



## **Women and Dignity As Viewed in the Works of Alice Walker**

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The evolution of ethnic America has a very distinct tale. Like Indians, the Americans are a unique product of many such civilizations, races, religions people and cultures. It is an amalgamation people of various backgrounds living in different parts of the world, speaking a variety of languages, belonging to different cultures. The Afro-Americans, are a unique product of such amalgamation. Alice Walker, like many other Black writers, has made her appearance on the stage of life through such mixture. Her characters, particularly women characters, need an exclusive treatment as they too are the product of the same mixture. The characters represent the life in general sustained by the Black people, their oppression, violence, their racial problems, exploitation and struggle for existence and survival.

History also bears testimony that women have suffered more than men everywhere in the world. More particularly the black women, either in Africa or in America have been the victims of oppression, sexual and physical exploitation, domestic violence, racial differences, sex- differences, deprivation and patriarchal system. They were spiritually crushed. They have had manifold predicaments. This fact is very much expressed in the almost all the novels of Alice Walker taken here for the study. Alice Walker has dealt with them realistically. She has voiced her protest and resistance through her women characters, which have been dealt thoroughly in the present study.

The historical, social, cultural and geographical background to American people and literature has had great impact on the evolution of the black American people. They have evolved to the present state of dignity through their rigorous and prolonged struggle. They have survived and achieved a kind of dignity and identity through their sufferings and

agonies. They have fought on all levels- intellectual, social, political and literary, to awaken their people and also to white people to their rights as human beings. Their struggle on all levels has certainly borne fruits. Awakening to rights and winning them through their lifelong struggle has earned the dignity which was enjoyed by the whites and denied to the blacks because of slavery. They have emancipated them not only from slavery but also from racism and sexism and have become an integral part of ethnic America.

The kind of agonies, exploitation and oppression the black people were put to under slavery system has been a dark period of human history. It was a long period during which the black people were treated as naked savages and beasts. They were made to work more and paid less. They were constantly exploited and used as toys and puppets. They had to work day and night on the farms of the whites. But later because of the enlightenment in the black communities in the form of awakening to voice their condition through their narratives and education, they rose to struggle to win rights.

The situation became worse when some black women struggled to keep their chastity and dignity by refusing to submit their bodies, they were publicly punished and ever more were burnt alive. The black woman didn't enjoy bliss in their matrimonial affairs. They had no choice of their own in the sex matters. If they wished to marry, their own black men opposed them; they looked down upon them as "black bitch." Thus, the black women were devalued, dehumanized, degraded, exploited and brutally oppressed. They were the victims of the whites and the blacks, the color and gender, racism and sexism, poverty and powerlessness. The double slavery imposed upon them was horrible. They became the slaves of their husbands. Hence, Celie, in "The Color Purple" screams,

*"And I ain't a woman? Look at me! Look at my arms! I have ploughed and planted and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And I ain't a woman? I could work as much as a man!"* (Walker, Alice, the Color Purple.)

The Africans were familiar with literature and art many years before their contact with the western world. They had their culture and civilization in which women were revered. The forefathers of the Africans who eventually became slaves in the United States lived in a society where university life was fairly common and scholars were beheld with reverence. Alice Walker with her searing ingenuity goes into the roots and brings the issues of the black

to fore. Her novels, short stories, essays and poetry are the tales of dispossessed and disillusioned feminine black voice. They portray theSelf's struggle for freedom of speech and expression in an incarcerating milieu. Her accent is on the diversity of black sensibilities, horrors of slavery, modes of expression and independent thinking. Racism and sexism figure as a dominant theme in her work. The double edged presentation of the Afro-American women finds full expression in her novels. They depict the Afro-American's women's pain of being black, illiterate, backward and that of females too. These women are shown desperately searching for their genuine self. The allied themes of racism and gender discrimination echo through the heroines and other female characters of Alice Walker. Insisting on the relationship of women as self and a part of a community, she prefigures the major themes of black women's fiction in the 1970s, the black women's potential as a full person and necessarily a major protagonist in the socio-cultural issues of the times.

Alice Walker appeared on the literary scene in the 1970s and began writing in the tradition of other women writers like Zora Neale Hurston, Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, and Gwendolyn Brooks. She, who draws an important tradition of African-American writing and speech to a greater extent, is the product of her age. The milieu has made up for Alice Walker as an activist and a prolific writer. Her novels, short stories and autobiography evidently prove her concern and greatness beyond any doubt. Walker's heritage and history provide a vehicle for understanding the modern world in which her characters live. She relies upon sexual violence and physical abuse to portray breaches in black generations. Typically she brings to her works a terrible observance of black self hatred and destruction. Her works simply presume, as she states, "*All history is Current; all injustice continues on same level.*"

Walker presents all her women characters in such a way that she lets them to make a search for dignity which she seeks for them. She has become one of the major voices of blackwomen in the multiethnic, racially, sexually and physically oppressed American society.

They struggle throughout their life first for liberation from "twin affliction" of sexism and racism and next for spiritual and political survival. Major or minor all her women seem to be struggling and fighting to achieve dignity. Her proclamation has literally worked and black women, wherever they are, have earned that status in various walks of life. They have proved their ability to create, their strength to sustain and their intellectual capacity to compete on all levels. They are spiritually and politically awakened; emancipated from racism and sexism;

liberated from slavery; stood on their feet and become economically strong coupled with hard earned civil rights.

The ending of her novels and stories is significant in that they all bring out Walker's vision for black women in particular and for all human beings in general. Walker gives the message of peaceful coexistence. Besides, she shows her concerns for the servitude of entire planet and all the creatures living on it. What makes Walker more concerned is the survival of whole including those who bullied the black for ages.

Walker shows great reverence for environment since she knows survival of humanity depends on the survival of Nature i.e. survival whole. The journey of her characters is a journey to wholeness. Any damage done to any of its factors may endanger the very fabrics of the universe.

### **CONCLUSION**

The historical, social, cultural and geographical background to Afro- American people and literature has had great impact on the evolution of the black American people. They have evolved to the present state of dignity through their rigorous and prolonged struggle. They have survived and achieved a kind of dignity and identity through their sufferings and agonies. They have fought on all levels- intellectual, social, political and literary, to awaken their people and also to white people to their rights as human beings. Their struggle on all levels has certainly borne fruits. Awakening to rights and winning them through their lifelong struggle has earned the dignity which was enjoyed by the whites and denied to the blacks because of slavery. They have emancipated them not only from the slavery but also from racism and sexism. And have become an integral part of ethnic America.

Almost all her works, poetry and fiction, more or less, deal with the same themes, but in a different way. She has dealt all related problems causing their predicament in her novels. She also takes us back into the history to show contrastingly the status once enjoyed by women in **“The Temple of My Familiars.”** She presents all her women characters in such a way that she lets them to make a search for a dignity which Alice Walker seek for them. She has become one of the major voices of black women in the multiethnic, racially, sexually and physically oppressed American society.

**REFERENCE**

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3. --- *The Color Purple*, Washington Square Press, New York, 1982.
4. --- *The Temple of My Familiar*, Pocket Books New York, 1989.
5. --- *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, 1992.