Exploration of Art and Authenticity with Special Reference to Alice Walker’s Womanism in *The Color Purple*

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**Abstract:**

*The Color Purple* traces the life of a coloured woman in a typically racist and sexist American society of the early 20th century. The protagonist in the book is a woman who progresses physically and emotionally through a shower of social paradigms. During her quest for self-knowledge and spiritual fulfilment, they clash with the belittling values that her daily circumstances imposed upon them. The text depicts the process of a woman’s coming to consciousness, finding her voice and developing the power to lead a life on her own. However, Walker’s experiences decades later were very successful in a literary climate that changes with the tick of the second; despite controversies about the image of black culture and the reviving of old stereotypes. Thematically and technically, Walker reclaims two territories: the experience of uneducated rural southern women and the language of black folk culture. The study’s purpose is to show essentially how black women writers use their literary productions to tell the stories of black women who try to find out the truth about them and the world they live in through different circumstances and in different cultures. To achieve this goal, it is found necessary to employ textual and thematic criticism.

**Keywords:** Art and Authenticity, Womanism, Animism.

“We are not white. We are not Europeans. We are black like the Africans themselves...We and the Africans will be working for a common goal: the up lift of black people everywhere” (CP 143).

The concept of Art and Authenticity is something very familiar to many of us. Art is evident through human imitation and imaginative creation and its application whereas Authenticity retains undisputed origin. Both aspects of the proposed paper explore the meanings
of Ethnicity in African American Literature known as Black Literature. And therefore, it can be stated that Black Art is the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Authenticity. Hence African American Literature becomes a metaphor of America, esp. after World War - II.

A survey of the world of contemporary black women writer reveals the search for meaningful identity, the search for self-esteem in an openly hostile society and the search for a language to express the richness of a native oral culture. In exploring these elements of black consciousness, African-American Women Writer exhibits a strong historical sense that often takes them back to their ancestors who lived in the slave society of previous centuries. Aspects of American culture have survived in much of the writing of Women Writers - codes of collective experience and memory, personal modes of production like diaries and letters, use of folklore, storytelling and an emphasis on the relationship of the individual to her community, to the past and to the future generations.

Many African American Women Novelists writing in English have understandably not allied themselves with radical white feminists. They recognize their consciousness of sexual issue; she must incorporate social, cultural, national, economic and political condensations into her philosophy of life. Alice Walker’s work as a legacy from the Southern experience provides a consistent interest and voice. Her aim is to rescue Black women from silence, recreate women’s lives and myths in different periods of history, confronting racism and sexism through the establishment of sister-hood and the writing of what she terms ‘Womanist’ prose, using qualifying, the vernacular, myth, and storytelling forms. Born in Eatonton, Georgia and educated at Spellman and Sarah Lawrence colleges, Alice Walker was active in the Civil Rights Movement. She taught in several colleges and universities, including the University of California at Berkeley which helped her to be a writer.

The paper explores in distinct ways the ideas of Alice Walker, of the Harlem Renaissance. Walker’s most acclaimed third novel, *The Color Purple (1982)*, which especially delineates the interactions between song and self, is a “One woman journey to song and self - possession.” Transformation of Pain into Art is Walker’s fictional Vision. Walker’s idea of God is based on her concept of *Animism*, a distinctive trait in African ethos, spirituality and music, as two inseparable aspects of *Womanism* in her most popular novel *The Color Purple*. Presented in epistolary style, the novel traces thirty years in the life of Celie, a poor Southern black woman who is victimized physically and emotionally by both her Stepfather and her Husband. While in
her teenage Celie is repeatedly raped by her stepfather, whom she believes to be her natural father, she bears his two children only to have them stolen by him and to be told that they are dead. Celie is eventually placed in a loveless marriage with Albert, a widower she addresses as “Mister,” who for the next three decades beats her and torments her psychologically. Celie writes letters describing her ordeal to God and to her sister Nettie, who escapes a similar fate by serving as a missionary in Africa. Celie eventually finds solace through her friendship and love for Albert’s mistress, Shug Avery, a charismatic blue singer who gives her the courage to break off her marriage. At the novels end, Celie is reunited with her children and with Nettie.

Change means growth, and growth can be painful rather than constant pleasurable but its results might be gleeful towards life. Change is the only static in art, culture, literature and nature too. Womanism is the term which reminds us of Black Feminism. It gives awareness among Black women who were always treated on the basis of race, sex or class in African American society. It is known that white feminism has served the interest of white women alone and has failed to do so for Black women’s life experience of racism, and sexism through the emergence of the movement. Black women’s unfortunate condition has been much worse than that of white women. White women have suffered for being female and black men for being black, but Black women have had to suffer from the “double danger” of racism and sexism in the society. Violence against Black women extended from life to myth and literature with dehumanization through misconceptions and stereotypes. Womanist writing tries to explore new dimensions from myth and literature, and represent a Black woman as a competent identity struggling towards race, gender and nation. And that is the main aim of the movement called as Womanism.

Walker’s book of essays, *In search of Our mother’s Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1984) could be considered as the Womanist Manifesto and *The Color Purple* as the New Testament of Womanist Gospel. The basic roots of womanism can be traced from these two masterpieces. According to Walker, a womanist is “A black feminist or feminist of color ... [with] outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behaviour. A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually”

Self-esteem is the primary issue dealt with by black women in their writings. They stress this factor by saying: ‘Women must assure responsibility for strengthening their self-esteem by learning to love and appreciate them - in short celebrate their womanhood.’ Womanism can be traced in the form as well as the content of *The Color Purple*. Its epistolary form in itself is
suggestive of lesbian sexuality: Within the framework of lesbian-feminism, the letter means the female body, and correspondence between two women is suggestive of lesbianism. To cite Wendy Wall: “Letters become the surrogate body for Celie, an inanimate form that serves a dual purpose: It tends off pain by siphoning off her feelings of degradation, as well as allowing her to express and thus feel the integrity of her emotions. Her self-division is imposed upon her external circumstances, yet by displacing a part of herself onto this second body, she keeps intact that division. She compartmentalizes a suppressed ‘Self’ through her letters. The letters become the tenuous skin of her body, framing her internal thoughts in a realm separate from her outward actions” (Wall 262). The novel’s theme and content are also thoroughly womanist. Walker explores, “the oppressions, the treaties, the loyalties and the triumphs of black women” (Walker 1984: 250). She says that “Black women among all women have been oppressed almost beyond recognition -oppressed by everyone” (Walker 1984:149). Marathi writer Anil Awachat says the same with the reference to the news report which he came across in his reading: “In the district places of South Africa sexually exploitation and abused black women cases are found around forty thousand every year” (Bhagat 70). Black women have been pictured as “The mule of the World” and “Mean and Evil Bitches”. But Walker says, “For me black women are the most fascinating creations in the world” (Walker 1984: 251). She wishes to investigate the relationship between men and women and to a greater extent the lives of the black women. In The Color Purple, Walker attempts to depict the oppression black women experience in their relationship with black men. She portrays the need for sisterhood which has liberating possibilities for black women.

In The Color Purple she emphasizes the universal oppression of black women focusing primarily on Celie’s story. Walker’s womanist touch gave new-dimension to the text. Though the life space of Celie is portrayed, Shug is Walker’s mouthpiece; she is Walker’s womanist catalyst. Being a representative of the genre of black blues/ jazz women who emerged, like Shug, during the beginning of the twentieth century revealed the fact through their singing which articulates the sorrows, brutalities, endurances and love- fleeting moments of all those women who, like Celie are shocked down and rendered inarticulate in this woman-hating world. Shug is her own woman that is she owns herself. Therefore, she is the most amazing female Celie has ever seen. Ultimately Shug is totally admired by Celie. She watches how Shug carries herself and how she dresses, curses and fraternizes with men as though they were mere people. Moreover, Celie is fascinated
by how womanish Shug is. Shug has physically nurtured and loved Celie. Celie and Shug play in bed together, laugh together, and for the first time in her life Celie experiences joy. Celie’s change is seen because of one thing—love, both in physical and the spiritual sense. Shug comes across as being woman’s woman, a lover and healer of women. It means that her heart is with women because she herself is a woman. But this does not mean that she does not love men, because she does. She has no doubt to be with all sorts of men and women. It makes clear sense that Shug remains bisexual throughout her sexual life. Here, Walker’s announcement can be considered over rumors that have surfaced over her sexuality after the publication of *The Color Purple* and *The Same River Twice*. Walker announces: “I am bisexual. I just live my life. I don’t think I have to phone in and tell everybody” (*White* 86). Walker’s above statement can be reconsidered that she is both feminine and masculine in her perceptions. This is what Walker’s personal experience and the experience of her protagonist. She says in her interview: “I feel so often that we are all so much the same in many ways” (*Wilson* 324).

Benard Bell has pointed out that *The Color Purple* is “More concerned with politics of sex and self than with the politics of class and race... its unrelenting, severe attacks on male hegemony, especially the violent abuse of black women by black men is offered as a revolutionary leap forward into a new social order based on sexual egalitarianism” (*Bell* 263). Celie’s life is a depiction of the black women to history. Walker and her sister Ruth were hiking through the woods discoursing on a lover’s triangle that both were aware of, when Ruth said, “And you know, one day The Wife asked The Other Woman for a pair of her drawers” Walker knew that suddenly she had the seed of a historical novel that had been taking shape in her mind. She says, “The ‘History’ starts not with the taking of lands, or the births, breathes, and deaths of Great men, but with one woman asking another for her underwear” (*Walker* 1984: 356).

Womanism spreads through the novel in the sense of sexual and emotional bonding between black women against all patriarchal tyrannies. It can be seen not only in the intense mutual longing that Celie and Nettie give full vent to in their letters, but also in one’s readiness to sacrifice anything for the other. Celie’s offering herself sexually to her stepfather to save her sister from being raped by him provides one of the most touching examples of womanism in the novel. Moreover, an example of empathy and sacrifice to the point of accepting rape, which parallels the case of Celie, is offered by Squeak, who endures rape by the warden of the prison to get Sofia out of it. Womanism, in its non-sexual aspect, i.e. in the sense of sisterhood, affection and solidarity
is insight in the attitude of economic co-operation that exists among the black women. To cite an instance: “Me and Sofia work on the quilt. Got it frame up on the porch. Shug Avery donate her old yellow dress for scrap, and I work in a piece every chance I get. It a nice pattern call Sister’s choice. If the quilt turns out prefect, maybe I give it to her, if it not perfect, maybe I keep”. (CP 61) This elemental form of economic co-operation among the women initially corresponding to mere seeds, later grows into black lesbianism represented by Celie’s “Folkspants unlimited Sugar Avery Drive Memphis, Tennessee” (CP 221).

Walker’s autobiographical glimpses found with history and culture. Walker introduces the art of quilt-making, which she herself works on while writing the novel: “I brought some beautiful blue and red and purple fabric my quilt began to grow. And, of course, everything was happing Celie and Shug and Albert was getting to know each other” (Walker 1984: 358). Quilting symbolizes female bonding, sisterhood, and togetherness. Walker’s mentioning of the art of quilting reflects her respect and love for black cultural heritage. Speaking of a quilt that hangs in the Smithsonian institution as the work of ‘an anonymous Black woman from Alabama’, Walker says that the anonymous woman was “one of our grandmothers- and artist who left her mark in the only materials she could afford, and in the only medium her position in society allowed her to use” (Walker 1984: 239). It is an art which also gives Celie an aesthetic release from her anger against

Mr. - So when she is dangerously angry, she takes “a needle and not a razor in (her) hand” (CP 153). Thus, Celie tries to revive her own humanity through a needle but not a razor. The discovery of this radical, but fulfilling lover provided Celie with self-confidence, identity, and voice. She resurrects from silent, dominated, abused and passive life into an active and industrious life. Around the dinner table at Odessa’s house, as Albert seeks to trap Celie, but her voice articulates in a powerful emancipator manner: “You a lowdown dog is. What’s wrong, I say. It’s time to learn you and enter into the creation. And your dead body just the welcome mat I need” (CP 207). This independence voice later tells “I’m pore, I’m black, I may be ugly and can’t cook. But I’m here” (CP 214). This great achievement of Celie leads towards Walker’s black sisterhood, known as Womanist theory. It becomes another reveal against tradition. Celie learns black womanist consciousness, and love to herself as well as black men and women.

To conclude, I tried to focus on the culmination of the tedious process of transformation into liberation. The immense change in Celie, Squeak remains with images and metaphors for
womanism with the radiant energy from Shug. In the process they have transformed themselves from isolated nonentities to family of sisters; they have come from colony to community, from slaves to free women. They are womanish women. The energy flowing between and emanating from them is pure radiance and that is Shug Avery, who is the mirror image of Alice Walker, as far as womanism is concerned. In another word, Walker’s Womanist Manifesto found in *In Search of Our Mother’s Garden: Womanist Prose* whereas Shug Avery’s in *The Color Purple*.

Though Alice Walker exposes patriarchal hegemony, she does not reject the black man completely. Her women characters do reject the atrocious black men but the moment these men change their way of life, they are welcomed into their company. In fact, Walker creates such a world of black men and women based on equality and mutual understanding and peaceful coexistence which is full of happiness and prosperity. Thus, Walker creates a new world order defined and determined by the female of the species. “The new empowerment confers on these black women responsibilities that she is capable of shouldering with compassion and dignity. Walker wants women to walk tall in all spheres of human endeavour” (Ranveer). To the exploration of Art and Authenticity, Alice Walker exposes Womanism as mutual in *The Color Purple*.

**Works Cited:**


