

Significance of Black Images in the Fictions of Alice Walker

Dr.JULIE

Research Scholar,
Kuvempu University,
Karnataka.

Abstract: The Fiction of Alice Walker: A Study of Black Images is a humble text authored by SeemaMurugan that focuses on how Alice Walker has responded through her fictional works to the challenges of the double consciousness especially being black woman in the powerful democracy of the world. Pulitzer winning novelist, Alice Walker has emerged as one of the most versatile and controversial writer of Afro-American Literature both nationally and internationally. Within this particular growing body of creative writing, presently we could see the publication of vital works by African women. This particular book is influenced by the framework of Joan Cannady's anthology which is entitled *Black Images in American Literature* brought out in 1997. Needless to say that Afro-American writing has its own distinctive properties, themes and unique techniques. The most important thing about Alice Walker's fiction is her power of narrating a story. She is a natural story teller. It's a known fact that she is very much preoccupied with the sense of spiritual survival. She can render theme in terms of action.

Keywords: Black Images, Double Consciousness.

Alice Walker's fictions has been the subject of elaborative comment by literary scholars around the world. This particular book revolves round the crucial difference between blacks and whites in terms of color it seems. No doubt that color is an interesting metaphor because of its association with skin color besides providing greater sources for black literature. The present book

focuses on the theme of blackness which is also a matter of fact and that was regarded as a social and cultural handicap. That is an artistic strength which will continue to operate as a creative element in the writings of Alice Walker. It is interesting to note that Seema, in her introduction, speaks about ancient India too, where varna or color, was the basis of discrimination against the lowest class who are called as dalit. In theme and tone, Dalit literature of India bears remarkable similarity to African American literature sharing its identity and some of its agony and suffering with it. It's a known fact that the Dalit Panther's is named after the Black panthers in the U. S. The author has followed the suggestive framework extensively and has applied to Walker's fictions. Black images are recognized on the basis of color contrast. Those images are the shadow, the mask and the lamp. These are also the title of the chapters in this text.

The first chapter is "The Shadow", is divided into three parts over here. The first part deals with the meaning of this image arising from the color symbolism and contrast of white and black obviously. The second part of this chapter traces the image of the shadow that has actually darkened American history and experience. Color issue arises because of the inherent white prejudice of always right and are always superior to black is certainly wrong. Aspect of the image shadow is very much focused by walker in her fictions and the reason behind that is her love towards black women is unbounded.

Seema Murugan recalls Walker's eye accident. She was blinded in one eye at the age of eight by his brother's careless shot from BB gun. After this accident, she started feeling that, prettiness and vitality of her childhood self-withdraw from her. It disappeared behind a scar that was over looming in her

imagination. She was deeply aware of a black woman's perilous world of male superiority and of the symbolism of light and shadow.

No doubt that importance of skin color in American life evoked a powerful response in fiction. American fiction decries the power of skin color to divide Americans. Walker's fictions actually affirms blackness against the traditional notion of white as always good. To prove this, Seema discusses Walker's first novel *The Third Life of a Grange Copeland* that portrays Grange, the black hero, as being bad only due to the white oppression that makes him so. The awareness of being black impels them to view all whites as the natural enemies. It sounds obvious that the above statement is true in the case of Lynne's character in *Meridian*. Even though Lynne is associated with the Civil Rights Movement, Trueman, her husband and activist, can only think of her as guilty of all those sins that are connected with whites and that is such an awful feeling.

In the second part of this chapter, Seema says that, in her name itself, Alice Walker acknowledges slavery as a part of her own distant past. Walker knew that her father's great grandmother Mrs Mary Poole, came as a slave on foot from Virginia, carrying a baby on each hip. This was like a trek that Walker memorialize by retaining her maiden name. Walker's fiction depicts vividly the institution of slavery and the conditions or environment it had set up. In a very different way, *Meridian*, equates motherhood with slavery, this is because motherhood had been a profoundly negative experience for her.

Further, in the third part of this chapter, we find author discussing *In Love and Trouble*, Where an old, black woman is forcibly expelled from a white church

and Southern Christianity thus seems to be nothing else than racism reserved for a Sunday. *The revenge of Hannah Kemhuff* is a story that is based on an incident which had happened to Walker's mother during the time of Depression. Like Walker's mother, Hannah in the story, receives a box of clothes from a relative who lives in the north. She wears one of the dresses from the box and goes to town to get the food that is being distributed by the Red Cross. When Hannah presents her vouchers, she is shamed and humiliated by a young white woman who refuses to give her food because she was finely dressed. Walker exemplifies such prejudicial acts of whites as an important aspect of the shadow image. In the final part of the chapter, the shadow image is the evil present among blacks themselves. Emotions like shame, despair, guilt and fear etc. are related to this image that too when blacks realize their sins.

Incest and sexual violence are the other aspects of their life causing darkness and shadows on their happiness. If racism is considered as a part of shadow image, then sexism that oppresses women is also naturally a shadow within a shadow. Some of the stories in *Love and Trouble* show black women as themselves responsible for the shadow and darkness in their lives. Similarly in *The Temple of My familiar*, *Meridian*, *The Color Purple* are the instances of black evil and inhumanity. Another interesting and glaring example of traditional cruelty within the black community itself is the custom of female genital mutilation. We find this theme in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. The shadow in black life cannot be lifted until these traditional methods of oppression are totally stopped. Seema Murugan has enabled us to gather

together Walker's depiction of various kinds of evil ranging from white prejudice to age-old oppression of women in human societies.

The Mask is a next chapter that explains the scope and its dual manifestations and this is what we get to observe in the Alice Walker's fictions. Blacks have a tendency toward invisibility and that's because of their natural similarity to their color with darkness. It seems this invisibility therefore grants them an unrecognizable power and strength over their aggressors who are actually white assaulters. This chapter throws light upon Walker's ability that drew upon the trickster figure of black folklore because for them it was like a survival mechanism. She has extended her idea of regarding trickery as a mask in the *Third Life of Grange Copeland* and it is also like metaphor where one can observe that something is intended to misrepresent the true nature of an activity. Not just this but we get to see in this novel illustrates hermeticism which is another kind of mask that means completely sealed where one can come across several recourses of our suspicion and distrust lies. No doubt masking is a combination of two contraries. Using this device women sometimes can secure their victory.

In America it's a known fact that blacks suffer from the problem of "double consciousness" the term coined by W. E. B. DuBois in his *The Souls of Black Folk*. He is someone who needs no introduction but his works speak volumes. He felt that blacks see themselves through the revelation of the white perspective. The above said is quite visible in the novel *Meridian* when she points out that both Trueman and Lynne looked white from distance. Trueman is black, but his psyche is directed by the white mindset. Here, one can make

out that black man masking as a white. It is like adopting and collaborating with whites occupying force.

Similarly, in *The Color Purple*, Celie's letters become a mask and that appears as an artistic method to avoid direct confrontation with her cruel father and subsequently husband who was inhuman. Invisibility has been a recurring theme in African-American literature because it stands as a symbol of the modern concern with identity and also as ironic comment on the effect of the high visibility of blacks in a white's society. We could see the perils of racism and sexism in and out of their literature. Invisibility is most visible in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*. This is how Seema Murugan enhances the artistic quality of Walker's writing besides not doing away with the originality of author's distinctive ideas and showcasing black reality.

In the next chapter, which is named as *The Mirror*, Seema uses mirror as image to show the reality since Alice Walker's pictures of black life in America also project the deterministic forces that are released by the history and industrialization causing damage to black community. She is of the opinion that this is the modern analogue of nineteenth century naturalism it seems. Whereas, Walker as writer, is not confined to realism, as it is very much clear from the other images recognized in her fictions. Therefore, when the image of mirror is applied to her work, the suggestion is that without professedly adhering to any realistic theory she presents glimpses of black life and its activities as they are apprehended by the senses. Walker's realistic dialogues gets an authenticity stamp from Black English and lead us to the basic modes of the African-American thought processes. Seema also enhances Walker's use of Black English and how the employment of this dialect strikes

her realistic descriptions and characterization. For example, in *Meridian*, there is a realistic picture of the town which is the setting for this novel in which Civil Rights Movement is depicted. In her realistic descriptions of black homes, Walker makes the living quarter of the black sharecropper an emblem of his continued slavery. Author focuses on such descriptions that Walker creates in her readers a sense of realism, a sense of watching the whole scene unfold before one's eyes, and sense of admiration for the artist who holds up the mirror to the sense of reality.

In the second part of this chapter, author focuses on the term 'naturalism'. Walker's naturalistic vision is a unifying theme it seems especially in her short story collection named *In Love and Trouble* where characters struggle without finding any result against forces of psychological predispositions, and also personal or collective history that causes them move forward.

The Lamp is the next chapter which depicts the image of the lamp as bringing Walker's character out of the shadows or darkness in which they were wandering. In *Meridian*, protagonist discovers divine manifestation. She realizes that her identity is integrated with her people and community. This is how get to see her essential oneness with black humanity. Protagonist reassesses her commitment to the racial struggle. Therefore, the lamp image signifies Walker's art which is like a liberation and lifesaving. It appears also as an act of reconstruction and reclamation of the past.

In the second part of this chapter, author appreciates Walker's writing as a powerful tool, very expressive that depicts the black woman's struggle for spiritual wholeness and sexual, political and also racial equality. If we try to

look at *Meridian*, the most artistically mature work of the author, she transcends the boundaries of the female gender to embrace more universal concerns about individual autonomy, self-reliance and self-realization.

Further, Seema Murugan discusses *The Temple of My Familiar*, in the third part of this chapter. This novel is a unique production and its story has true African elements no doubt. Along with that we find a string of interesting stories, spirituality and some kind of magical feeling. Not to forget its treatment of history and philosophy deserve a separate consideration. *The Temple of My Familiar* presents certain difficulties to the western reader. But to an Indian reader, Walker presents age-old themes. Like a lamp, Walker's imagination has revealed the entire course of human history. In this novel, there is an attempt to move from darkness to light. Alice Walker is an aesthetic in her life. According to her life is worth living when it is guided by the principle of beauty.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that the master image of Walker's fiction is the Lamp. Her work lit up by faith in the unity of mankind and in the hope that human nature is capable of redeeming itself. Every protagonist in her novels, are shown to have achieved a spiritual victory. And it is this quality of Walker's fiction that constitutes her own victory as a novelist.

The Fiction of Alice Walker: A Study of Black Images provides a deeper insight into Walker's fictional art and techniques showcasing that how Alice Walker responds through her fiction to the challenges of the double consciousness of being black and also being woman in the most powerful democracy of the world. Through the images of Shadow, Mask, Mirror and

Lamp, SeemaMurugan actually reveals insights into the multidimensional world of Alice Walker that would help to understand and to explore the universal human condition in contemporary times with respect to both race and gender. The book is well written and no doubt that readers and scholars will be benefited.

SeemaMurugan is currently Assistant professor in the Department of Humanities and social Sciences at the IIT, Kharagpur with an MPhil gold medal and PhD in Contemporary African American Literature from the BHU Varanasi.

Works Cited.

Murugan, Seema. *The Fiction of Alice Walker: A Study of Black Images*.

Author Press. New Delhi. 2008.

Walker, Alice. *The Color Purple*. Harcourt publisher, 1982.

_____. *Meridian*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976.

_____. *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*. New York: Harcourt
BraceJovanovich, 1970.

------. *The Temple of My Familiar*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
1989.