



## Quest for Identity in the select Novels of Alice Walker

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### **Introduction – Identity**

“Generally speaking, female identity is a political, social, and cultural stance that is pro-woman. what keeps feminism in a constant of dialogue, however, is the fact that feminists do not necessarily agree about the definitions of terms as basic as women, let alone what it would mean, precisely, to be pro-woman”.(Warhol:308)

Maintaining one’s identity simply means being one’s own self. Quest for identity as a challenging issue of life engaged the minds of great African-American intellectuals. With their creative imagination, they closely analyze the theme of the loss and search for identity. Female bonding is an important aspect in the evolution of black female identity. Identity of a black woman is what discloses to others who she is.

This paper attempts to find out the trial of the black women in search of self and identity. The entire Afro- American community was condemned to endless suffering, yet the black woman’s conditions was much worse than the black man’s because “To be Black to Female” was to be in “Double Jeopardy” (Beal90). Because of her ability to do man’s work and her extraordinary reproductive capacity, the black woman was treated by her white master as an indispensable commodity. As a result, black women find themselves “suspended”, economically and psychologically, carrying the burden of a two-fold repression as black persons and as women. The quest for a ‘womanist’ self-definition has motivated the black woman writer undertaken an exploration of her historical identity.

### **Problems faced by black women**

I personally see the early seventies as a period of transition when in response to active consciousness- raising activities black women expressed their distrust of men ( in literature) in the form of fore- warnings that one woman ( often a mother figure) passed on to another. ‘Womanhood’ During the struggle for liberation from slavery and during its aftermath, the reconstruction, the black woman worked alongside the black man although black political leaders upheld strictly patriarchal.Black women’s writing, on the other hand, presents a completely different picture. The focus here shifts to the black woman as an individual, struggling towards freedom and selfhood .right from the slave narratives down to the present times, there has been a conscious or sometimes unconscious repudiation of the many myths that surround the black woman.

### **Afro- American Women Writings**

The persistent search for and sometimes assertion of, an independent ,integrated identity with a sphere that can be called one’s own has been an insistent theme in writings by Afro-Americans both past and present. This finds full expression in black feminist writings, especially in fiction. They depict her pain of being black and female and, at the same time, present her desperate search for her genuine self. The oppression of these women is an outcome of American racism and sexism which are interconnected as modes of dominance. Racism figures as a dominate theme in the works of black authors, irrespectively of sex. Black women have been victimized not only

by racist and sexist assumptions but also by scholarly neglect.

The journey from **Zora Neale Hurston** to the writers of the eighties is an arduous one marked by the loss of faith in the black man, and the awakening of consciousness geared towards the creation of a female network. **Zora Neale Hurston** (one of the foremost black thinkers to attack American capitalism for creating a tier of socio-economic classes that ranks black woman at the bottom) was **Walker's** literary ancestor. **Hurston** popularized this image of the black woman as "the mule of the world" This image is based on the assumption that as far as living in a while world is concerned, the black woman has been the only creature more helpless, rather doubly helpless, than a black man. The term she first used for her black women was: "mules of the world" –carrying the burdens heaped upon them by society and the family, the victims of both racial and sexual oppression

The concerned black women writers like **Toni Morrison** and **Alice Walker** have looked at the black woman from an insider's point of view and tried to discover what happened to her as they fulfill the different kinds of responsibilities in their lives. For feminists like **Morrison** and **Walker**, there is also a search for that Blackness or "Africanism" that America shaped in order to define its own whiteness. But they emphasize the discovery of the real self, the real Africanism. Major female characters from **Morrison's Sula** to **Walker's Meridian** are seen readily rejecting marriage, wifehood, motherhood .This shows the reflecting the black woman writer's involvement with feminist ideology. On her own, **Walker** closely resembles **Toni Morrison** in her authentic depictions of the horrors which blight the lives of black women.

### **Alice Walker**

This paper discusses the Quest for identity in the fictional works of **Alice Walker** through her double implications of racism and an examination of the African American experience itself. **Alice Walker**, an activist during the civil rights

movement of the blacks in the U.S., goes beyond the protest novels of **Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Chester Himes** and others to assert the ethnicity of her Black characters. **Alice Walker** fights the myth of the black motherhood as a stereotype of strength, self-abnegation and sacrifice. **Alice Walker** reported that over one hundred million women and girls living in Africa have been genitally mutilated and that she feels threatened by media reports on "growing practice of female circumcision in the united states and Europe, among immigrants from countries where it is part of their culture. **Alice Walker** has once again emerged as the true champion of female sexuality and black womanhood and has attempted to rescue women from the torture being inflicted upon them in the name of culture and tradition.

**Alice Walker** is one of those pioneers who celebrate black womanhood in their writings. She calls herself a "womanist" "because womanism, in her opinion, expresses women's concerns better than feminism. But as an Afro-American woman writer .she is more "committed to exploring the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties, and the triumphs of black "(interview 192) **Alice Walker** coins the term to describe the conscious of liberated black women. It is a definition that underlines the difference between black feminism and white mainstream feminism:"womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender" foremost it is a political philosophy and a stand. It aims at collective struggle which is whole and non-separatist. Alice walker's notion of "womanism"nicely expresses the resistance to this doubling of oppression for women.' womanist' Alice walker calls herself. It is the term she has coined to express the comprehensive context of black feminism. To her 'womanist' is "a woman" who(...)appreciates and prefers woman's culture (...) and women's strength (...)traditionally capable (...)"(cunliffe 394).further he explains 'womanist' relationship with feminist by playing upon the title of her Pulitzer prize novel The color purple : "womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender"(395)thus focusing on color dimension of black feminism. Being a womanist **Alice**

**Walker** is more interested in heroines than in heroes. She is trying to indicate that black women should benefit the rights that all of the white women and men do. She believes that Afro-American women should no more be considered as slaves. **Walker** believes that this slavery is due to the demands of black males claiming that their ego needed boosting and reconstructing first and foremost by way of compensation for the historical un-demining of their role in the family. In the fictional world of **Walker**, woman is no longer subservient to man but rather struggles against her patriarchal culture and its institutions to define her individual identity. **Walker** clearly shows that they are victims of both racism and sexism in the American society and at the same time seeks to transform them into emergent black woman.

**Alice Walker's** works typically focus on these struggles of African-Americans particularly women, and their struggle against a racist, sexist and violent society. Her works deals not only with the problems of black women, but also with the possibility of change and progression, even though it shows process. The history black women in the United States begin with the forced migration of millions of African women from the interiors of the west coast of African.

In this paper, we may take Walker's *THE COLOR PURPLE* (1984) and *MERIDIAN* (1976)

### **The Color Purple by Alice Walker**

**Alice Walker** is the first African – American woman writer to win the Pulitzer prize for third novel *THE COLOR PURPLE* in 1983. *The Color Purple* explores the issues of spousal abuse, incest, lesbianism, subjugation, and dehumanization. *The Color Purple* (1982) has generated the most public attention. In this novel, **Alice Walker**, who introduced her own theory called 'womanism'. The dominant themes of *The Color Purple* are female assertiveness, female narrative voice, female relationships and violence. In the color purple, the identity crisis that grows from the violence within family during

Celie's childhood is explained, traced to its origin, into significant different ways.

*The Color Purple* is a post-colonial, gynocentric classic that chronicles the grim struggle and gradual transformation of a plain, poor, God-fearing, perennially battered black American teenager named Celie into a fairly decent – looking, self-confident, bold and most important of all, financially independent woman. The present paper is an attempt to study the entanglements of Celie's life and the conversion of a non-identity, a nothing into a person with a distinct identity: and her journey toward emancipation.

**Walker's** protagonist Celie writes to God, Nettie to her sister Celie, and Celie to Nettie. The letters reveal the injustices of women incur from men in the United States and in Africa. This novel chronicles Celie's growth from a dependent, defeated personality to an independent, liberated woman with purpose and drive.

The novel is an epistolary narrative, written in two voices. One is addressed to God, i.e., Celie the main narrator's naive addressed to god, i.e. Celie the main narrator's naive addresses or prayers to God and the other is Nettie's who is Celie's sister, in her letters from Olinka in Africa to Celie. This aspect of the narrative brings to the fore the theme of repression of the voice women and Black voice and the breaking of silence. Both Celie and Nettie in one way breaking of their addresses. Celie's to God, communicated in private and in confidence of solitude and Nettie's to her he sister. Both of which do not reach the addressee, one to the white god whose ironic (non) existence is linked to racial oppression and the other, Nettie's letter to Celie which are intercepted by Mr. Albert, Celie's tyrannical husband who stashes them away from Celie who thinks that she has lost her sister. There is a comparison between God and Mr. Albert who plays god being male. The white God, who silences Black male silence Black women's voices. The White Mayor who slaps Sophie Celie's spirited and rebellious daughter-in-law and then sends to jail because she refuses to

become housemaid; and rapes Mary Agnes Squeak Harpo's second wife to show her that she is not his kin, when She goes to speak for Sophie is comparable to Mr. Albert (pp.90-104) Racism and sexism are expressed in the same forms of violence and subjugation. Letters are written by real people in life and it is possible for two people to correspond in this manner. But these letters we know are fictional and written by Alice Walker.

Celie writes about the misery of childhood incest, physical abuse, and loneliness in her letters to God. After being repeatedly raped by her stepfather, Celie is forced to marry a widowed farmer with three children. Yet her deepest hopes are realized with the help of a loving community of women, including her husband's mistress, Shug Avery, and Celie's sister, Nettie. Celie gradually learns to see herself as a desirable woman, a healthy and valuable part of universe. Set in rural Georgia during segregation, *The Color Purple* brings components of nineteenth century slave autobiography and sentimental fiction together with a confessional narrative of sexual awakening. Walker's harshest critics have condemned her portrayal of black men in the novel as "male-bashing," but others praise her forthright depiction of taboo subjects and her clear rendering of folk idiom and dialect

We readers tend to attribute the contents both to Nettie and Celie. Walker makes clear that she equates spirituality with creativity. Purple thus may also stand for the creativity of the Black women. As in her statement on black feminism it also signifies struggle. Shug Avery of course is the model of womanly beauty. She is a mother of three and has refused to marry the father even if she loved him and has chosen to cut a career as singer. It is the ambivalence places her above ordinary women and it defies the usual gender norms. She may be said to be the 'womanist' personality that walker seeks to build up in her feminism.

Walker's gallery of women is thus living examples of man's inhumanity to woman: Sofia, wife of Harpo, Albert's eldest son, wants to be

herself and not the fantasy woman Harpo thinks she ought to be. In *The Color Purple* (1982), we see her changing from a warm, happy woman to a bitter paranoiac who only wants to get through her life without killing anyone.

Secondly, there is Mary Alice "Squeak," who takes Sofia's place with Harpo when the latter is jailed for sassing the Mayor's wife. She allows her uncle, the warden, rape her in exchange for Sofia's freedom. *The Color Purple* for many has come to symbolize male ill-treatment at its worst. The black, male characters in this novel are extremely poor peasants. In the cruel treatment of their women, they mirror the inhuman lifestyle of their former white masters and overseers. Ironically, they subject their women to the same abuse, cruelty and insensitive neglect as were suffered in slavery by their female ancestors at the hands of powerful white masters and overseers.

**Barksdale** comments: "Sexual conflict in *The Color Purple* is thus stark and drear and rooted in the traditions and practices of slavery with its emphasis on male prerogatives and patriarchal control. (Barksdale 1986: 409)

**Walker** emphasizes the entrapment of black women, the interior colonization they suffer from because of their dependence on men for everything. Once they unite in woman-to-women relationship, they no longer need the men. They even manage to free themselves economically since they are hard-working and smart. **Walker** also portrays the racial domination of the white man in her portrayal of Sofia and her defiance of the white domination. Celie's sister Nettie is the third major woman character who journeys through life on her own. The paper attempts to show self-recognition of Celie, and through which processes she then as a woman who can stand on her own feet without any kinds of dependencies. Keywords: Gender, Racism, Race, Rape in Black Community, Sexuality. Thus Alice walker's presents as to how collective effort of woman can empower women and this Celie draws her strength from it and later on reciprocates by helping other women.

## Meridian

**Alice Walker's** *Meridian* is a feminist novel. It points out the audaciousness and courage of African American women in the moment and their willingness to sacrifice and struggle on its behalf, as well as their ability to take charge and become agents of social change for the liberation and wholeness of people. The protagonist meridian becomes an activist to help change an American society that oppresses women and African Americans by placing restrictions on them. One of the fundamental ideas of the novel '*Meridian*' is a women's struggle. **Walker** centers on race and class issues, as well as incorporating feminist issues of gender. African-American women's struggle to cope in life is a central theme in the novel.

The first chapter of *Meridian* exemplifies the archeological approach to narrative by meridian's life and ancestry synochronically, as though it were the strata of one archeological site at which each unearthing of an antecedent redefines the structure of the whole. In *Meridian* (1976) we see further instances of black evil and inhumanity. Mrs. Hill's father had beaten his wife and children with more pleasure than he beat his mule.

**Gloria Wade-Gayles** comments on how the black women are in deeper shadows cast by slavery than that which engulfs their male counterparts: In the institution of slavery, black people, regardless of sex or age, were slaves. In the institution of patriarchy, black women, regardless of age, are slaves (Wade-Gayles 1930; 317)

This note attempts to examine how **Meridian**, one of the most celebrated novels, reflects her strong belief in the black womanist tenets. It tells the story of the black woman in the period of transition, the story of a coming to consciousness and a subsequent development of self and search for authenticity. **Meridian** (1976, 1986) centered on the life of a black woman, it presents her search for selfhood against the background of rapid socio-cultural changes of the 1960s. She is a civil rights worker who comes to perceive the

true meaning of feminine freedom when she can redefine her role which has been imposed on her by a patriarchal and racist society.

**Meridian** is a maturation novel which celebrates the protagonist's triumphant emergence as a strong and wise black woman. The first part of the novel describes her initiation into adulthood and the beginning of her search for her black woman self; the second part focuses on her renunciation of her child and her active participation in the civil Right Movement; and third and final part deals with her release from sexual bonds with an accent on her greater commitment to the "survival whole" of her people. *Meridian's* quest for the womanhood turns into a greater concern for the wholeness of black society. *Meridian's* final discovery suggests that black women should struggle to break loose from the stereotypes for the social and spiritual upliftment of their community as whole. The novel ends with a new image of meridian as a liberated black woman with a hard-won insight into the riddles of life.

*Meridian*, thus presents a most balanced picture of black womanhood. It openly mirrors the black woman's experiences of exploitation-political, racial, sexual and emotional – and then envisages her total freedom through her pursuit of her wholeness as a human being. The novel vividly creates an image of the Afro- American woman with her complexity, diversity and depth. **Alice Walker** has concerned herself with many themes, but the characters that populate her novels differ from those created by earlier black female novelists. Her characters are seen as harbingers of change and mouthpieces for the call for re-evaluation of certain societal norms at a time when not only the Afro-American society but the entire American society to effect the needed transformation towards liberation and equality, it must first look within itself, self-reflexively, iron out the societal seems. **Walker** has experienced the societal change and re-examination of gender and historical roles fostered by the black and women's liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s, engaged in struggle for both their physical and psychological survival. The lives of these



black women consist of struggle, a struggle to survive in the horror of racism and sexism. **Walker's** women are engaged in a struggle to control their lives, a struggle that may sometimes take radical swerves for the purpose of redefining the self and the role no matter what the consequences might be. This paper sheds light on one of the most important aspects of resistance by black women in their attempt to redefine their subjectivity on the face of the gendered roles prescribed from them by the society. Walker's depiction of the black woman in her roles as wife, mother, and lover illustrates why it is morally imperative for the Americans to work towards the eradication of racism and sexism: those institutionalized attitudes result in suffering and the tragic waste of human potential and lives

In **Walker's** second novel, *Meridian*, emotional and psychological growth are possible for black women, but affected by her commitment to the civil rights movements and certain traumatic personal experiences. In *Meridian*, **Walker** focuses on the world of middle class blacks, for whom marriage fails to provide happiness. The mother figure in African –American communities is also greatly respected, because the very lineage of “Black” in unites states is determined by the status of the mother. *Meridian* rejects violence as a method for effecting change in American society, emerging instead as a symbol of nurturance. **Walker** illustrates the guilt and suffering which plague both men and women as they are forced to choose between following the dictates of their own consciousness and following the behavior patterns which have been promoted by significant others in their environments. This novel illustrates that a civil rights movement entails changes not only in the white society's perception of black men and women, but also in their perception of themselves **Walker** has depicted a black woman to remind the reader of the need for a re-examination of gender roles, suggesting that intellectual and spiritual growth are impossible for the black woman as long as she is victimized even by the fecundity of her womb and her use as sex object by the black man.

Thus, *Meridian* is one of her most celebrated novels, reflects her strong belief in the black womanist tends to tell the story of black woman in a period of transition, this story of a coming in consciousness and a subsequent development of self and such for authenticity.

### Conclusion

**Alice Walker** also shows through her works how African American women made sacrifices in their lives to join the campaign to free their people. **Walker** noted that African American women who struggle alongside the men received little recognition for their contributions, for nationalist men desired to subjugate women in traditional roles of wives and mothers. She articulates the literary image, representation, and female narrative voice of previously silenced poor African American women. She allows them to be confidants engaged in intimate communication. She has been identified with black movement. She has a spilt on questions of anti-Semitism, integration, class, religion, region and increasingly sex. She was the most evocative and impressive representative of women's movement of her era.

**Alice Walker** is one of the pioneers, who celebrate black woman hood in their writings. She calls herself a womanist because womanism, in her opinion, expresses women's concerns better than feminism. It appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility and women's strength. A womanist approach embraces practice and theory and criticism all at once. Womanist criticism subverts classical Eurocentric feminist criticism. Womanist refers to women of color who embrace universality rather than separatism. Further, women who are womanist are survivors, and they love and appreciate other women and women's culture. They form bonds by empowering themselves and other women. The ideal women always emerge as a whole human being.

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