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Alice Walker's Womanist Reaction to Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye

الرد "النسائي" لالس ولكر على رواية العين الزرقاء لطوني مورسن

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Abstract

Quest for identity is a recurrent theme in most Afro-American texts. This study aims at highlighting the issue of female identity in Alice Walker's Meridian. In doing so, showing the different concept of womanism adopted by Walker as a counter-reaction to feminism is the main point in this study. The latter focuses on what differs and converges Walker with some Afro-American novelists when dealing with female identity crisis. It focalizes on the way Alice Walker handles the theme of female identity from a womanist point of view.

Key Words: womanism, feminism, identity, feminine, divergence, convergence



الملخص:

يعتبر السعي وراء الهوية موضوع شائع ومتكرر في معظم النصوص الادبية الافروامريكية . الهدف من وراء هذه الدراسة هو معالجة مشكل الهوية الانثوية في الرواية "ميريديا" لروائية الس ولكر. في هذه الدراسة قد تم التطرق الى المعاني المختلفة لمفهوم الانسوية المتبناة من طرف الس حيث تم اثبات ان الانسوية هي رد فعل مباشر للانثوية. كما تم اظهار الاختلاف والتطابق بين الروائية الس ولكر وبعض الكتاب الأفروامريكية عند معالجتهم مشكل ازمة الهوية

الكلمات الافتتاحية : النسائية، الأنثوية، الهوية، انثوية، الاختلاف، التطابق

Introduction

Since the era of slavery black women suffered from white supremacy and black patriarchy. Therefore, their voice remained unheard and their social and cultural values had been devalued. Despite the existence of some white female movements such as feminism, they were not welcomed to voice their concern. Actually, feminism has been established to address issues facing white women not colored ones for this reason black women needed a new movement with a different agenda. Many black female activists disassociated themselves from feminism since it preoccupied highly with male oppression of white women and t ponse, womanism was created by Alice Walker as an alternative to feminism.

1-Walker's Disagreement with Feminism

Walker disagreed with the white feminists for their unwillingness to fight for the establishment of just world where white along with black women can lead a deracialised life. She especially blamed the white feminists of deepening the racial rift between black and white races via their bigoted vision of not considering black women as women but different species¹ As far as Walker is concerned, the white feminists detached themselves from colored women to deny them the same rights and the same prerogative of womanhood. Walker also blamed them of disassociating themselves in order to get rid of their moral responsibility of helping the downtrodden black women as she states: "The reason for it was the desire of the white feminist to avoid assuming responsibility for the lives of colored women and their children so they denied them the rights they had"².

he way forwards to raise their social ranks in the social ladder. As a res

Exclusiveness of feminism was a subject matter for some Afro-American women literary scholars who refused the status of their representation in American life in general and the field of literature in particular. Its exclusiveness became evident via

the white feminists' practice of not considering Afro-American literary works during the 1970s and the 1980s. Alice Walker criticized her white colleagues Patricia Spacks and Phyllis Chesler for rejecting to include the Afro- American women writers in their survey of all literary works written by American writers. They justified this exclusiveness by claiming that the experience of colored women and white women were different which, in their eyes, required a different scope of work³. Such justification seems baseless since they included works written by British women writers in their survey when the two categories of women did not undergo the same experience. Unpredictably, Spacks and Chester argued that Third World Women possess " a special psychology which scholars have to master in order to be able to write about their works"⁴. The two previous examples highlight the deliberate intention of white feminists to exclude Afro-American women along with their works from the spectrum of the mainstream literature. Such feminist exclusiveness and denial paved the way to the emergence of womanism as a new movement and ideology.

Contrary to feminism, womanism rests upon inclusiveness and support of all women of different minorities. It is not only about Afro-American women but all oppressed and marginalized women worldwide including Third World Women who suffered from dual oppression exercised by African patriarchal society as well as economic power which was too at the hand of man. More importantly, womanists seek to challenge all dominant powers contributing in downgrading the oppressed mainly colored women and inhibiting their human development. In this respect, womanism decenters feminism which focuses primarily on gender inequality. Such a stance makes of it an original and innovative movement seeking to broaden the scope of female struggle.

In contrast to feminists, womanists advocate solidarity among oppressed people all over the world not only in the dominantly white American society. In their opinion, women should be self-sufficient and self-confident, but also pluralists in

their endeavor for the betterment of all women. Due to its global vision, wamanism has gained exponents from the different corners of the world. Many Afro-American alongside Latin American scholars endorsed the universality of womanism and lined themselves with womanists. They spurned feminism on the grounds that they viewed it as too “Eurocentric” focusing on gender issues and ignoring daily problems such as unemployment and racial violence⁵.

2- Definition of Womanism

“Womanism” as a concept and ideology has gained momentum and support among a large number of Afro-American activists. The latter prefer “ womanism” to “ feminism” due to the fact that the former enabled them to shy away from some white feminists and racist ideologies embedded in white feminist organizations. By doing so, they distinguished themselves in an attempt to figure out a genuine ideology through which they could find solution to their various female issues. Such separation with white feminism lines them with black nationalists who too advocated separatism and specificity of black race⁶.

The term “womanism” was coined by Alice Walker as a black version of feminism. The term “womanism” is derived from the word “womanish” which means a grown up and resolved woman. Unlike a girlish woman, womanist is capable of asserting herself and defying all the odds of life. Walker has forged a fivefold definition of womanism.

The first stage of womanism is represented in the idea that a womanist should be “outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior”⁷. Contrary to a black feminist woman, a womanist should challenge herself and the world around her in order to assert herself in spite of white hostility. These womanist attributes are exposed in most of Walker’s literary works mainly *Meridian*, *The Color Purple*, *The Temple of My Familiar* and *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. *Meridian* is one of Walker’s most appreciated literary works. It is illustrative of her ideology of womanism.

The second stage of womanism is represented in the fact that a womanist is “ a woman who loves other women, sexually and/ or non-sexually. Appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility”⁸. It means that womanism advocates lesbianism in society. Walker’s positive stance on lesbianism made of her a subject of dire criticism from some black conservative activists and theologians for encouraging sexual disorientation among black women. Her inclusion of lesbianism as a part of womanist philosophy is considered the most striking dissimilarity between feminism and womanism.

This revolutionary idea of same sex was striking to patriarchal American society in general and Afro-American community in particular. It is worth mentioning that lesbianism is refuted in all orthodox societies, but Walker as a womanist desires to show her “outrageous” thinking and defiance to the established patriarchal system and social restrictive codes. More importantly, by supporting lesbianism between black women, Walker seeks to break black man’s sexual hegemony over black woman since they have been victims of sex exploitation. By doing so, Walker undermined the importance of conventional marriage in order to free colored women from male sexual dominance.

The third stage of womanism is reflected in the idea of love. A grown up woman is a womanist who “loves music. Love dance. Love love and food and roundness. Love struggle. Love the folk. Love herself. Regardless”⁹.

The fourth stage of womanism is the fact “womanism is to feminist as purple to lavender”¹⁰ which implies that black women are superior to and more valuable than white women. It also suggests that black and white women, despite the fact they live in the same territory with the whites, cannot be treated and regarded the same. She extols the colored woman and compares her to the strong color of purple often described as the royal color among the different colors. It also means that there is a common ground between white feminists and womanists as it is the case of purple and lavender sharing the same garden;

however, they differ in many respects. Thus, womanism provides a vision that white and black women should co-exist as flowers in the same garden, yet maintain their racial specificity and distinctiveness. Because of its endorsement of such separatism, womanism lines with nationalism. However, womanism doesn't seek a physical separation but a racial recognition of black race .

The final stage of womanism is exposed through the idea of wholeness which means the survival of the whole community irrespective of color or gender. Womanism stipulates that a womanist is "committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female"¹¹. While white feminism seeks to address the issues facing white women only, womanism contrives to cope with issues confronting the entire people. This global vision makes of womanism a pluralist movement which comes to terms with issues hindering both genders: black and white.

Womanists seem more universalists in their thinking and socially integrationists whereas feminists are somehow separatists who excluded a large segment of American society represented in black women. Most of Alice Walker's concept of womanism is reflected in her novels *The Color Purple*, *Pressing the Secret of Joy* and *Meridian*. The latter which is one of the primary resources in this study exposes the idea of womanism. It is a story of a womanist protagonist named Meridian Hill who behaves in an audacious, outrageous and courageous way throughout the sequence of the events. There is a direct correlation between the tenet of womanism and the characterization in the novel.

3-Meridian as a Womanist Character

Alice Walker via Meridian voices her worry of her black fellows' status quo. She uses the novel as her mouthpiece in her struggle against racial oppression. To reach her objectives of restoring justice, dignity and identity, she adopts unconventional characters breaking social norms. Her spokeswoman Meridian is a Civil Rights active who seized the opportunity of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s to be the voice of the voiceless.

The ultimate target of this movement was to put an end to the corrupt system by which the blacks were crippled to lead a meaningful life void of racial oppression. The way forward to the fulfillment of this objective is traced in the plot of Meridian.

It is worthwhile to mention that the suffering of Meridian Hill is doubled due to the fact she is black by color and woman by gender. She faces physical and psychological tortures. She is subjugated to racism for not having the same color shared by the white majority, and to patriarchal oppression for being a woman in a world where women's voice is unheard. Nevertheless, Meridian does not surrender to the dictates of back patriarchal community and the bigotry of white society.

Most of Meridian's behavior entitles her to be a womanist. In a stark contrast to a feminist character, Meridian is outspoken, bold and committed. Her participation in the Civil Rights Movement transforms her life and helps her voice concerns over gender discrimination and racial prejudices. Her impulsive involvement in civil rights protest makes of her a prominent figure in the process of deracializing American society. By doing so, she proves herself a womanist who stands in defiance to social norms and the different odds of life. It is worthwhile to mention that her defiance of a tank during a civil right march is a reflection of her courage and womanist character. She risks her life by exposing herself to the danger of getting knocked down by a tank as the narrator stresses: "Meridian did not look to the right or to the left. She passed the people watching her as if she did not know it was on her account they were there. As she approaches the tank the blast of its engine starting sent a cloud of pigeons fluttering.." (07). Meridian offers herself as a martyr sacrificing her own life for the cause of her black people. This gesture proves to her black along with her white fellows that the black woman is "audacious" and gallant enough to defend her rights even at the cost of her own life.

Walker as a womanist encourages women to love each other non-sexually too. This idea is too manifested via

Meridian's love of her female fellows regardless of their race. Strikingly, she seems more forgiving even towards those who ruin her life as Lynne who spoils her marriage with Truman. She forgives Lynne who is the cause of her divorce with Truman. Her support of the couple especially after having their first child is unpredictable. This humanist and tolerant act is indicative of a womanist behavior making of Meridian an ideal and a lovely character with a good and forgiving spirit.

Unexpectedly, Meridian lives up to the ideal of womanism when she sympathizes with the homeless Wild Child who does not have shelter and a family to look after him. Despite the restrictions imposed by the campus administration not to bring foreigners, Meridian risks her accommodation and offers Wild Child shelter. Such a womanist behavior asserts the fact that Walker via Meridian seeks the survival of all people irrespective of their social status. Meridian also reflects Walker's idea of wholeness and the survival of the whole community. Through her behavior, Meridian proves to be a womanist committed to the survival of all.

Meridian seems autobiographical or semi-autobiographical. There are many events in the novel experienced by Alice Walker herself when she was a fervent supporter of civil rights during the 1960s and the 1970s. They both lived in the same place Georgia. Both were abused and bruised during civil right protests. Both proved themselves audacious and courageous. They too lacked sexual knowledge resulting in an unwanted pregnancy when they were teenagers. However, Meridian does not establish a meaningful and healthy relationship with her mother while Walker was fond of her mother.

From the above ideas, it is quite clear that Alice Walker via Meridian desires to report her experiences as a womanist and an active figure fighting against racial injustice. Moreover, she proved herself a committed writer dedicating her literary and non-literary life to raise concerns over sexual abuse, racial oppression and patriarchal dictates. She combines her aesthetic

skills with her social preoccupations to show the protagonist Meridian's journey from self-doubt and isolation to self-assertion and self-awareness.

In a stark departure with feminism, Walker incorporates the philosophy of womanism in her Meridian. Such incorporation is manifested in the protagonist Meridian's behavior. Meridian is reported audacious, stubborn and committed. Similar to her fictional creator and unlike Pecola in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, she is a womanist who does not have a defeatist view towards life and social difficulties she went through. Unlike Pecola who complies with the social standards dictated by the dominant white society, Meridian rebels against restrictive social codes showing the hidden aspect of black consciousness. More importantly, likewise Walker, her engagement in the Civil Rights Movement has been a model triumph embodied in registering her black fellows in votes which reflects her contribution towards disentangling colored people from the yoke of institutionalized racism.

At the end Meridian becomes a mature woman with full responsibility towards herself and her community. Her engagement in the fight against racial oppression via the political means enabled her to discover herself and the world around her. More importantly and in a stark contrast with Pecola, Meridian at the end emerges a different and triumphant woman succeeding at overcoming double-consciousness and restoring her lost identity.

As a conclusion, being subject to racism and different types of marginalization, colored women fought back by integrating themselves in two female movements represented in black feminism and womanism. Their adoption was an attempt to find a way forwards for the betterment of their life and restoration of their lost identity.

Identity crisis is what characterizes the two literary works *The Bluest Eye* and *Meridian*. However, the two novelists follow a different path in their attempt to raise concerns over racism, classism, sexism and identity crisis. After

reading the two texts, the reader comes to a conclusion that the two prolific novelists Morrison and Walker have a mandate and literary responsibility to write for purposes to awaken the reader as an individual not just to please him, which means that the two novelists are socialists not modernists who write for art's sake.

Through this paper, the study reveals that what assembles the two novelists is their choice to handle the theme of female identity, but what diverges them is the different path they follow to do so. The two prove that they are women and female novelists, but Morrison is a black feminist whereas Walker is a womanist. The former adopted a mode of writing which is different from the one opted for by the latter. Morrison opted for a feminist mode of writing while Walker created her own stylistic writing inspired from womanism.

Alice Walker's adoption of womanist ideology in *Meridian* seems a blatant attempt to answer back her colleague Morrison. She is more authentic and original since she has adopted a strategy of her own creation, and appropriates a new version of female protagonists who are unconventional in their acts and thought. Nevertheless, such assumption does not undercut the importance of Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* through which the novelist proposes a redefinition of beauty- black beauty. More importantly, Walker focuses on brave behaviors and rebellious acts to disclose that the alternative for black women to get back their racial dignity and restore their identity is not to look and behave white but to be themselves and audacious. Walker's female protagonist *Meridian* is not cliché and a stereotypical character as colored women used to get represented in the mainstream white culture, she is rebellious, gallant and defiant to her unfavorable environment where she faces all types of bigotry and contempt. She serves as a role model whom black women should follow to taste the beauty of life. Even after encountering many storms in her journey from childhood to adulthood, she does not perish but pursue her path towards maturity. Her defiant character is what helps her to triumph over bigotry and racism, and more importantly results

in restoring her split identity. Meridian's success to restore her identity is also Walker's success to adjust and gloss over the debased picture of backwardness attributed to black women by the mainstream culture.

3- Conclusion

As a conclusion, thank to her creation of womanism, Walker provides black women with the vision that colored women should struggle and cooperate together to change their living, but also struggle for the betterment and the survival of all people of different ethnicities and background. That is to say, womanism has a global vision towards helping all oppressed women all over the world. The focus of womanism has been multidimensional; it proposes new ways to colored women to cope with political exclusion, racism, classism and sexism.

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