

“Womanist is to feminist as Purple to Lavender” Purple Womanism- A Theoretical Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Black women in America have had very disheartening experiences whenever they tried to be a part of the Women’s Movement. Black women, through their tough experience of the past, had learnt that their experiences were unique. Alice Walker ‘Womanism’ is fore grounded on precisely these issues of togetherness. Walker knew for sure that for these wonderful Black women art was their way of life, and so it would have certainly left behind some remnants of their artistic endeavours, waiting to be revealed to the world. Walker succeeds in establishing the aesthetics of Black women lives and art. This power is her ability to convert the negatives of life into positives. Womanism is not just a theory; it is a way of life.

KEYWORDS: *Black women, oppression, feminism, womanism, power*

Introduction

“Womanist is to feminist as Purple to Lavender” – Alice Walker

The Western notion of feminism seems to be an all-inclusive study of women impending from poles apart social, racial, political, religions and national backgrounds. But a closer look reveals that it sensibly theorizes the lives of White middle-class women. It blatantly ignores the lives of those women who do not fit into their criterion. These include Black, Asian, Hispanic and even poor White women. Those American Black women coming of age around 1950’s, 1960’s, 1970’s were enticed by the promising future of Women’s Liberation Movements at their height around this time. The misleading manifesto of these White women dominated campaign against patriarchy could not blind them for long.

Black women in America have had very disheartening experiences whenever they tried to be a part of the Women’s Movement. They were made to feel obliged for being allowed to be a part of the White women’s organization. Black women were also made to feel that they should be thankful to their White sisters for voicing their sexiest oppression, the one which was committed on them by those very perpetrators who had enslaved the white women, that is the White man. The sexiest oppression that Black women faced back home at the hands of their own men was never recognized. While sharing her experiences at such organization Bell Hooks says that whenever she participated in feminist groups she felt that the White women had a

condescending attitude towards them. And they were sure to be made to feel obliged for being allowed to witness the proceedings of white intellectual women, Bell Hooks observes in her essay titled “Black Women : Shaping Feminist Theory” that the Black women were tired of being allowed to be a part of the white Feminist Organizations; she writes:

The condescension they directed at black women was one of the means they employed to remind us that the women’s movement was “theirs” - which we were able to participate because they allowed it, even encouraged it; after all, we were needed to legitimate the process. They did not see us as equals. And though they expected us to provide first-hand accounts of black experience, they felt it was their role to decide if these experiences were authentic (Hooks 11).

Hence, their theory of protest and unification should also be accomplished on a more solid ground, relying not just on the issues of victimization and pain, but on the positive grounds of combined strengths, beliefs and survival tactics.

Alice Walker ‘Womanism’

Alice Walker ‘Womanism’ is foregrounded on precisely these issues of togetherness and more. Walker in her much acclaimed prose-writing “In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens” (1967) has presented a black-feminist treatise and named it ‘Womanism’. Alice Walker in her definition of ‘Womanism’ puts into words those very things which Black women have felt and experienced throughout the span of their existence in America. She converts the weaknesses attributed to Black women, to strengths. Walker’s essay works as a magnifying glass for today’s generation Black women. She gives credit to those generations of Black mothers who have burned themselves in order to light the hearts of their children. Walker voices the unheard sounds of these women lost in the haze of recorded HIS-story.

Walker realized that the first and foremost thing that a Black-woman needs to do is to acknowledge the knowledge passed on to her by her foremothers. And that somebody needed to document these efforts and grant them their due place in immortal her-story. While defining ‘Womanism’ Walker defines the strengths and essence of being the ‘Other’ for the whole world she brings the black woman in the ‘Centre’ and gives her unique identity which recognizes her existence in a positive manner.

‘Womanist’ theory

Walker begins by revealing the source of her inspiration for the naming of her ‘Womanist’ theory. Here too she falls back on verbal usage of her community, a term used by mothers to admonish girl children. She writes that she borrowed the term from black folk expression of mothers to female children, “You acting womanish”, i.e. like a woman [Sic]. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or wilful behaviour” (Walker 402). She goes on to explain that such a girl child would want to know more than is considered “good” for her to know. The most interesting aspects of the above mentioned characteristics is that they are taken to be the shortcomings of black women by the world that they inhabit, but Walker very smartly converts them into their strengths, because Walker knows that it is only through

a seemingly audacious behaviour that a Black woman can courageously survive and enable herself to look into the eyes of danger and disarm it.

Alice Walker countered this colonial strategy by defining the Black women as responsible and hence trustworthy. Her Womanist theory projected women as “Responsible” (Walker 403). A Womanist is a person responsible not only for herself but also for those people who depend on her, especially other Black women and children. She is responsible enough to take her own decisions and face the consequences. She is the one who is serious enough to take charge of any given situation. These are the characteristics not expected of a Black woman both by the White world and the Black patriarchy.

Then Alice Walker brings out the essential component of being a Womanist, that is, the appreciation and love for all women and women’s culture. She insists that a Womanist would be a person who would love women non-sexually and sexually as well. By this she opens up the avenues of acceptance for Black lesbian whose existence was never taken into account by others. Walker’s Womanism celebrates the difference of being a woman and therefore she upholds women’s emotional flexibility and “values team as natural counter-balance of laughter” (Walker 405).

Feminism and Womanism

The most important differentiating point between Feminism and Womanism is that though both of them are women-centred their approach towards society at large is different. Unlike feminism, Womanism is not a separatist theory. It is all-inclusive when it says that a Womanist, ‘Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and or nonsexual’ (Walker 405). Walker does not exclude men from her theory because being a black woman and having learnt to survive in the hostile white world, she has known the pain of being the ‘Other’. She would definitely not want to place anybody else in this position, Bell Hooks comments on the paradox inherent in the white Feminist theory as under:

White women feminist turned feminism into a war between two sexes rather than a political struggle to end sexist oppression. Although they sometimes considered themselves “radical feminists”, their responses were reactionary. Fundamentally, they argued that all men are the enemies of all women and proposed as solutions to this problem a utopian woman nation, separatist communities, and even the subjugation or extermination of all men (Hooks 33).

Such a paradoxical stand was not acceptable to a feminist of colour. Walker firmly believes that there is a great potential and scope for change because basically people are good. All that one needs to do is scratch beneath the surface layers of social and political conditionings.

Womanism goes a step further to include not only men of a single race or community but of the entire humankind. Walker writes that a Womanist is, “Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health” (Walker 406). It is possible to read in this particular point that Walker envisions a united world where people belonging to different genders, races and nations can comfortably co-exist.

The next definition that Walker gives of a black woman has its roots in the magical power hidden behind her capacity and will to survive whole. Walker calls her a “Traditionally universalist”. In an attempt to explain this term Walker notes a query emerging in the minds of

the younger generation, regarding the various shades of colours present within the family. The reply from the mother reveals the magic. She would say, “Well, you know the coloured race is just like a flower garden, with every colour flower represented” (Walker 407).

Feminism has often been accused of being an artificial and superficial theory, a theory which does not come down to the ground level and address real serious issues like poverty, human rights, racism, etc. Womanism on the other hand, is by its very definition all-inclusive and Universal. In its motto of the “survival whole of all” it has been able to stand up for every one of those section who are victimized under any system of oppression. Womanists have very often moved on to become active social workers.

Womanist

A Womanist is a person who loves love, in all its varied forms. The Black women have suffered so much hatred and antagonism throughout their presence in America that all the hostility they felt for their oppressor also got drained out. They awoke to the fact that only love can counter hatred. Walker knows that in order to detoxify one’s heart of all the ill will a deep spiritual cleaning is needed. Walker feels that, in the process of hating someone we hurt ourselves by spreading the pain in our own system.

Finally, Alice Walker defines Womanism as in comparison with feminism and says, “Womanist is to feminist as Purple to Lavender” (Walker 409). Just a different shade, a shade which incorporates the missing components of feminism. It begins from where feminism departs. It fights sexism with the view that it is one of the many evils threatening the World Peace. She has to include the fight against racism, poverty and dehumanization of any form in her theory.

The most interesting part of the whole Womanist movement is the very paradox that, though the theory of Black women’s lives is a recent development, the ideology on which it is based is much older and well accepted as a way of life. What Walker has done is to put down on paper what has been a lived philosophy of the Black women all over the world. Elsa Barkley Brown writes in the essay “Womanist Consciousness: Maggie Lena Walker and the Independent Order of Saint Luke” mentioned that the ideology propagated by Walker may not be new but their understanding is definitely innovative. To quote her:

Walker’s terminology may be new, but their ideas are not. In fact, many black women at various points in history had a clear understanding that race issues and women’s issues were inextricably linked, that one could not separate women’s struggle from race struggle. It was because of this understanding that they refused to disconnect themselves from either movement. (Brown 177)

Conclusion

Alice Walker’s Womanism focuses on acknowledging the contributions of all those long forgotten mothers, grandmothers and great grandmothers without whom the black woman of today would be nowhere. While disintegrating the myth about black woman’s lack of creativity, she tracks down those unseen areas which have not been tapped to reveal her art and aesthetics. For years together these black women were deprived of all means of creation and

so they have not left behind a legacy of artefacts as a proof of their creativity. Womanism is not just a theory; it is a way of life. If one believes in equality, if one upholds human rights and if one is a conscious, spiritually inclined person, then Womanism is for such a person. It is not confined just to a single nation or community, but is open for all believers of the spirit of human dignity and freedom all over the world.

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