

ALICE WALKER – A FEMINIST MANIFESTO

Ms. Payel Ganguly
Asst. Professor
Gangadharapur Sikshan Mandir
University Of Calcutta (W.B.)

*“I find my own small / person a standing self /against the world an
equality of wills/ I finally understand” (17-22)*

[WALKER; on stripping Bark from Myself]

Through this poem Alice Walker emphasizes the importance of self-respect by resisting abuse or injustice for women all over who are locked in and locked out in the world of male domination. Its truly a saga of womanhood, an attempt to destroy the rigid orthodoxy of male dominated society where the females find tough to withstand. It is a universal issue of the female sage of emancipation and triumph over the domination. We have travelled a long miles but still the scar of female insecurity did not heal. The act of resisting the power of social domination is an Herculean task. In Hindu epic of “The Ramayana” and “The Mahabharata” too displayed the facts of how females are locked in and locked out everywhere. Draupadi’s ‘Vastraharan’ in the Mahabharata projects the plight of women who is compelled to open her Vastra or cloth, that protected her femininity before the court of male rulers but the timely intervention of Lord Krishna saves her honour. Similarly, Sita of the Ramayana, is sanctioned her territory within a Laxman - rekha, a line marked by Laxman, her brother in law. Once Sita crosses the line of Laxman - rekha, she is in the grip of Ravana, the cruel power. The saga of womanhood spells doom everywhere and is a universal issue where punishment awaits those who tend to cross the boundary of laxman- rekha established by the male society.

The expression ‘womanism’ has its origin in Black American Women’s cultural, ethical and socio-political stance. In 1983, Alice Walker, one of the foremost contemporary writers and activist, introduced ‘womanism’ in a collection of essays entitled “In Search of Our Mother’s Garden”. She regarded this concept as a more vital and accurate description of Black American women’s ethos to contrast to feminism, which was and is a predominantly middle class white women’s perspective. As Jacquelyn Grant observes “Black Feminism grows out of black women’s tri-dimensional reality of race, sex and class” (202). Since black women face a multifaceted oppression that is manifested in racism, sexism and classism, they find it especially important to define and express the particularity of their experience. Therefore, Walker’s womanist notion suggests not ‘the feminist,’ but the active struggle of Black women that makes them who ‘they are’ (Grant 205). Moreover, black women endeavour to collaborate with black men in the struggle against racism, concurrently joining all the women of the world in resistance to sexism and classism.

“To speak of black Women’s tri-dimensional reality, therefore, is not to speak of black women exclusively, for there is an implied universality, which connects them with others.” (Grant 217)

As a black writer, Alice Walker attempts to evoke this tradition of creativity and struggle within black women. She draws attention to her special position as Black artist in her essay, 'In Search of Our Mothers' Garden' to this effect: 'I am preoccupied with the spiritual survival, the whole of my people, but beyond that, I am committed to exploring the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties and the triumph of black women... For me, black women are the most fascinating creations in the world.'

In this connection Abena P.B. Busia writes: 'In their rebellious revalidation of 'Africa, our writers are neither attempting to resist the passage of time nor to deny the impact of history, for good or ill...the past bound us because we became subject to alien or hostile narratives, the present can liberate us because we can become teller of our own tales. We celebrate an oral tradition not merely because it is oral or because it is traditional. We celebrate because the traditional as claim is one of triumphant survival.'

The womanist writers focus mainly on the tri-dimensional oppression of black women, their spiritual journey towards self-development, their life within the black community (Bell 137) as well as certain global matters, for instance female genital mutilation, famine, war and poverty. Accordingly, Alice Walker relates in her book, "Anything we love can be saved". 'I create characters who sometimes speak in the language of immediate ancestors, characters who are not passive but active in the discovery of what is vital and real in this world. Characters who explore what it would feel like not to be imprisoned by hatred of women, the love of violence, and the destructiveness of greed taught to human beings as the 'religion' by which they must guide their lives.'

Alice Walker's novel 'Now is the Time to Open Your Heart (2004) shows that the protagonist, Kate Talking-tree, a middle-aged woman, sets off on a spiritual Sojourn, on which she discovers the medicinal and aesthetic quality of nature, the significance of human bonds and the power of ancestors connected. Kate also rejects institutionalised religion, materialism and evils of violence and 'un-civilized' civilization. Kate maintains an over-ordered house, has gone through several unsuccessful marriages. Discomfort and pain draws Kate's attention to herself. She notices the aging of her body. One day she hears her knees creaking like 'un-oiled door hinges' (11) and she finds a 'wrenching pain in her hip' (12) almost unbearable, she feels that aging initiates a need for transformation. She dismantles her altar of religious paraphernalia upon which stood her Gods and Goddesses. In addition, her worldly physical surroundings appear to be distant, unfamiliar, and uninspiring.

They 'mirrored a dissolution she felt growing inside herself. And though she had loved her home, her berry coloured house with starry-blue trim, she thought frequently of selling it. She even thought of giving it away... she could feel her house dissolving around her, as her parents dissolved when she day dreamed them. And there was a feeling of relaxing, of letting go, that was welcome (13).'

In her novel, 'The Third Life of Grange Copeland', the main character on the novel, connects the three generations of Copeland as he moves through the phases of his own life: his years as an abusive father and husband. In his first life, Grange, then a distant, alcoholic father, withholds love from his son Brownfield and indirectly causes the death of his wife Margaret, a very submissive wife who dreams of a better life for her family, in the North. Grange's alcoholism, infidelity, violence and desertion drive her to suicide. Brownfield's reaction to his mother's behaviour is described as follows: "His mother agreed with his father whenever possible. He thought his mother was like their dog in some ways." Margaret also takes shelter

into alcoholism and sexual promiscuity, having a child out of marriage. The example of male domination is found in the next generation of Brownfield and his wife, Mem who too suffered in human repression under Brownfield's male domination. Margaret's gradual degeneration in the face of Grange's tyranny is a silent evolutionary process of the suspension of her creative self and the numbers of spirit that Walker speaks of in her essay on black women's creativity. Margaret's story is the story of a submissive and surrendering wife who is stung by the tentacles of male subjugation.

Alice Walker's novel 'Possessing the Secret of Joy' (1992) launches an upcoming attack on both the practice and the tendency – rooted sometimes in weak relativism, at other times in plain sexist culturalism – to justify the oppression of women by resorting to the alibi of "tradition". The novel stakes out a Universalist position that valorises a basic, trans-cultural category of the female body is subjected to disfigurement on account of patriarchal ideologies. For her, the practice of genital mutilation serves to contain women sexually and socially, above all, it is a violation of each women's right to the integrity of her body.

Tashi, the female protagonist undergoes the ritual of excision in order to show her allegiance to liberation and cultural self determination. Her conjugal life suffers a setback which leads to bouts of depression and insanity and it takes the intervention of psychotherapy and Jungian archetypal analysis to bring her unconsciousness the roots of her suffering. At the end, Tashi resolves to murder the woman who performed the surgical excision on her.

Walker's "The Colour Purple" (1982) is a novel structured through a series of letters that Celie and Nettie exchange from their eventual encounter in their adult life. Celie falls an easy prey to men's continuous threats of violence. At the beginning, she writes a letter to God confessing the fact being raped by her step father, Alphonso, when Celie gets married to Albert, she undergoes the same loathsome experience through her husband's disrespect. While Celie grows up as a woman, she is sexually initiated through Shug's endeavours. Despite the fact, Celie and Shug share the same man as husband and lover respectively; they feel no jealousy but rather become close female friends. There begins and lesbian relationships between Celie and Shug and Celie discovers for the first time the experience of being in love and sexual enjoyment through another woman.

Once Shug initiates her, Celie feels strong enough to counter act Albert to the extent that their traditionally established gendered roles becomes reversed. Celie is finally given the rest of Nettie's letters, which restores her strength again through the renewed literal and allegorical, sisterhood with other females. When Celie is away, Albert feels hopeless. A woman's repudiation often implies a reversal of gender roles to the extent that the woman becomes stronger and the man feels weaker at the woman's display of strength. Thus, at the end of Walker's novel, there is an important gender role reversal between female and male characters.

Walker's novel, 'Meridian' marks a complete change, wherefrom is the signifier of a new consciousness. The foregrounding perspective of the novel is the expressivity of growing feminist consciousness within the Meridian. The novel de-constructs the traditional, social and moral values, the rules which dominate women sexuality and motherhood and the central problem of black-white feminism. The story of Mrs. Hill, Meridian's mother and Meridian emphasize on the demystification of romantic love and motherhood, the archetypal image of black matriarchy.

The narrator intervenes in emphasizing this critique of romantic love and motherhood within the Mrs. Hill. In her portraiture of Mrs. Hill, Alice analyses the tension between the

institutions of motherhood imposes upon Mrs. Hill and real experience and suffering in bearing this role like “an iron-heavy cross”. Mrs. Hill accepts the role of motherhood believing in the “sacred calling” of the institution of motherhood, sacrificing her single women’s life as a school teacher. But within a few years while giving birth to Meridian, she recognizes the bitter reality within the myth. Through her experience Mrs. Hill comprehends “the mysterious inner life...she had imagined gave women a secret joy for simply a full knowledge of the fact that they were dead, living just enough for their children, Mrs. Hill takes resort to abstraction.” The text presents one significant aspects of the feminist discourse in connection with Mrs. Hill’s frustration and bitterness– beyond the myth that motherhood is inherently oppressive.

Black feminism is political and social movement whose aim is the liberation of black woman by ending the interlocking system of racism, sexism and classism. The fight for gender equality connects all feminist. Yet, in contrast to the feminist who fought against sexism, black woman had to fight against both sexism and racism. What makes black feminist peculiar is the act of resistance against patriarch, fight for racial and class equality, as black woman hood is not circumscribed solely by the issues of gender (Gilyard and Wardi 1141). Therefore, black feminist speak above the intersectional position of black woman- being both black and female. The act of resistance is central in Walker’s activism. Through her poetry, she urges all the woman of colour to raise and resist their oppression.

Work Cited

- Beal, Frances.(1970) “Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female” CWLU Herstory.
 Cannon, Katie G.(1988) Black Womanist Ethics,Atlanta,ScholarsPress.
 Christian,Barbara.(1985) Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women
 Writers.NewYork:Perganon Press.
 Guy Sheftall,B. (1995)Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought.
 New York: New Press.
 Olakunle, George.(2001) Alice Walker’s Africa: Globalization & the Province of
 Fiction.ComparativeLiterature, (Vol 53) No 4;Published by Duke University Press.
 Roth, B. (2004) Separate Roads To Feminism, New York : Cambridge University
 PressWalker,Alice.
 Anything We Love Can Be Saved (1998) Kindle Edition
 A Poem Travelled Down My Arm: Poems & Drawings (2003) Kindle Edition
 Hard Times Require Furious Dancing: New Poem (2013)Kindle Edition
 Her Blue Body Everything We Know: Earthling Poems, 1965-90 Complete (1992) Kindle
 Edition
 Meridian (2007) Kindle Edition
 Now is the Time to Open Your Heart (2004) Kindle Edition
 The Color Purple (2013) Kindle Edition
 The Third Life of Grange Copeland(2003) Kindle Edition
 We are the Ones we have been Waitingfor: Light on a time of Darkness (2007) Kindle Edition