by slapping the mayor who slaps her back, the same way that Dee pays for being too radical by losing her former boyfriend to another woman because of her incessant fault-finding habit in *Everyday use: For your Grandmama*. Walker is not using the characters of Dee and Sofia to preach that women should continue to lament under the heavy burden of patriarchy, rather she is saying that subtle approach to subjects involving male dominance is better and more effective. Maggie gets the sympathy of her mother and gets the quilt which symbolizes her own heritage back because she is liberal in her feminism, the same way Kate gets Mr. – to buy Celie new set of clothes simply by dialogue.



The works of Walker also captures the fact that motherhood is an integral part of Womanism. Mama in *Everyday Use: For your Grandmama* displays affection for her two daughters. She loves and shows that she loves them unconditionally regardless of their inadequacies. Despite the fact that Dee and Maggie differ in their outlook to life, Mama still tries to balance between them by catering for the needs of the two. While Maggie shows affection for cultural heritage and Mama lets her have the quilts, Dee prefers education and exposure, and Mama provides for her needs by raising money and seeking financial assistance of the church in order to send her to school. In the same way, Celie displays uneasiness because she thinks her children have been killed. Her anxiety and suspicion rises the day she stumbles on a woman and a girl who looks like her and bears the name she has given her own daughter. She is happy to learn that her children are after all alive. The character of Mama and Celie is not farfetched in real life African society. A typical African woman sees her children as the center of her world and can go to any extent to protect the interests of her children. Records have shown that many African women endure the patriarchal dominance of their husband and would not opt for a divorce because of their children.

Another tenet of womanism is the various relationships that exist among the women in the society. Women often have their different traits and inadequacies and often there are rifts and there are cases of misunderstanding but in spite of that, women still manage to bond, they still manage to bear one another's burdens. The female characters in the *Color Purple*, though at one time or the other steps on each other's toes, still manage to be there for each other. An example is the case of Celie and Shrug who initially see each other as rivals and enemies, but later come to be best of friends, also in *Everyday Use: For your Grandmama*, Dee and Maggie despite their different characters still manage to tolerate each other to a good extent. Maggie is willing to let go of her treasured quilt for her sister. Mama manages to be the mediator between her two children despite her own personal challenges too.

Another recurrence in the works of Walker is the autobiographical touch to her works. There is an element of truelife story in her works. The novel and short story considered for this study reflect Walker's early life as a child. Quilting is an integral part of her story. Quilts perhaps have a special place in her life or have a special meaning to her. For her, it could signal feminist creativity, and probably beauty, but she has shown that quilting is part of her own personal heritage, given her background discussed above.

4. Conclusion

Walker has been able to show through these selected works, the need for dialogic complementarity. Her school of feminism does not believe that women have to be separatists. Rather she advocates the need for both sexes to complement each other. While she is never in support of the subjugation and oppression of the female gender by the man, she does not believe that the battle against patriarchy can be won by total annihilation of the man. This is what is brought to bear as she makes Sofia pay for raising her hand back at a mayor. For her, to have an egalitarian society, no sex should see itself as superior, neither should a sex think it is better off without the other. She has set a pace for many generations of African female writers after her, so that it is uncommon to see the western radical sort of approach to feminism exhibited by African female writers. Therefore, it would not be wrong to refer to Walker as a "liberal feminist" as she would mostly prefer to be called a "womanist".

Many African writers have since adopted workers approach to feminism and have continued to manifest its tenets in their writings. This approach has also continued to impact the society positively and foster cooperation.



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