

## The Woman Characters in the Select Fiction of Alice Walker

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### Abstract

*This paper proposes to highlight the women characters in the selected fictions of Alice Walker and examine them closely so as to analyze their uniqueness, similarities and qualities in representing the African American women in contrast to the other women in the world. Walker like all the other African American writers has designed her women in replica of the real women characters she had come across in her life. They may be her own mother, her grandmother or great grandmother or neighbors or in any way known to her through her friends and relatives. The sole aim of this paper is to bring out the personal touches in her characters.*

**Keywords:** *Alice* Woman characters, African American, personal touches, mother, grandmother, friends and relatives

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**Introduction:**

Alice Walker was born in Eatonton, Georgia on February 09, 1944. She grew up in a household filled with children. In fact, she was the eighth child born to sharecropper parents named Willie Lee Walker and Minnie Tallulah Walker. Not much is known about her childhood, but the young age of eight, while playing with her brothers and a pellet gun accidentally shot her in the right eye. Her parents spent several days trying to heal the eye without success and by the time she was taken to the doctor, it was too late; the eye had become permanently blind. The young Alice Walker would begin wearing glasses for the remainder of her life. The ridicule and loneliness that was created from her blindness led Walker into writing her first poetry pieces. Writing and studying under a large tree became the solace for her to get peace and quiet while she suffered from her childhood injuries. Later before attending college, Alice would ask her mother permission to become a professional writer.

Alice concentrated and studied hard in school. She graduated as valedictorian from her high school and went on to attend the local Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia. She was greatly influenced by one of her professors there named Howard Zin, who she worked closely with on civil rights rallies. She became a volunteer for registered voters of Georgia and began attending political rallies for civil rights. Zin would become an influence for some of Alice Walker's later writing. From Spelman College, Walker moved to New York to attend Sarah Lawrence College in Yonkers. For both schools, she had received full scholarships because her academic performance was so accomplished. She graduated from Lawrence College in 1965.

Two years after college graduation, Alice married Mel Leventhal, who she met while working at the Head Start Program in Mississippi. The marriage was extremely controversial as Mel Leventhal was Jewish and Caucasian and Walker was African American. The union between the couple was the first legal marriage in the state of Mississippi that was inter-racial. In 1968, one year into the marriage, Alice published her poetry collection, "Once." This was followed by Mel and Alice birthing their first daughter, Rebecca, but the marriage eventually fell apart under the turmoil and controversy of the time period. Alice Walker's writings were creating discussions and controversy in both the literary and political arenas. In 1976, Mel Leventhal and Alice were divorced. Between 1968 and 1971, Alice would be a teacher in the Black Studies programs at two different colleges. She spent a year at Jackson State College and another year teaching at Tougaloo College.

Alice Walker's writing career would surge in the 1970's with the publishing of her first novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*. The predominant issues

and themes of her writings were civil rights based. Many of her stories and poems focused on rape, sexism, racism, violence, segregation and relationship problems. It would later be openly announced that Alice Walker had a bi-sexual orientation. In 1973, Alice Walker joined *Ms. Magazine* to publish short stories and poetry. She would also publish many different articles focusing on the theme of civil rights, animal rights and environmental issues. In 1973, Walker would publish the short story collection, *In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women*, and the collection, *Revolutionary Petunias and Other Poems*. That same year, while on a walk with one of her friends, Walker discovered the unmarked grave of Zora Neal Hurston. Charlotte D. Hunt and Walker would spend tremendous amounts of personal money to purchase a very elaborate and fitting grave stone marker for Hurston in Mississippi.

Walker's second novel talked about the life of being an activist in the civil rights and political movements in the South. It is believed that much of *Meridian* parallels or reflects on Walker's own life. *Meridian* was published in 1976 and earned Walker much recognition. The focus of the book was accepting one's mistakes and taking full responsibility for our actions. There were no excuses made and people greatly admired and respected Walker for this writing piece. Her political venues later turned from the problems of segregation and racism in the South to issues abroad. During her junior year in college, Alice Walker did her internship in Uganda. Her experiences in Uganda led her to stand against female genital mutilation; however, the process of female genital mutilation is still practiced today. During her college years, Alice Walker also visited Cuba on several occasions and would take an open political stand against the Cuban Embargos. Her political and social concerns were not strictly limited to the plight of black women in America but were on a global social and political scale.

The novel, *The Color Purple* was published in 1982. Alice Walker would become a huge name virtually everywhere. *The Color Purple* would be turned into a movie and a Broadway play. There was a great deal of controversy over the book because the black culture was shown as patriarchal and whites were shown as sexist and racist. *The Color Purple* looks head on at the situations and plights of the black woman without the worries of being politically or socially correct. *The Color Purple* was so powerful in character development and insights into issues that it won Alice Walker the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1983. *The Color Purple* would later also receive the American Book Award. In 1992, she would go onto write the novel, *Possessing My Secret Joy* which would feature the characters that were descendants from *The Color Purple*.

*The Woman Characters in the Select Fiction of Alice Walker*

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The Pulitzer Prize for Fiction was certainly the most distinguished of all her honors and awards but Alice Walker would go on to receive many others. In 1969 she received the Lillian Award from the National Endowment of the Arts for her publication of *Third Life of Grange Copeland*.

1974, Walker received the Rosenthal Award from the Institute of Arts and Letters and the Radcliffe Institute Fellowship for the writing and publication of *In Love and Trouble*.

Even with all of her popularity, Alice Walker went on to write and publish such popular short stories and novels as *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down: Stories* in 1982, *Beauty: When the Other Dancer is the Self* in 1983, *To Hell with Dying* in 1988, *The Temple of My Familiar* in 1989, *Finding the Green Stone* in 1991, *Possessing the Secret of Joy* in 1992, *By the Light of My Father's Smile* in 1998, *The Way forward Is With a Broken Heart* in 2000 and *Now is the Time to Open Your Heart* in 2004. Walker continues to publish poetry collections as well. Alice Walker has had a profound impact on literature, social and political areas of American life.

A feminist is one who is awakened and has become conscious about women's life and problem. She/he is a person who knows that the exploitation of women is caused by patriarchal hegemony and it has to be ended if one has to build a society based on equality. Feminists are those who are united by a belief that the unequal and inferior social status of women is unjust and needs to be changed. An awareness of one's oppression and victimization are none other than one's race, and gender constitutes black feminist consciousness. "An awakening that one is oppressed not because one is ignorant, not because one is lazy, not because one is stupid, but just because one is black and female creates a feeling of black feminist consciousness."

Naturally, this awareness and awakening brings an understanding about one's enemies and friends and compels one to think of strategies that could help in ending such oppression. To do so one has to be prepared for struggle and sacrifice. The black women writers who express such consciousness are labeled as black feminist writers. However, unlike many other black women writers Alice Walker is a Womanist rather than a feminist. To her 'Womanist' means, "A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counter-balance of laughter), and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female."

Womanism is a feminist term coined by Alice Walker. It is a reaction to the

realization that “feminism” does not encompass the perspectives Black women. It is a feminism that is “stronger in color”, nearly identical to “Black Feminism”. However, Womanism does not need to be prefaced by the word “Black”, the word automatically concerns black women. A Womanist is a woman who loves women and appreciates women’s culture and power as something that is incorporated into the world as a whole. Womanism addresses the racist and classist aspects of white feminism and actively opposes separatist ideologies. It includes the word “man”, recognizing that Black men are an integral part of Black women’s lives as their children, lovers, and family members. Womanism accounts for the ways in which black women support and empower black men, and serves as a tool for understanding the Black woman’s relationship to men as different from the white woman’s. It seeks to acknowledge and praise the sexual power of Black women while recognizing a history of sexual violence. This perspective is often used as a means for analysing Black Women’s literature, as it marks the place where race, class, gender, and sexuality intersect. Womanism is unique because it does not necessarily imply any political position or value system other than the honouring of Black women’s strength and experiences. Because it recognizes that women are survivors in a world that is oppressive on multiple platforms, it seeks to celebrate the ways in which women negotiate these oppressions in their individual lives.

As a black womanist novelist Alice Walker is after the whole truth of African–American life. However, her major concern is the black women themselves. She has made it very much clear in an interview with John O’Brien when she said: “I am preoccupied with the spiritual survival of whole of my people. But beyond that, I am committed to exploring the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties, and the triumphs of black women.” Therefore, Alice Walker’s novels deal with the life of African - Americans with special emphasis on the black women’s life.

Alice Walker’s first novel, **The Third Life of Grange Copeland**, though majorly concerns with the black man-woman relationship, also highlights the sufferings, pains and hardships the black women (Margaret, Mem, Josie) faces in their lives. Their sufferings lead them to understand their situations to launch a struggle to gain a meaningful place in the black world. These three characters have been victimized by the black men: Margaret was left behind, discarded and abandoned by Grange, to die a silent death; Mem was killed at the gun point by her own husband, Brownfield. And Josie was driven out of her own home by her own father, a man who stood for religion. It is also the story of three different women: Margaret, the most illiterate and submissive; Mem, literate and ambitious, who dreams of her own world; Josie, an enterprising black woman who creates the world of her own and establishes her

economic empire where she dictates her terms to others as a boss. These three women represent the different types of women in the black society. Moreover, they sometimes resemble Walker's own mother in some of their qualities. For instance while describing Margaret, Walker had said: "Margaret left each morning with a hasty hug and a sugartait, on which he sacked through wet weather and dry across the dusty clearing or misty, until she returned. She worked all day pulling baits for ready money. Her legs were always clean when she left home and always coated with mud and slime of baits when she came back." She almost resembles Walker's mother in her characters. Her mother "seemed a large, soft, loving-eyed woman who was rarely impatient in our home. Her quick violent temper was on view only a few times a year, when she battled the white landlord who had the misfortune to suggest to her that her children need not go to school. During the 'working' day, she laboured beside—not behind—my father in the fields. Her day began before sun up and did not end until late at night."

Walker had brought out the hard working nature of her mother into almost all of her women characters—Margaret, Mem, Celie, Sophia, Zede, and Lissie. And her determination to educate her children can be seen in the character sketch of Mem. She even goes to the extent of fighting her husband and threatening him to obey her orders, of moving to better house, at gun point. She bears all his tortures, suppressions and oppressions only to find a better place for her daughters to live at; a better school for them to study; a better environment that would teach them decent living and change their social standard of living, thereby enabling them to come out of slavery and be a decent women when they grow up. Margaret was so very submissive that Brownfield himself says that his mother was like a dog accepting and obeying anything said by his father.

"He thought his mother was like their dog in some ways. She didn't have a thing to say that did not in some way show he submission to his father." But Mem was extremely different from Margaret in one aspect. That is she somehow wanted to lead a decent life and give her children a world without slavery. She bears with all sorts of oppressions caused to her. But she did yield to slavery. She was secretly searching for a good house and job to get rid of this share cropping. But she couldn't achieve her goal.

Walker's attitude to fight against slavery rather than submission would have been inherited from her mother only. Because she had beautifully brought out her mother's nature of serving equality when she points out that her mother always laboured beside her father and not behind her father. This shows that her mother was not subjected to suppression from black men. We could see this nature in the

character of Sophia in *The Color Purple*. Whereas, Walker's second novel *Meridian*, which is about the female protagonist of the same name who gradually awakens from her subordinate status as a black female, daughter, wife and mother to her own self and tries to become the maternal provider of the larger black community. *Meridian* is a character who is neither much submissive nor ambitious in the early stages of her life. Hers is a journey from the most ordinary position as a high school dropout to a self-illuminated person who has attained selfhood and knows what is the purpose and mission of one's own life. *Meridian* is said to be an autobiographical novel in many aspects. The novel probes the ideology of motherhood and extends the meaning of mother, of cherishing life, to that of the revolutionary. *Meridian*'s journey towards awareness leads her to instance after instance of society's rejection and abuse of children, until she arrives at a fierce commitment to remaking the world. She also comes to understand that she owes it to herself and to the life given to her to continue to live and fight against injustice.

Her next novel **The Color Purple** is the story of Celie, a simple Southern girl, abused first by her stepfather and then by the man to whom she is married off, whose self-confidence and self-awareness is awakened under the guidance of a free spirited blues singer. Walker has said that she took her great-grandmother's life, which included rape, and childbearing at age 11, and gave it a happy ending. It is her way of taking up one of her ancestor's stories and completing and transmuting it through her art.

Celie is the most prominent and submissive personality of the women characters of Alice Walker. As Walker had declared, she had brought in the character of Celie in a much lively manner. Celie is always submissive. She does everything that was instructed to her. And never did anything that is not expected from her. But her sister Nettie is exactly opposite to Celie. She's much bolder than Celie and was even capable of deciding her necessities and ways of life. When their Pa stops Celie from going school, it was Nettie who argued with him that Celie should be sent to school again. But Celie didn't even speak a word against him. She has a motherly care for Nettie and the younger children at their home. When Mr\_\_\_ offered to marry Nettie Celie saved her by offering herself in the place of Nettie. She was not treated in a humane way even by her husband. Even the children of Mr\_\_\_ mistreat her. When one of her sister-in-law induces her to fight for life she only says that fighting will not cause her any good. She says that Nettie but she is no more there, whereas she didn't fight and did whatever is instructed to her and so she is alive. But this attitude is changed at the arrival Shug Avery, the blues singer. She taught Celie many things and changed her submissiveness into self-awareness and self-identity.

Walker had wanted Celie to identify her 'self' and hence she grew blooming and creating herself an identity through her stitching work. Celie makes pants, screens and bed sheets with large elephants in bright colours. This signifies Celie's individual growth through her art.

Walker's fourth novel **The Temple of My Familiar** reveals her interest in the ancestral past of her people. It features several characters of *The Color Purple* and reflects some of the concerns of that novel—racism, a reverence for nature and a search for spiritual truths. Lissie and Zede are the two characters who most clearly carry the novel's message of the need for a new vision. Zede, like Lissie, has "dream memories" of her ancestors who trace their lineage from Latin America back to Africa. In her many incarnations, Lissie has been animal and human, male and female, white and black.

Walker opens the novel with Zede's crisis and her subsequent travel to South America. Zede's journey requires her to remember her painful past, which contains violence, murders, rapes, prisons and heart break. Zede gravitates towards possibilities or ideas, and her life lacks any connections to physical reality. Perceptions of the present are distorted by the influences of her imagination and, consequently, Zede's world is one of fantasy and also one devoid of any moral substance. Zede's suffering in the village prison where she met Carlotta's father are heart-breaking. She had never disclosed it even to her daughter but later to her son-in-law, Arveyda. Walker had created pity and fear through the character of Zede.

Also **The Temple of My Familiar** is the ultimate expression of womanism. There is virtually no subject that escapes Walker's womanist commentary. The book speaks of homosexuality, AIDS, drug abuse, racism, religion, parenting, marriage, and death. A cascade of memories (ancient and contemporary) connects these issues to the various stories and messages of the book. Within all the stories dignity, honor, and grace are ruthlessly denied to those in spiritual, mental, or physical bondage, making it nearly impossible for them to achieve wholeness. Regardless of financial standing, throughout time the "enslaved" have endured an endless struggle for gracious living. The importance of this theme is summarized by the character Fanny Nzingha who comments that "all daily stories are in fact ancient and ancient ones current.... There is nothing new under the sun." Present in each story is the suppression of individuality by rules of morality and by the power one culture (usually white culture) wills over another. One clear message of this book is that although suffering is not new, it is inflamed by ignorance and freed by determination and change. Although **The Temple of My Familiar** demands respect for the instruments of change, (self-



awareness, freedom, equality, love, and respect) it does not insist that change is always positive. According to Zedé, the moment prehistoric man sought to emulate woman (and produce life through a physical opening that he did not possess) destruction, disorder, and death were conceived. Walker had brought in ancestral history and song of the past in this novel.

Thus the paper presents the various women characters of Alice Walker from her selected fictions. The characters presented by Alice Walker are mostly submissive and are subjected to slavery, suppression and oppression. This suppression was not only from the white bosses but by their own black men. Thus Walker says that a black woman is subjected to double oppression; she is ill-treated by white just because she is black and by a man just because she is a women. Walker had most probably brought the real sufferings of her own people- her mother, grandmother, and great grandmother— through her characters. She had at times had also brought in the resemblances of her own self in her characters.

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