

ISSN INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER

IJELLH

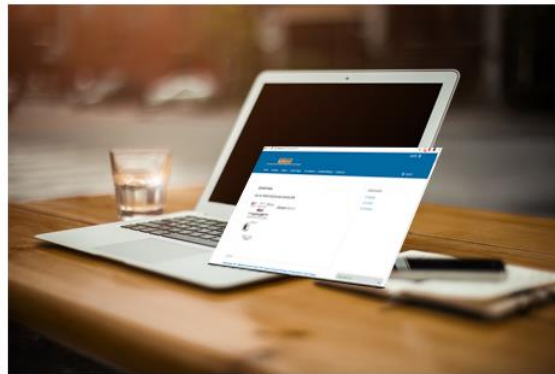
Crossref
INDEX COPERNICUS
INTERNATIONAL

**International Journal of English Language,
Literature in Humanities**

Indexed, Peer Reviewed (Refereed) Journal

UGC Approved Journal

ISSN-2321-7065



**Volume 6, Issue 7
July 2018**

www.ijellh.com

Ghansham Sardar Baviskar

Asst. Professor, Department of English

RNC Arts, JDB Commerce & NSC Science College, Nasik

Maharashtra

India

chiusham5353@gmail.com

**Dispossessed World of Women and their Resistance against Racist and Sexist Patriarchy in
Alice Walker's Fictional World**

Abstract

Alice Walker's novels from *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970) to *Now is the Time to Open Your Heart* (2004) are the historical documents. These novels delve into historical oppressions of the African Americans in the United States of America and document the intricacies of race and gender in relation to class distinctions responsible for the racial intolerance in the South and North America. Walker focuses on racism, sexism and classism in all her novels and her treatment of these issues in her fiction is organic and integral. She regards sexism, racial capitalism and patriarchy, the prime cause of women's oppression. As an intellectual, Walker addresses the issues of domestic violence, racial disparity and pitiable conditions in poverty, gender bias, interracial relationships and the children, imposed pregnancies and abortions, rapes and lynching, genital mutilation and cultural terrorism, violence and non-violence in the Civil Right era and the ecological problems invited by the capitalist imperialism and the question of survival and the need to free mind and body from detrimental wheels of oppressions in society. This paper presents the dispossessed world of the African American women and their resistance against the extremist forces and religious fanaticism relegating their existence to lesser human beings.

Key Words: oppression, injustices, authoritarianism, resistance, solidarity, liberation and humanity

Walker's fictional world mirrors the oppressed mankind. The reflections of all that Walker has experienced, witnessed, explored and lived emerge from her fiction graphically and realistically. Her novels expose the triple jeopardy: racism, sexism and classism; physically exploiting and psychologically disturbing and shattering the African Americans in America. According to Gerri Bates, "Her firsthand account of injustices surrounding race,

sex, and gender, and her moral responsibility to draw attention to them in an effort to correct them, become an integral, if not the central, focus of her writing.” (48) While presenting the historical conflict between the races and the violence perpetuated on African Americans, she centers her focus on the race and gender hierarchy that gets internalized within the African American communities and fractures the psyche of women and children by leaving them wiped out from the stream of the society. Though, oppression and the class boundaries dominate the world in her fiction, her characters make their way through the confrontation. The world is an “entirely menacing” place for Walker characters where they exist but this existence is not without loss and struggle, resistance and rebel to liberate them from the multi-dimensional authoritarianism they suffer in America. (Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* 263)

Walker's fiction is noted for aesthetics of folk tradition, poetic expressivity, lush details, sensitivity and realistic experiential observations, the omniscient narrator, and multi-voices narrative discourse. It explores into the fractured psyche of society that is fragmented and split in multi-dimensional forms of oppression. As women always remain on periphery in the masculine discourses, Walker's integral focus is on the African American women. Meena Kumari rightly states, “Her focus is on African American women, who live in a larger world and struggle to achieve independent identities beyond male domination.” (27) She places her characters in a large white narcissist order that has constantly destroyed the African American identity, culture and subjected women to brutal atrocities in inhuman conditions in the history of America. Through her projection of violence, Walker not only exposes the ills in hegemony but creates a sound ground for her characters to grow human and achieve the true humanity with all the beings on the earth. Kashinath Ranveer substantiates,

Though Alice Walker exposes patriarchal hegemony, she does not reject the black man completely. Her women characters do reject the atrocious black men but the moment these men change their way of life, they are welcomed in their company. In fact, Walker creates such a world of black men and women based on equality and mutual understanding and peaceful coexistence which is full of happiness and prosperity. (105)

Walker's fictional world abounds in a variety of experiences that she witnessed in America. In her seven novels, she centers her focus on African American women, “the most fascinating creations in the world.” (Byrd 40) Her novels explore into the social realities of women's oppression, devastating effects of racism and sexism on African Americans, the interracial relationships and its serious impact on the children and the women's plight in

white narcissism and their struggle for equal rights. Walker's novels not only venture into human sufferings in patriarchy but also oppose the very ideas of "denigration and destruction of self, others and the earth." (Kincaid 483)

The Third Life of Grange Copeland, a novel acclaimed as "a southern work of art" deals with the grim realities in African American women's lives. (Wade-Gayles 102) Alice Walker employs the third person omniscient narrator in the novel to recount the plight of women in the Copeland families. Grange Copeland, the protagonist, in his fight against the oppression in the capitalist sharecropping system inflicts the trouble on Margaret, his wife and destroys her, and leaves Brownfield, his son paralysed by the racist order. Violence bred in his childhood, Brownfield turns it more brutally on his family. He murders Mem Copeland, his wife and leaves the three daughters to survive in the hostile environments, but hope comes to Ruth, the third daughter in the form of Grange Copeland. He tries to make amends for the wrongs he caused to his wife and son by taking the custody of Ruth. He emancipates her and makes her fit for survival in the threatening hostile world. The three generations of Copeland family from Grange to Ruth is a study of "miseducation, miscommunication, and redemption." (Huskey 452) Empowered by her grandfather's philosophy and his faith within and not in any external force or God, Ruth learns her lessons in life. It offers both of them strength to fight Brownfield and the racist judicial system. By the time Ruth becomes young, her love: the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s comes as a hope for her further emancipation and redemption in the racist, sexist and classist order. Walker's first novel ends by the time the Civil Rights Movement era starts symbolizing hope and even struggle in Ruth's life for the betterment of the African Americans in the most troubled times of histories in the struggle for equal society.

Meridian, the second novel based on Walker's experiences in the civil rights era is an account of Meridian's journey from her objectification in sexist social order to her triumphant delivery into the realm of Civil Rights Movement. Through the third person narrative, Walker unfolds Meridian's story and comments on the women's position in a conventional society. Meridian's entrapment in an evil marriage and betrayal from Truman Held, her husband who is indulged in a relationship with Lynne, a white woman changes her perception towards life. She gives up her child as she realizes the routine chores at home condition her to servitude. Learning about the event occurred in April 1960 that the white racists bombed and killed the black children and adults; she resolves to fight back and joins the movement voluntarily. When the members in the movement prefer violence, she retorts and adopts non-violence but she is even ready to "kill when killing is necessary" an act of self defence. (Walker, *Meridian*

207) She leads the demonstrations against the segregation in the country and is very much influenced by the movement songs and the blues music. She teaches the illiterate to read and write to further the change in African American world. Finally, her involvement in the movement brings transformation in her state. She emerges from a suspended woman to the emergent fighter of Walker who in her quest for identity advocates the “brotherly/sisterly love” between the men and women as she forgives Truman, her husband at the end for not loving her but a white woman when she was herself being a mother carried his black baby. (Winchell 70)

Walker’s Pulitzer Prize winning epistolary novel, *The Color Purple* like *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* and *Meridian* centers its focus on women’s oppression. She projects the women’s marginal world from Celie’s perspective and throws light on the cultural taboos in the society of her time. “Love redeems, meanness kills” dominates the theme in *The Color Purple*. (White 355) It recounts a saga of Celie, a girl brutally mutilated in body and spirit depicting her life of what it means to be a black woman in the black and white racist, male dominated patriarchal constructs of society. Celie’s growth is shunned by her father who rapes her brutally and sells her children and later hands her over to domineering Albert as if she is “a piece of property.” (Winchell 86) Shug Avery, a blues singer and Albert’s beloved develops a female bond with Celie and sets her free from the Christian conventions and the patriarchal constrains of marriage institution. Embedded in the soil of southern black community, the novel presents the African American women’s universe through Celie’s entrapment in sexist and racist world from which, the women like Celie cannot escape the ghetto that binds them to utter poverty and pitiable conditions within their families, communities and the entire society.

In her fourth novel, *The Temple of My Familiar*, Walker centers her focus on women’s resistance against the religious conventions and traditions which confine women in patriarchal institutions. She projects her character gallery in the backdrop of economic disparity and the ecological problems. Her characters Celie, Albert, Sofia, Shug Avery, Nettie and Olivia from *The Color Purple* make their appearance and revisit in *The Temple of My Familiar*. Walker’s strategic repetition of these characters in her novels displays how the dominant influences of her characters’ personalities strengthen the individuals and influence the community. These personas remain the eternal source of life affirming forces to sustain survival through the potential capabilities; they possess and develop as a strategy to deal with the adversities in their lives. Alice Walker has confirmed the novels: *The Temple of My Familiar* and *Possessing the Secret of Joy* are not the sequels to *The Color Purple*. Shug

Avery figures in Walker's these three novels and transcends her effect to the community through her blues songs, her role as "Minister" and the writer of the pamphlet, *The Gospel According to Shug* in *The Temple of My Familiar*. Walker not only repeats Shug but also pamphlet to develop and strength the concept of God, the divine figure who is everywhere and in everything and within, against the backdrop of Christianity and its notions of a white God. Walker's use of characters revisiting in different novels, representing black voice and rejecting the concept of white God challenges not only the Christianity but the entire paradigm of Western culture.

In her another famous novel, *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, Walker employs the multi voices to focus on cultural terrorism existed in age old conditions in the African continents. Though, the novelist uses multi voices to narrate the community stories, the focus is on Tashi and her oppression in male dominated society. She represents the victims of genital mutilation. The multi voices which are diverse in persona often merge together and contribute the personal experiences in the narrative of community. Tashi, a victim of cultural terrorism rebels against the conventions and murders the ritual circumciser. After this rebellious act, she is sentenced to the death penalty. Her resistance mobilises the women protesters to retort the cultural terrorism through the banner slogan: "RESISTANCE IS THE SECRET OF JOY!" and the songs they sing to register their voice and resistance. (Walker, *Possessing* 264) Through Tashi, the protagonist of the novel, Walker presents an example of resistance through which women can liberate themselves from the cultural traditions and notions responsible for women's victimization.

Walker's reflection of her own interracial marriage experience with a white man in the hostile environments and its impact on her relationship with her parent too can be traced in her earlier short stories and her fiction as well. Like the unnamed father in her short story "The Child Who Favored Daughter" the patriarch in her next popular novel entitled, *By the Light of My Father's Smile* gets enraged and acts vengeance on his daughter but in his act of violence that he inflicts, he spoils his relationship with his daughters. Walker effectively blends the multi voices in the novel to centre the focus on Robinson, the patriarch and his two daughters: Susannah, a novelist and Magdalena, an academic. Robinson, the patriarch who is an anthropologist inflicts violence on Magdalena, his daughter by his discovery of her love affair with Manuelito, a young man from the mixed African/Indian people known as the Mundo. Through Robinson's story, Walker shows how an act of violence on the part of the father results in spoiling relationship with daughters. Like Grange Copeland, he grows human and tries to amend the wrongs he caused on his daughters as a father. What he could not do in

his earthly life, he does that by becoming a restless spirit hovering his presence over his daughters' lives. The father's restless spirit which is deeply felt by the daughters seeks for the daughters' exoneration for his acts of violence which defiled their lives when he was alive. Through her narrative of multi voices, Walker insists that the violence of any sort is not the solution to the problems. To counter them more dynamically, one has to become more human and sensitive towards the needs of human beings and trust in the universal principle of forgiveness that is must to attain peace with all in the world.

Walker's 2004 novel, *Now is the Time to Open Your Heart* concentrates on Kate, a writer and a protagonist. The omniscient narrator unravels an artist's story and delves into her spiritual quests and her deep concern for the earth and the environment in the midst of growing industrialization and its damaging effects on the entire humanity and the other species existing on the planet. While tracing the artist's concern for the planet, the narrator explores into Kate's spiritual quests undertaken for the rediscovery of meaning of her existence that is caused due to the disillusionment of the aging realities in her life. Disappointed with her "Buddhist retreat" Kate discovers the teachers "unreliable sources of information" and decides to leave her lover. She travels Amazon to gain new experiences and knowledge about the divine world through a drug called *yage* as she follows the notion of indigenous people that by consuming *Yage*, one can attain wisdom and the worldly knowledge about one's self and the world. It is only when she reaches her grandmother, she realizes: "the divine source of knowledge" does not exist anywhere and even in her spiritual quests that she had undertaken and learns the only means to reach it is to "look within" what Buddha calls *Atta Deep Bhav*. (Gillespie 119)

Ruth in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, Meridian in *Meridian*, Celie, Shug Avery, Sophia and Nettie in *The Color Purple*, and Tashi in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, Susannah and Magdalena in *By the Light of My Father's Smile*, Kate in *Now is the Time to Open Your Heart* do not surrender to the racist and sexist patriarchy. In exploration of their selves they reject conventions and orthodoxy and even the white God as they rediscover, God is innate, within and so their first and foremost duty is to themselves and not to the racist and sexist social order which oppresses them. With this new realization they grow in their understanding of the universe around and in learning to love themselves, they learn to forgive and love others and extend the bond of humanity.

Walker does not use only the omniscient narrator and the multi voices in the discourse of her narratives, but also effectively blends it with poetry, blue songs and music. Her blend of polyvocality and antiphony not only add to the effect of dramatisation of community songs

in her fiction, but also demonstrates its integral role and significance in the overall growth and development of her characters. It is effectively incorporated in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. The effect of blue songs and music is felt throughout her fiction. The songs and music in *The Color Purple*, *Meridian* and *Possessing the Secret of Joy* not only strengthen and empower the individual personas and their consciousness but also strengthen the community feelings to stand firm against the injustices, atrocities, threats and intimidation in racist social order.

Thus, Walker's fictional world better acquaints with the serious problems and threats posed to humanity by capitalist society in the forms of racism, sexism, and classism. Besides, racism, sexism and classism, Walker also deals with the Church, religious practices and the concept of God in all her novels. How to liberate African American women from the confinements of orthodox religions is Walker's serious concern in almost all the novels. It is a matter of serious discussion. Ruth in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, Meridian in *Meridian*, Celie and Shug Avery in *The Color Purple* and Kate in *Now is the Time to Open Your Heart* are trapped in the constraints of religious notions. Without breaking the shackles of conventions, they cannot free their selves and bodies from the institutions which oppress them in America. Walker strongly advocates the rejection of the biased social order to create a matriarchal society based on female bonding for the peaceful coexistence with all the living organisms present on the earth. It is for the peaceful coexistence of all, the threats of patriarchy to the humanity needs to be dealt. Through her novels, Walker explores into the masculine agenda from which women must be freed and for that Walker advocates peaceful resistance and gender solidarity. Walker herself is a follower of Buddhist practices, her characters in search of their identities like her practice, the peaceful political activism, struggle, resist and enlighten themselves by discovering that the divine power, they were looking for in an external agency, is within and their honesty does not lie with violent men and racially deposed society but to themselves. Walker does not only raise women's' issues and discusses them in her fictional world but also provides solutions through the principle of resistance and peaceful political activism that is all her life is about.

Works Cited

- Bates, Gerri. *Alice Walker: A Critical Companion*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2005. Print.
- Byrd, Rudolph. *The World Has Changed: Conversations with Alice Walker*. New York: The New Press, 2010. Print.
- Gillespie, Carmen. *Critical Companion to Alice Walker: A Literary Reference to Her Life and Work*. New York: Facts on File, an Infobase Learning Company, 2011. Print.
- Huskey, R. Erin. "Alice Walker." *Icons of African American Literature: The Black Literary World*. Ed. Yolanda Williams Page. California: Greenwood, 2011.
- Kincaid, Jamaica and Hisaye Yamamoto. *American Ethnic Writers, Volume 2*. California: Salem Press, Inc., 2000. Print.
- Kumari, Meena. *Alice Walker*. Kanpur: Bhaskar Publications, 2011. Print.
- Ranveer, Kashinath. "Alice Walker: An African American Womanist Writer." *Alice Walker's The Color Purple: A Reader's Companion*. Ed. Nandita Sinha. New Delhi: Asia Book Club, 2002. Print.
- Wade-Gayles, Gloria. *No Crystal Stair: Visions of Race and Sex in Black Women's Fiction*. New York: Pilgrim Press, 1984. Print.
- Walker, Alice. *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. London: Phoenix, 2005. Print.
- . *Meridian*. London: Phoenix, 2004. Print.
- . *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. London: Vintage Books, 2009. Print.
- Winchell, Donna. *Alice Walker*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992. Print.
- White, Evelyn C. *Alice Walker: A Life*. New York: W.W.Norton and Company, 2006. Print.