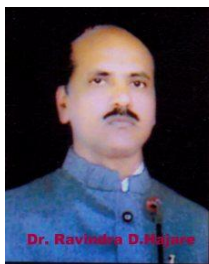


THE FICTIONAL WORLD OF ALICE WALKER: A BRIEF REVIEW OF FOUR NOVELS

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ABSTRACT

Alice Walker is a much acclaimed, contemporary, Afro- American novelist, poetess, activist and philanthropist writing for her declared cause of uplifting Afro- American women and projecting them as goddesses in her fictions. Her fictitious world is typical as the world painted by her predecessors and contemporary Afro -Americans both men and women writers. Her fictitious world, though much dominated by female characters, Walker casts much insight into the male characters making them grow simultaneously and become aware of the tyranny, agonies, and sufferings sustained by their women since their capture and their forceful sale in slave market, their estrangement from their own children, kith and kin and their empowerment through different liberation movements. Walker's fictional world is a genuine and successful attempt of bridging gap between past history and present evolution of women to self -awareness, liberation and dignity.

The present paper is a sincere and systematic attempt towards taking a review of some novels of Alice Walker in which the theme is found to be central and much dominant.

1. Introduction

The Afro- Americans, the Negroes, or the Back-Americans, as they are variously called, are a unique product of amalgamation of various cultures. Alice Walker, like many other Black writers, has made their appearance on the stage of life through this mixture. Her characters, particularly women characters, need an exclusive treatment as they too are the product of the same mixture. The characters represent the life in general sustained by the Black people, their oppression, violence, their racial problems, exploitation, their struggle for existence and survival.

A peep into their historical, social-economic and cultural background helps us to arrive at the point of the making of Alice Walker an artist, painting the portrayals of black people and black women in general and creating a fictitious world of their own with their searing, insightful perspective as an Afro- American writer, unlike many others, with her declared purpose of winning a dignity, an identity to black women through riveting characters as well as her life as an activist, fighting tooth and nail, to uplift the black women to dignity and status enjoyed by the whites and discarded to the Black in America.

Walker's fictional world is but her vision of the world in future and the status all women should enjoy as human beings. This is the common thread that binds all her novels and reveals her purpose. Her realistic

delineation makes all of us believe and help us take an insightful journey into their personal lives. Her treatment of black female characters does not remain within the constraints of the fictions but form to be called a prototype of her vision.

2. Dealing with the Fictional World: The Four Major Novels.

As the history shows, the black women were devalued, dehumanized, degraded, exploited and brutally oppressed. They were the victims of the whites and the blacks, doubly oppressed, the color and gender, racism and sexism, poverty and powerlessness. The double slavery imposed upon them was horrible. They became the slaves of their husbands. This is the picture presented by Walker in her fictional world. Hence, Celie, the protagonist in "the Color Purple" screams,

"And I ain't a woman? Look at me! Look at my arms! I have ploughed and planted and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And I ain't a woman? I could work as much as a man".

(i) Alice Walker began writing **the Third Life of Grange Copeland** during the winter of 1966 when she was staying in a dark, poorly lighted apartment on St. Mark in New York. She herself admits that it was an incredibly difficult novel to write, for she had to look at and speak about violence among people-including her and her family- were enduring massive psychological and physical violence from white supremacists in the southern states, particularly Mississippi. Black people, including her were already fighting for freedom and civil rights. "**Everybody's got a right to the tree of life**" they said. Alice Walker was very much disturbed on witnessing the violence, sexual exploitation, physical and mental oppression at her town Eatonton. She could not help writing a novel on such a subject. The novel presents the most disturbing incident: the brutal murder of a woman and mother by her husband and the father of her children, which is she says, unfortunately based on a real case. The black people there, as in so many parts of the world, are an oppressed colony. The violence of her hometown was impressed upon her because she visited the local black funeral home several times a week.

In her immediate family, too, there was violence. Its roots seemed always to be embedded in her father's need to dominate her mother and their children, and in her resistance, verbal, physical, to any such domination. The same kind of violence was there in her husband's family. A black family has become symbolic of all black women. That is why Alice Walker has named her major female character **Mem**, in the novel after the French la meme, meaning '**the same**', whose fate is dealt with in this novel.

It is a story of a black sharecropper, enslaved and dehumanized by poverty and debt, which breaks free at the point where he would have killed his wife, who has betrayed him with the white landowner. Instead he abandons her and his son Brownfield, and heads north. Consumed by hatred for Grange, Brownfield nevertheless is condemned to repeat his father's evil. Stripped by his manhood by an oppressive society, he degrades his wife Mem to the point where he can recover part of his ego by dominating her. He batters and crushes his wife and their three daughters and eventually kills her, out of his neurotic jealousy. The youngest daughter Ruth is taken by Grange, now returned and transformed by time and experience into a wise and saintly old man. He nurtures and protects Ruth in the end to the point of killing his own son and evolves from a victim of abuse, his white boss to a perpetrator of abuse against his own wife and son, and finally, in his 'third' life, into a protector and guardian of his beloved granddaughter, Ruth.

Alice Walker's place as a feminist is more important. She dismisses the label and describes her works and social conviction as '**womanist**.' She takes to define the term as "a woman who loves other women Appreciates and prefers woman's culture, woman's emotional flexibility.... and woman's strength..... loves the spirit, loves her...regardless." Contrary to it, a feminist is one who is awakened and has become conscious about women's life and problem and knows the exploitation is caused by patriarchal hegemony and it has to be ended if one has to build a society based on equality. An awakening that one is oppressed just because of one is black and female, creates a feeling of black feminist consciousness. The black women writers like Alice Walker express such consciousness.

Mary Helen Washington, an Alice Walker critic, states that 'the author is on apologist for Black women' and she uses the term '**apologist**' in the sense that Walker 'speaks or writes in defense of a cause or a

position.’ The cause is the liberation of Black womanhood, but as an apologist, she demonstrates this position basically in the sense of acknowledging.

(ii) **‘Meridian’** is her long-standing civil rights novel. Here Walker acknowledges Meridian’s plight. The main plot of the novel deals with the tale of Meridian, the title character, her childhood miseries, then her life as an activist, her evolution from a school girl to a successful protagonist. At same time, Walker also brings out many other women characters victimized by racism, sexism, color politics, class differences, and their pitiful states because of being black, and their plight as slaves etc. Along with Meridian, the tales of exploitation and oppression of black women are the part and parcel of the novel. The sexual and racial harassment of Meridian would not be sufficient to bring the issue home. Hence, Walker has included many other sharply portrayed women whom Meridian comes across while living her life as an activist, moving from place to place, only to give kaleidoscopic pictures of black people, their predicament, and their miserable, pitiful state.

Like Celie in the *Color Purple*, Meridian dominates the entire novel. It tells her story from her school days to her appearance as historical figure, making room in the heart of her people, serving them, raising their problems, children’s problems without fear, irrespective of her life and family. Here Meridian becomes a metaphor of rise of black women to identity through their awareness to political rights as well as social equality. Meridian like a figure of spirits and soul represents that every black as well as white women who have awakened and started agitation for their rights. Setting the novel in the period of 1960’s, an age of rising of black women to their rights, itself is a proof of the vision of its author which she saw coming true.

(iii) The third novel which is undoubtedly the most famous and controversial one presents the vision in very dramatic way. The novel has received a lot of mixed comments from the reviewers and readers. Alice Walker has answered them in a fitting way. In many of the interviews she has revealed her purpose. Her purpose was not to offend men by making them mere stereotypes or presenting whites as tyrants. Her purpose was to bring fore the writer’s notion of an ideal society sans every tyranny, whether they are white or black, men or women. She gives the message of love, compassion and self respect and dignity. With this purpose, in **the Color Purple**, she lifts Black women off their knees, uses love as a defense mechanism and raises Black women to a level of royalty. Alice Walker makes an interesting study with her southern background and feminist approach in the *Color Purple* and other fictions.

The *Color Purple* has brought her an important place among contemporary American novelists. Walker’s novels focus on racial, political and sexual issues while they highlight women’s struggle for survival. The *Color Purple* more particularly provides an insight into predicament of women on the domestic front. The story revolves round an unfortunate, abused woman, Celie and other black women characters and brings home the predicament perpetrated against black women.

The predicament, as the history bears a testimony, is the result of their sexual, racial and interracial suppression and oppression, physical exploitation and violence. The women in the *Color Purple* live in an unpleasant, difficult, perplexing and dangerous situation. They are always in a dilemma, in a quandary. They try to come out of racial and sexual discrimination, inhuman treatment and the patriarchal system which encourages women’s oppression and offers secondary status. The women are treated like slave. They are deprived of freedom and social position. They are mere puppets fallen in the hands of men and mere objects of sex though it is against their will. The men suck them till they die and bring home another teenager to gratify their sexual desire. They are so mean they don’t even spare their ‘daughters’. They are estranged so that they should not find solace in the company of one another. The women are as if toys that are born only to be played by men in whatever way they want.

Alice Walker depicts these multifaceted problems and predicament of women quite realistically and naturally in the *Color Purple*. The novel provides them a wide canvass to put forth their sufferings and pains in a new light. Though male characters have been dealt harshly, it is with didactic purpose; to suggest a solution to their predicament. Her aim is to emphasize and highlight the predicament of women caused by repetitive violence, suppression, physical and sexual exploitation, and patriarchal taboos so that the men would be introspective, sympathetic and considerate towards women and bring about a change in their attitude and treatment. Being a ‘womanist’, Walker loves women and becomes the spokesperson of them.

“ Like the best writers of any era Walker has probed deeply into the soul of the nation in which she was bred and in doing so, has brought to the light our country’s dark secrets ” remarks Richer Wesley.

(iv) The fourth novel, *The Temple of My Familiar* reveals Walker’s interest in the ancestral past of the people. It features several characters of the *Color Purple* and reflects some of the concerns of the novel- racism, a reverence for nature and search for spiritual truths. It presents the history of the life of the African black women of different races. Lissie has lived many lives in different countries and different continents. She is different races and time. Though the stories are told by Lissie and Zede, Alice Walker throws light on different types of atrocities committed on women. It is also the story about how women once enjoyed dignity and status in their motherhood, in the world of matriarchs and they were brought under the control of patriarchal social order, which caused the loss of their status and dignity both. Like three of her earlier novels this novel can be taken as a progression of the vision Walker wants to present in her fiction. Once she showed women rose to their feet and obtained liberty and dignity. We cannot say that her vision is complete. She wants to substantiate the cause by digging the history of black people and showing the status once enjoyed by them before they lost their ‘Paradise’ and thrown into the dungeon of slavery, poverty, sexual harassment and racial discrimination in the new world. It does not mean that there were no problems at all; they were very happy enjoying the status of ‘Goddess’ in their temples. They believed in coexistence with equal reverence to nature, birds and animals. Their life was full of bliss and joy. They were revered. This is the vision of Alice Walker which she tries to fulfill by writing such a novel. One should not take it merely digging her history. It is a purposeful endeavor of the novelist to make her vision complete.

Ms. Alice Walker, as a Black American novelist, poet, short story writer, essayist, critic and editor, has contributed a lot to enrich Afro-American literature. Much of her writing reveals her concerns with Black women and families. Ms. Walker deftly sculpts her people and delineates their relationships. She writes from a world of experience which no white poet could possibly share.

3. Analysis

Over more than four decades of her writing life, Alice Walker has immersed herself in protest, civil disobedience, writing, speaking, travelling and film making on behalf of numerous causes. The Civil Rights movement of the 1960s involved her in demonstrations, the voter registration campaign and defiance of Mississippi’s racist laws during her marriage to Leventhol. Using her writing in a politically engaged and socially responsible manner, to give voice to the voiceless, she stands out as a pioneering literary figure, creating new voices and new visions of the role literature can play in shaping and critiquing society.

Walker’s intention in writing the novels was to lessen the oppression of black women by black men. Hence they are directed to black men. They are held responsible to end sexist exploitation and also to determine the means to end it. She describes her works and social conviction as ‘womanist.’ She is “a woman who loves other women appreciates and prefers woman’s culture, woman’s emotional flexibility.... and woman’s strength..... loves the spirit, loves her...regardless.

A review of the four novels simply makes one analyze that Walker’s fictional world is full of men and women: but she presents women empowering, liberating, becoming independent and rising to self awareness, consciousness, and dignity which she dreams for them. Each novel moves on towards achieving the goal as well as making of Walker. *The Color Purple* shows Alice Walker’s growth as a work of fiction. She elevates Black women to the height of sovereignty. They wear the royal robe of purple. Zora Neale Hurston’s novel **‘Their Eyes Were Watering God’** (1939) a brilliant evocation of the mores and folkways of the South, is clearly one of Walker’s models. Gloria Steinem’s views about the greatness of Alice Walker are also worth mentioning. She writes-

“There must be thousands of people scattered around this country, each one of whom thinks only she or he knows how necessary and major a writer Alice Walker is. ”

Walker’s heritage and history provide a vehicle for understanding the modern world in which her characters live. She relies upon sexual violence and physical abuse to portray breaches in black generations.

Typically she brings to her works a terrible observance of black self-hatred and destruction. Her works simply presume, as she states, “**All history is Current; all injustice continues on same level.**”

Conclusion

Alice Walker herself a civil rights activist raises the same issues in her novels. Her novels are characterized by the contemporary social, economical and political issues, in addition to the racism and sexism. Walker’s novels deal with several other problems of lower middleclass black people especially focusing on black women. Being a woman herself, confronted discriminatory treatment, oppressed and suppressed by their own men and the white, Walker a ‘Womanist’ made her ‘pen’ a missile to liberate her women from all kinds of oppressions and win them a special kind of dignity and identity fighting for them on almost all grounds: education, literature, social, political and spiritual. Her fictions reveal the vision quite emphatically and realistically.

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