

Alice Walker's Womanism VS Feminism

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يهدف البحث الى دراسة اثر مفهوم المراوية لاليس ووكر على مسرح اليس شلدريس تصويرها للحياة الافروامريكية والدور الذى تلعبه المرأة السوداء للدفاع عن هويتها عن طريق تقديم دراسة تحليلية لاعمال اليس شلدريس المسرحية من خلال الاطار النظرى لمفهوم المراوية كنظرية ادابية . يتناول الفصل الاول شرحا تفصيليا للتعريف الذى وضعته الكاتبة اليس ووكر لمفهوم المراوية كما يلقى الضوء على التسلسل التاريخى لتطور المرأة السوداء داخل المجتمع الامريكى كما ترصده اليس ووكر ويركز الفصل الاول على الفروق الجوهرية ما بين نظرية المراوية والحركة النسائية للمرأة الافروامريكية ، موضحا محاولة الكاتبة اليس ووكر لتطوير مفهوم المراوية ليصبح ايدولوجية سياسية لجميع المهمشين والمقهورين فى جميع انحاء العالم ، ويوضح الفصل الاول ايضا السمات للكتابات النسائية ودور المسرح النسوى فى تصوير نضال المرأة الافروامريكية رابطا مفهوم المراوية باعمال الكاتبة اليس شلدريس من خلال استعراض رؤيتها لدور المسرح الافروامريكى الانسانى والسياسى من خلال تحليل مقالاتها الادبية ما بين عامى 1949 و1966 .

يتناول الفصل الثانى بالتحليل مسرحية الكاتبة اليس شلدريس فلورينس 1949 مستعرضا نال المرأة السوداء ضد العنصرية ملقى الضوء على واحده من اهم سمات الكتابات المراوية فى هذه المسرحية وهى رحلة التطور والتحول التى تحدث لشخصية البطلة وتؤدى بها فى النهاية الى اتخاذ قرارا حاسما ينتصر لهويتها وجنسها كمرأة سوداء .

ويتناول الفصل الثالث مسرحية اطراب فى العقل 1955 لـ اليس شلدريس موضحا نضال المرأة الافروامريكية لتحسين صورتها المقدمه على المسرح من خلال نضال بطلة المسرحية لتوضيح حقيقة المرأة السوداء على المسرح ويركز هذا الفصل على توضيح سمات الكتابات المراوية فى هذا العمل .

اما الفصل الرابع فيتناول بالتحليل مسرحية رباط الزواج 1966 والتي تعد اهم كتابات الكاتبة اليس شلدريس حيث يستعرض هذا الفصل نضال المرأة السوداء ضد القوانين العنصرية والفصل بين الاجناس فى جنوب امريكا فى ذلك الوقت وايضا يتناول بالتحليل سمات الكتابات المراوية والتي تظهر بوضوح فى هذه المسرحية .

ويتناول الفصل الخامس مسرحية شراب فى الصحراء 1974 مستعرضا دور المرأة الامريكية المعدمه فى النضال ضد العنصرية والطبقية ومواجهة الانقسام داخل المجتمع الافروامريكى موضحا اهمية هذه المسرحية حيث انها تمثل اولى مسرحيات الكاتبة المواجهة بغرض احداث صحوه سياسية بين السيدات الافروامريكيات وحثهم على احداث تغيير فى المجتمع بشكل جزرى محققه بذلك الهدف الرئيسى التى تسعى اليه الكتابات المراوية.

وفى النهاية تتناول الخاتمة اهم النتائج التى توصل اليها البحث .

"Womanism" is a term coined by Alice Walker in her book *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens : Womanist Prose* to culminate almost two decades-long effort to establish a literary Canon for African American Women writers. Her main target is to evoke the black women's glory and pride in their cultural heritage, and to provide them with socio-political framework to fully engage in society. Izgarjan and Markov emphasize that :

As Walker's literary scope expanded and she developed into a more mature writer and political activist, she became aware of the need for a movement which would be different from feminism and which would offer colored women a space to formulate their policy. She named it Womanism"(305) .

Obviously , this concept stems from Walker's awareness of the destructive and oppressive forces of racism and sexism that undermine the black women' sense of identity and self- esteem, and the need for creating a new concept to change the distorted image of the black women in the American society to motivate them to act in an organized way in order to liberate themselves and to promote their status in the society. To do so, she has dedicated all her fiction and non-fiction writings from 1963 to 1980 to explore and revive the African- American women's history, aiming at recovering the black female pride and redefining the black female identity. This journey has ended by coining the concept of Womanism in 1938 to provide the black women with a new and self-given definition that connects them with their African roots and focuses on their leading role in the society. She explains this concept by a definition of four aspects to clarify what Womanism means, and to identify the features of the black female identity in details. She states:

Womanism is

1-From womanish. (opp. Of girlish, ' i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, no serious .) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black expression of mothers to female children, " you acting womanish, ' i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered " good " for one. Interested in grown – up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: " you trying to be grown ". Responsible in charge serious.(Walker, *In Search* xi)

In the first aspect of the definition Walker describes the black woman as a thinking person, who is always in pursuit of knowledge. She starts by

defying the prevailing stereotype of the black woman as inferior to both man and white woman in terms of the mental faculties and the thinking ability. Furthermore, she emphasizes the black women's attributes such as strength, capability, and independence. It is important to emphasize here the fact that although Walker states that a Womanist is a black feminist or feminist of color, but Womanism cannot serve as an alternative for black feminism because it is not limited to the political and social targets only, but it covers also the cultural and spiritual aspects of the African civilization. According to Venkatesan, Walker's Womanism is a "more reflective [theorization] of African – American women's culture, especially southern culture"(qtd. In Mishra 196). Further, Venkatesan emphasizes that " Womanism is a cultural aesthetic that embraces a humanistic rather than an examination of the politics of oppression or the other related concerns of black feminism" (qtd.in Mishra 197). In other words, Black feminism focuses on the economic, social and political forces that impinge on the lives of black women, while Womanism pays particular attention to the spiritual aspects. Walker herself emphasizes, in most of her interviews, her refusal to embrace any ideology that is narrow and out of harmony with spirituality. Walker's choice to the word Womanism emphasizes this peculiar perspective of her ideology. Obviously, Womanism is formed by the legacy and the cultural heritage of the afro-American women. It is based on the wisdom of the grandmothers and transfers their experience to the young generations. For that reason Walker has used the word ' Womanism ' in preference to ' black feminism ' to describe more appropriately the black woman's cultural heritage. Walker explains that the term ' Womanism ' does not come from a vacuum. According to Benarioua For Walker the term ' Womanism ' " Was the best choice to present the balanced picture of black womanhood that had been misinterpreted" (33). She "has derived the word womanism from the black folk term ' womanish ' to locate " Womanism within black matrilineal culture" (Izgrajan and Markov 3). According to Walker, The word ' Womanish ' is a colloquial word used by black mothers to describe girls who wants to "know more and in greater depth ... and whose behavior is ' outrageous ' (In Search Xi). Walker has picked this term in particular to express the black folk's spirit, and to use a genuine term stemming from their own daily conversation and culture. According to Shogho the term is also " preferred by many black feminists because it is rooted in black culture, whereas the word feminist is perceived as coming out of the white woman's culture"(57). For Walker, the name of any revolutionary movement for human change should stem from the culture of the founders of this movement in order to articulate their concerns and

aspirations. In one of her articles she says that although she values the civil rights movement deeply, but she "never liked the term itself "(In Search 336). She explains " this is because 'civil rights' is a term that did not evolve out of black culture, but, rather, out of American law" (In Search 336). She asserts :

the term 'civil rights' could never adequately express black people's revolutionary goals, because it could never adequately describe our longings and our dreams, or those of the non – black people who stood among us. And because, as a term, it is totally lacking in color. (In Search 336).

According to Walker the other black movements like " black power, 'black panther party', and 'Mississippi Freedom Democratic party' sound so much better, although they accomplished less. In an interview for the New York Times Magazine in 1984, Alice Walker states:

I don't choose womanism because it is ' better ' than feminism ... I choose It because I prefer the sound, the feel, the fit of it' because I cherish the spirit of the women (like sojourner) the word calls to mind, and because I share the old ethic – American habit of offering society a new word when the old word it is using fails to describe behavior and change that only a new word can help it more fully see " ("The black women's story" 94).

According to Tally, Walker believes that "feminism needed a new word that would capture its complexity and fullness " (216). Hence, the word 'Womanism ' is meant to complement the deficiencies in the feminism and to tackle the issues of women from a much broader perspective. To defend her choice to the word ' womanism ' she writes :

Womanist " encompasses ' feminist ' as it is defined in webster's, but also means instinctively pro-woman. It is not in the dictionary at all. Nonetheless, it has a strong root in black women's culture. An advantage of using ' womanist ' is that, because. It is from my own culture, I needn't preface it with the word ' black ' (an acknowledge word necessity and a problem I have with the word ' feminist '), Since blackness is implicit in the term just as for white women there is apparently no felt need to preface ' feminist ' with the word ' white ', since the word ' feminist ' is accepted as coming out of white women's culture (Walker, "The black women's story" 94).

Most importantly, Walker asserts that Womanism "may include different meanings which focus not only on women but on men as well" (In Search 11). It is a word that emphasizes the importance and the particularity of black women's relationship to men. In the word 'Womanism' she emphasizes how black women's attitudes are different from those of white women in relation to men. Walker explains that :

It is a word that said more than that they choose women over men. More than that they choose to live separate from men. In fact, to be consistent with black cultural values (which, whatever their shortcomings, still have considerable worth) it would have to be a word that affirmed connectedness to the entire community and the world, rather than separation, regardless of who worked and slept with whom " (In Search 81).

The second aspect of the definition highlights the peculiar perspective of Womanism. The second aspect of the definition says :

2- Also : A woman who loves other women, sexually and / or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers woman's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and / or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist, as in : " Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white beige, and black ? " Ans, : " Well you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented. Traditionally, capable, as in : " Mama, I'm walking to Canade and I'm taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me '. replay ; " it wouldn't be the first time (In Search xi).

This aspect elucidates the difference between feminism and womanism. Feminism is female centered and revolves around the empowerment of the women in the patriarchal society. Womanism, on the other hand, is family – centered and focuses on the liberation of the entire people, male as well as female. Walker emphasizes that Wominism is "committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist' (In Search Xi). In Womanism, unlike Feminism, race and community are essential and inseparable from issues of gender. Womanism appreciates and highlights black women's culture and the struggle of women in general, while opposing the separatist gendered ideology that may situate black women against black men. Talley Says "opposed to the gender separatism that bedevils feminism, Womanism

presents an alternative for black women by framing their survival in the context of the survival of their community where the fate of women and that of men are inextricably linked" (210). Asserting Collins aptly notes "many black women view feminism as a movement that at best, is exclusively for women, and, at worst, dedicating to attacking or eliminating men ... Womanism seemingly supplies a way for black women to address gender – oppression without attacking black men" (11). Thus, the sense of community can be considered as the core of the Womanist theory on the contrary of the Feminism. Alice Walker herself asserts that the sense of community is one of the most significant issues to black women writers more than any other group of writers. She says "large black women writers support themselves, they support each other and support a sense of community much more than any group I've ever come in contact with" (In search 380). To emphasize this sense of community Brooks defines Womanism as :

that sense of shared experience that comes from living within, and as part of, a group of people who share basic assumptions, a common system of values, including morals and manners, the same historic experience, the same traditions, and all other things cause men to feel that they are not alone in an alien world or surrounded by as unfeeling society " (279).

The second aspect of the definition also describes the black woman as a capable person. This depiction is also another important difference between Feminism and Womanism because it represents the black woman as a powerful person who has the ability to lead the society for the better, and the courage to change the world around her to meet her expectations and to solve her problems. In one of her interviews Walker says "You see, one of the problems with white feminism is that it is not a tradition that teaches white women that they are capable. While my tradition assumes I'm capable" (Bradly 54). This contrast is evident in the second aspect of the definition of Womanism where she defines a womanist as "traditionally capable, as in : " Mama, I'm walking to Canada, and I'm taking you and a bunch of other salves with me ." Reply : ' It wouldn't be the first time. '. Commenting on this part of the definition Junior says :

A daughter's plan for a group escape from slavery is met not with surprise but with an unimpressed acceptance by her mother. For Walker, womanism does not simply distinguish women by race; it emphasizes differences in the

expectations of those women. Thus, the African American mother does not bat an eyelash when confronted with her daughter's audacious plan because the mother expects such bravery and competence. (XVI).

The third aspect of the definition identifies the cultural identity of the black women. It highlights the artistic, social, moral, and spiritual matters that the womanists are interested in such as music, dance, the moon, the spirit, love, food, roundness, struggle, the folk, and themselves. The third aspect says : " 3 – loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the folk. Loves herself. Regardless" (In Search XII). This aspect shows that Womanists celebrate their black roots, their community, and their own culture. Furthermore, it represents a balanced picture of black womanhood. This aspect also denotes that Womanists are committed to their own folk without sacrificing their own sense of self .

The fourth aspect of the definition emphasizes that the womanists have their own values and commitments that encompass and transcend the limits of the white feminists. The fourth aspect says " womanist is to feminists as purple is to lavender ". It compares womanism to feminism by way of color. According to Bealer "this analogy implies not only that womanism are literally darker in hue than (white) feminists, but also that womanism is richer and less diluted than feminism" (24). For Walker the concept of Feminism is a narrow and limited concept because it is limited to the white woman only, while Womanism is an inclusive concept that includes all women regardless of their color. Hence, It is evident that Walker's choice of the color purple to be a symbol for Womanism implies that the deeper color signifies a greater ideological power than the lighter color . According to Izgarjan and Markov "She (Walker) extols womanism and sets it apart by comparing it to the strong color of purple which is often described as the royal color"(305). In fact, the purple color has had worldwide association with leadership. In the 15th century, purple was the color used by the British royal family, and other royalty in Europe for special occasions. In Japan, purple is the color of the aristocratic families and emperor. In china purple is associated with spiritual awareness and strength. And in the United States, a purple heart is usually seen as a sign of bravery, being awarded to those in the military who are wounded in combat. Finally, in the early 1900s, purple became associated with people who led all kinds of social progress. Thus, this analogy put the womanists in a leading position due to its inclusiveness. Asserting this point Montelaro says:

This contrast of hues in Walker's definition is consonant with her political intention to demonstrate the crucial difference between the terms 'womanist' and 'feminist': according to the semantic analogue she constructs, an exclusively white, bourgeois feminism literally pales in comparison to the more wide-ranging, nonexclusive womanist concerns represented by the rich and undiluted color purple"(14).

Obviously, Walker believes in the capability of the black women to lead the society. The concept of Womanism is not limited to motivating the black women to defend their rights in the American society, but it is a concept that nominates the black women to lead the world society due to their unique ability to endure all the undue burdens and hardships in their life, and their tolerance and respect for others regardless of their race, color, sex ,or religion. Walker says that "black women are called, in the folklore that so aptly identifies one's status in society, the mule of the world, because we have been handed the burdens that everyone else – everyone else- refused to carry"(In Search 237). For Walker, "black women are the most fascinating creations in the world"(In Search 51). She even deplores the fact that the civil rights movement during 1960s lacked the leadership of the black women. In fact, the organized participation of the black women in the civil rights movements during that early period was quite weak. Although there were influential women in the movement like Harriet Tubman, who "played a very significant role in the civil war by working as a Union spy and helping more than 300 slaves to escape using the underground Railroad" (Larson xvii), But the black women in general were deprived of the leadership position. According to Ling and Montieth "black women were excluded as formal leaders because of their sex" (6). Alice Walker's interview with Coretta Scott King, the wife of martin Luther king in 1962, when Alice Walker was still at the beginning of her political work, made her realize the importance of the black woman's leadership to the society. According to Walker, Coretta Scott King "seemed, at that time, the only black woman in Atlanta actively and publicly engaged in the pursuit of peace" (In Search 146). In her interview with Alice Walker, Coretta king said that she and her husband, Martin Luther king, used to talk about "trying to organize women" (In search 155). She regretted that her late husband never had time "to get around to addressing women as women" (In search 155). She told Walker that " we have never used the woman power that we had" (In Search 155). She explained that the black woman has

both the inner strength and the purity required for envisioning and guiding a better future. Emphasizing the Capability of the black women to lead the society, Coretta King says :

Women, in general, are not a part of the corruption of the past, so they can give a new kind of leadership, a new image of mankind... they're capable of tremendous compassion, love, and forgiveness, which, if they use it, can make this a better world " (In Search 153).

For Walker, The lack of self-recognition represents a real barrier in front of the black woman to play the leading role in the American society. The Afro-American women used to see themselves with the eyes of the white people. Thereupon, they lost their genuine identity and developed what W.E.B. Dubois called "double consciousness". W.E.B Dubois defines the concept of "double conciseness" as "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (Dubois 45). Being aware of this fact, walker took it upon herself to gather the history of the black women, and to create role models for the black women. Thus, all her fiction and non-fiction writings focus on retelling real stories of numerous forgotten black women who defied the bonds of servitude to free themselves and their folks. According to Chunte, Walker focuses in her writing on "creating models in literature for those outside the norms of American society" (1). She believes that there is a pressing need for creating models that black women can imitate and measure themselves against, and from whom they can inherit their spiritual touchstones. As a writer Walker believes in the power of narrative and its ability to change the world. She believes that telling the stories of the black women, which are different from the dominant narrative of the culture, is able to motivate the black women to attain their right position in the society .

In her pursuit of gathering the back female history, Walker managed to identify three main stages of development for the black woman in the American society and named them 'cycles'. She explored the stages of evolving the black woman in the American society, focusing on the third stage being the stage of empowering the black woman to attain a leading position in the society. In her interview with the critic Mary Helen Washington in 1973, she describes the three " cycles " of black women that she managed to explore. The first cycle or the first type women that Walker explored is the 'suspended woman', who is completely victimized by society and who is verbally and physically abused. Women "who were cruelly exploited, spirits and bodies mutilated; relegated to the most

narrow and confirming lives sometimes"(Washington 60). She calls this type of women as "suspended" because they had no options, and they cannot improve their life any way. This cycle, i.e., the cycle of 'suspended woman' describes the state of the black woman in the society in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Describing the black women during this period Walker says :

[their] spirituality was so intense, so deep, so unconscious, that they were themselves unaware of the richness they held. They stumbled blindly through their lives : creatures so abused and mutilated in body. So dimmed and confused by pain, that they considered themselves unworthy even of hope. In the selfless abstractions their bodies became to the men who used them, they became more than " sexual objects ", more even than mere women : they became " saints " (....) who were these saints ? These crazy, loony, pitiful women ? some of them, without a doubt, were our mothers and grandmothers. (In Search 232).

Walker describes the black women of this period as, 'the mules of the world'. She borrows Zora Neal Hurston's term to emphasize that the black women of this time used to carry the "burdens heaped upon them by society and by family, and they were victims of both racial and sexual oppression" (Washington 89). In an essay entitled "In search of our Mothers' Gardens : The creativity of black women in the south", published in Ms. Magazine in May 1974, Walker explains what she meant by "the suspended woman" .She says :

They were suspended in a time in history where the options for black women were severely limited ... and they either kill themselves or they are used up by the man, or by the children, or by.... Whatever the pressures against them. And they cannot go anywhere. I mean, you can't, you just can't move, until there is room for you to move into. And that's the way I see many of the women I have created in fiction. They are closer to my mother's generation than to mine. They had few choices " (In search 315).

obviously, according to Washington " for such women – the great – grandmothers of the black women of contemporary times – pain, violence, poverty and oppression where the essential content of their lives " (90). However, they are creative women and artists by instinct. The

artistic tendency is a genuine part of their spiritual formation. For that reason they managed to keep their creativity a live in spite of all the hard circumstances surrounded them. Walker also mentions the hand crafts, the quilt making, the garden making, and even the simple poems that the black women including her grandmother used to do as a part of their tradition as a proof of their natural talent and creativity during this early and hard period of their history. Washington says:

Walker cites the poetry of Phillis Wheatley, the quilt – making of so many anonymous black women of the south, the wise woman selling herbs and roots, as well as the brilliant and original gardens designed and cultivated by her own mother, as evidence that the creative spirit was nourished somehow and showed itself in wild and unlikely places (90).

According to Washington, the 'suspended black women' is " part one of Walker's personal construct of the black woman's history " (90). In addition, Washington emphasizes that "Walker is the first writer to define and develop the concept of the black women of the past – Reconstruction period as 'suspended', as artists "hindered and thwarted by contrary instincts"(90).

The second cycle in Walker's chronology of the evolving of the black woman is the 'assimilated woman'. The women in this cycle are not victimized by physical violence and have much more control of their life. However, "they are psychically conflicted as a result of wanting to be part of mainstream American life" (Washington 7). These women are the women "who belong to the decades of the forties and fifties, those decades when black people (then Negroes) wanted most to be part of the main stream of American life "even though assimilation required total denial of one's ethnicity (Washington 95). Describing the black women in this cycle, Walker says :

I have this theory that black women in the ' 50s, in the '40s – the late '40s and early – got away from their roots much more than they will probably ever do again, because that was the time of greatest striving to get into white society, and to erase all of the backgrounds of poverty. It was a time when you could be the exception, could be the one (Washington 100).

In the introduction to her book on Alice Walker entitled *Everyday Use* : Alice Walker, the critic Barbara Christian categorizes writers Zora Neale Hurston and Nella Larsen under this cycle of the black woman's history. She says that those writers "suffered from 'contrary instincts' in their

need to be recognized as 'real' writers in order to express themselves and their people" (Christian 7). According to Washington, "The women in this cycle are more aware of their condition and they have greater potential for shaping their live. However, they are thwarted because they are still unaccepted by the white society"(97).

The third cycle of Walker's chronology includes the women of the late sixties. According to Christian, they are the " women who came to a new consciousness about their right to be themselves and to shape the world " (7).Walker names this type of women as the "emergent woman", who became fully aware of her own psychological and political oppression and became Capable of creating a new life and new choices for themselves. In the interview Washington in 1973 Walker also discusses in details the characteristics of the black women in the third cycle that she intended to highlight in her future works, focusing on the influence of the various political movements on the black women's personality. She says :

My women, in the future, will not burn themselves up – that's what I mean by coming to the end of a cycle, and understanding something to the end ... now I am ready to look at women who have made the room larger for others to move in I think one reason I never stay away from the southern movement is because I realize how deeply political changes affect the choices and life – styles of people. The movement of the sixties, black power, the Muslims, the panthers have changed the options of black people generally and of black women in particular. So that my women characters won't all end the way they have been, because black women now offer varied, live models of how it is possible to live. We have made a new place to move (Washington 100).

According to Washington, this statement by Alice Walker indicates the contrast between the women of the second cycle who were determined to escape their roots in order to make it in a white world and the emergent women of the third cycle who "demonstrates a sense of freedom by the drive to re-establish those vital links to their past " (100). Washington includes Alice walker herself under this cycle, she states ;

Alice Walker, herself a real – life prototype of the emergent black woman, speaks of having been called to life by the civil rights movement of the sixties, as being called from the shadows of a world in which black people existed as statistics, problems, beasts of burden, a life that

resembled death; for one was not aware of the possibilities within one's self or of possibilities in the larger world outside the narrow restraints of the world black people inhabited before the struggles of the sixties " (Washington 98).

In addition to the political activism of the black woman in the sixties, Walker asserts that the black woman of the third cycle started to appreciate and celebrate their black roots. On the contrary of the second cycle, in which the black women were cut off from their African roots by their desire to adopt the white identity to be part of the white society, the black women of the third cycle reached a level of awareness that enabled them to have a state of self – acceptance. Washington asserts that "a fundamental activity the woman in the third cycle engages in is the search for meaning in their roots and traditions (99).

Doubtless, Walker's chronology which covers three consecutive stages of the black woman's life, namely; 'the suspended woman', 'the assimilated woman' and 'the emergent woman, represents valuable insights into the life of the black woman that motivate them to aspire to the leading positions in the American society. According to Washington, Walker is the first writer to see "the experiences of black women as a series of movement from woman totally victimized by society and by the men in their lives to the growing developing women whose consciousness allows them to have control over their lives" (Washington 88). This steadfast desire of Walker to empower the black woman in the American society gives Womanism a unique position among the world's critical theories due to its African and indigenous cultural roots. Asserting the uniqueness of Womanism, Laughinghouse says :

prior to the construction of a womanist ethic and reflection, there are no such construct in place to encourage black women to reclaim their identity, love their full selves, and use historical voices as encouragement towards dismantling the white, patriarchal, dominant narrative" (34).

Later on, according to Audre lorde , Walker expanded the concept of Womanism to be an inclusive political ideology (203). She hoped to make of this concept an inclusive movement for all the marginalized and oppressed people worldwide. For Walker, Womanism is a perspective open to all humanity. For her, "the womanist idea is not limited to black women or women of color, even if it was developed, launched, articulated, and elaborated primarily by Black women and other women of color"(Phillips xxxvi). In other words, Womanism, according to

Walker, is a social- change perspective which aims at ending all forms of oppression and dehumanization for all people, regardless of race, religion, gender, or any other forms of discrimination. This social – change perspective is based on the experience of the Afro American woman , her African culture, and her spiritual values. Due to this peculiar perspective of Walker's Womanism, most of the critics observe that this concept and its definition can be used as an independent literary theory, and a theoretical framework for analyzing the works of the Black women writers. One of those critics is Elliot Butler Evans who posits some aspects and features of the Womanist writings based on Alice Walker's definition for this concept and the majority of her writings. She states ;

One can find a framework of the combination of the following themes in them :

- A) A critical perception of and reaction to patriarchy, often articulated through the struggle of a victim or rebel who must face a patriarchal institution .
- B) Sensitivity to the inequities of sexism allied with an acceptance of women and understanding of the choices open to them .
- C) A metamorphosis leading to female victory in a feminist utopia, or a stasis, signifying the failure to eliminate sexism.
- D) A style spiced with acrimony of feminist discourses.(qtd. In Maryemma 121).

I add also to the previous features two more significant features in the womanist writings. These two features are also based on Alice Walker's definition of this concept and the majority of her writings. The first feature is highlighting the leadership capabilities of the woman of color in general and the Afro- American woman in particular . The second one is throwing the light on the suffering of the other people in the world.

Generally speaking, the idea of the strong and responsible woman dominates the writings of the black female writers from the very beginning of their artistic and literary production. Since the 40th and 50th , the black female writers are interested in depicting the black life and the significant role of the black woman in supporting the black community. Their aim is to make of the theatre a medium through which the black life can be seen and viewed. Many black female writers since this early period, like Angelina Weld Grimke, Marita Bonner ,Marry Burril, and Georgia Douglas Johnson, insist on defying the predominant stereotypes of the black woman as a sensual, primitive siren, or a faithful servant, and the stereotypes of the black people in general. They also

focus on their own culture rather than on their conflict with the white community. According to Burrow "black women writers tend to be more concerned about uncovering the aesthetic, emotional, and intellectual values of the black community. They are less concerned about comparing these with the moral standards of the white community" (40). They emphasize the respect of self, family, the elderly, the community, spiritual values, the importance of working cooperatively to overcome problems, giving back to the community, and the value of hard work. Furthermore, According to Burrow "black women writers stress- in a way that no other writer do- the need for black women to affirm, protect, and enhance their own sense of self and dignity"(40). But despite of their attempt to stabilize the black community in the face of the ongoing racism and giving the black woman greater voice, their writings lack many important issues like raising the consciousness of the black women to their potentials and shaping their identity. According to Dandridge the writings of the black women during this early period "lack certain preeminent issues such as self-determination and the search for individual identity"(XVI).

One of the prominent writers during this early period is Alice Childress. She is considered as a pivotal yet critically neglected figure in contemporary African- American literature. Her plays are milestone during the 40th and 50th because, unlike all her female contemporaries, she created dramas that call for black female self- definition and self-determination. Although the term 'Womanism' was not coined until the early 1980, but its concept and interests appears clearly in her writings. Dugan states:

Childress proved protégé and pioneer to many black dramatists who also recognized the need to reach out to others from one's own perspective. Her plays echo earlier dramas written by, for, and about Black people, and set standards for plays dedicated to redressing the black image on the stage and reaffirming black female identity (10).

In her plays she primarily focuses on the black women's experience of racism and economic exploitation, drawing the attention of the readers to the leading role of the black woman in the society and her efforts to uplift her community as a whole; men and women on the equal foot. She represents a new image of the black woman. She represents the image of the black woman who decided to live true not to what others think of her, but to who she already is. She represents the image of a black woman who freed herself from the other's domination, and had an internal rise from enslavement to people's opinions and deeds to political awareness

and empowerment. The same image that Alice Walker identifies its features in her definition of Womanism; i.e., the woman who is very mentally and emotionally strong, self-determined, survivalist, lovers of women and women's experiences, as well as lovers of and caregivers to the black community. Furthermore, like Walker, She also focuses on raising the consciousness of the black women to their potentials in general and to their leadership capabilities in particular. For Childress, the black woman is the real builder and leader who shaped and supported the black community. She says "the Negro woman has worked with and for her family. She built churches, schools, homes, temples and college educations out of soapsuds and muscles" ("The Negro Woman" 32). Thus, she was keen to depict the black woman in leading and influential roles in her plays on the contrary of the prevailing image of the Negro woman on the theatre during that time. Asserting this point Kollin says "Childress challenged the American Commercial theatre to accept more diverse depictions of black women...Childress's heroines act as leaders during historical periods when they were often asked to play supporting roles"(43).

As a playwright Childress is interested in representing the history of the black people and the vital role that the black woman played in it . In her article "The Negro woman in American literature" in 1965, Childress emphasizes that the core value of black theatre is its depiction to the past and cautions writers of overlooking the black history. She says "be wary of those who tell you to leave the past alone and confine yourselves to the present moment. Our story has not been told in any moment.... And our history is not gone with the wind, it is still with us" (" The Negro Woman" 16). Her point is that the independence and self-government of the black theatre relies on the determination of the black to present "plays... about these things" ("The Negro Woman" 17). By "These things" she refers to the history of the blacks and their struggle to defend their rights in the American society. This history was not on view in the 1940s and 1950s. Thereupon, most of the audience accepted the familiar stories of African American people that either misrepresented them or simply did not take them seriously as proper subject matter for literature specially the black woman. In "The Negro Woman in American Literature", Childress asserts this fact saying :

The general popular American drama, television, motion pictures and radio had nearly omitted the Negro woman as important subject matter based on gross misrepresentations of her strengths "as faults" because of prejudice and the

widespread lack of knowledge among average American citizens (14).

She emphasizes that "if the Black woman was not portrayed as the empty and de-characterized faithful servant, she was depicted as the demoralized hussy or at best the pious, ball-busting matriarch" ("The Negro Woman" 16). Childress believes that representing positive images that depict the black people struggle in general and the struggle of black women in particular would redress the false prevailing images, and it would provide motivation for the black people to improve their statues in the society. She also pays particular attention to the black women asserting the responsibility of the writers to "tell her story with the full knowledge and appreciation of her constant, unrelenting struggle against racism and for human rights" ("The Negro Woman" 19). She contends that in this way the black woman "will attain her rightful place in American literature" ("The Negro Woman" 19).

In her essays Childress presents her own view of the meaning and function of theatre to African-American people. The view that she worked hard to represent practically through her own plays during the peak of her career as a playwright. For Childress the black theatre should have a two-fold function: a humanistic function, and a political one. In a 1978 essay titled "Knowing the Human Condition" she explained and discussed the humanistic function of theatre. According to Childress the humanistic function of theater means representing the human personality in its totality, which means "portraying as subject not only the prize winners, but also those who are poor, lost, and/or rebellious" ("knowing" 10). The theatre, for Childress, should not represent the significant and influential characters only, it should represent the whole society with all its diversity, focusing on the ordinary, and the poor and marginalized people. She says "Black writers cannot afford to abuse or neglect the so called ordinary characters who represent a part of ourselves, the self twice denied, first by racism and then by class difference" ("Knowing" 10). Commenting on the humanistic function of the black theatre as explained by Alice Childress, Dugan says:

For Childress humanism was the philosophy of knowing the human condition... Childress conceptualized humanism in relation to literature, then, as being synonymous with presenting all people in depth, and acknowledging their humanity in the interest of seeing others as well as ourselves sharing an equal part in making up the human race" (83).

Childress' view of the political function of the black theatre complements her view of the humanistic function of it, and represents also the womanist thought in this early period. For Childress, the political function of the black theatre is to shape public awareness and to represent Black people on the stage in images that defend their collective and individual identity. In her view, the responsibility of black dramatists is to portray people in the true light of their circumstances in order to urge them to change the negative aspects of reality for the better. She asserts that playwrights "must write as we will, as we must" ("Knowing" 10). In an article under the title "For a Negro Theatre", she defines "the word theatre" as being "derived from the Greek meaning to see or view" ("Negro theatre" 6). She asserts that "theatre serves as the mirror of life experience and reflects only what looks into it" ("Negro Theatre" 9). Hence, all the stories of Childress's plays are drawn from first-hand knowledge as well as imagination with the aim of motivating the black people to change their reality. She emphasizes "I have learned that I must watch my people in railroad stations, in restaurants, in the fields and tenements, at factory wheels, in the stores, on the subway" (Negro theatre 61). In fact, Childress' theatrical works and writings are inextricably bound with her political work because her affiliation to the Left party cannot be overlooked. According to McDonald, "she organized in pro-communist women's organizations and labor unions, ... contributed to Left journals such as Freedom and Masses and Mainstream, and recruited actors and young people into the Left" (52). This leftist activism is clearly apparent in all her works, and her struggle to give voice to black working-class women of her time. Asserting this point Wilkerson says :

Her leftist politics were tempered by the humanity of her characters and their insistence on being treated with dignity. Because Childress was a single parent and had to work to support herself and her young daughter, Jean, she knew the difficulties faced by a working woman of color. Her many and varied jobs – salesperson, assistant machinist, insurance agent, and domestic worker- brought her a range of experience and contact with a variety of working-class people, some of whom found their way into her drama and fiction" (136).

Childress writes about the poor black woman with an inspirational way, depicting her as a capable woman who is able to survive with dignity

regardless of her poverty and ignorance. Commenting on the image of black woman in Childress writings Guillory Says "Indeed, her poor, dejected heroines are depicted as morally Strong, sometimes vulnerable, but resilient. She portrays these women honestly as they fight daily battles not just to survive but to survive whole. (Their places on the stage 314). Similarly, curbs states that "Through essentially solitary struggles, Childress's strong women forge through barriers not only of race and sex, but also class, education, and age which threaten to keep them poor and powerless to recognition of personal worth." (57). Furthermore, Her plays represent the social problems of her time, focusing on the capability of her heroines on defending their rights and creating better future for the coming generations. Asserting this point Dugan says:

The stories also draw on the social problems of the day, which include racism, sexism, classism, and ageism. But rather than dwell on them, the stories focus more on the importance of the main characters' taking pride in their histories of self-determination even as they fight for their own rights and try to secure better futures for those who will come after them(87).

Like Walker, Childress also extends the humanistic and political function of the black theatre to encompass all the oppressed and helpless people worldwide. According to Shanon, Alice Childress is one of the Women playwrights who managed to cross the cultural borders. He says "she (Childress) adopted a global perspective that was the result of her strategic professional relationships coupled with an enduring passion for asserting women's values, beauty, and strength"(222). Like Walker, she aims at promoting the black women's culture, and evoking the presence of Africa as a source of strength and pride. She aims also at expanding her worldview beyond the United States' borders to inspire, through her dramas, the oppressed people from cultures other than her own. Most importantly, she aims at making the black theatre a platform for all the marginalized and oppressed people all over the world. For Childress, according to Dugan, the black theatre should play a role in "enhancing the people's understanding not only of themselves, but of themselves among others who have also known oppression"(90). In an article titled 'For a Negro Theatre' Childress asserted that the experiences of collective struggles should "be heard around the world through a black theatre"(63).She explains that the main function of a Negro people's theater is to provide an "opportunity of seeing and viewing the Negro people... to inspire, lift, and eventually create a complete desire for the

liberation of all oppressed peoples"(63). Asserting Childress's global perspective, Washington says:

Her vision of this new theatre is multicultural, black-centered, and internationalist: it will, she says, be concerned with the world and possessed of the desire "for the liberation of all oppressed peoples." The "Negro people's" theatre will take advantage of "the rich culture of the Chinese, Japanese, Russian and all theatres," and it will study "oppressed groups which have no formal theatre as we know it,"(130).

Like Walker, Childress's global perspective promotes the black woman's culture and value, and espouses the idea that the struggle of the black woman for freedom is not limited to her race, but it is a lens through which the oppressed people worldwide understand their suffering. Most importantly, like the womanist writings, Childress's writings highlight the leadership capability of the black woman, and place the black woman in a distinguished position as a leader and a spokesperson for all the oppressed people all over the world due to her unique experience of slavery and racism through the history .

In view of the foregoing I deduce that the concept of Womanism is a racist concept. According to Steve in his book *Racisms: An Introduction*, racism is the belief in the superiority of one race over another, which often results in discrimination and prejudice towards people based on their race or ethnicity (xi). Moreover ,according to Newman the ideology underlying racist practices often includes the idea that humans can be subdivided into distinct groups that are different due to their social behavior and their innate capacities as well as the idea that they can be ranked as inferior or superior(5-8). This racist attitude can be easily traced through the writings of the womanist writers in general, and the writings of both Alice Childress and Alice Walker in particular. Obviously, Childress dedicates all her writings and dramas to propagate the idea of linking the struggle of the black woman in the United States to the other great struggles of black woman for freedom in the other nations, focusing on the leading role of the Afro American woman. According to McDonald, "She[Childress] went to great lengths to show the ways that black women have been historically powerful leaders in struggles for racial justice ... [she] depicted women's participation in black liberation movements over the course of several centuries, linking struggles in South Africa, the west Indies, and the United States"(56).

Asserting the same point Thelwell says "NWT[Negro World Theatre], originally naming itself the Third World Theatre Series, and aligning with international struggles...It related global struggles for human rights to domestic fights for equality through works like ...Alice Childress's *Florence*"(30).This global perspective that empowers the Afro American woman by representing her experience as an inclusive theory for all the oppressed and marginalized people all over the world can be regarded as the core of the womanist thought . In her explanation of Womanism, Alice Walker emphasizes this global perspective of her theory. She says:

What is always needed... is the larger perspective. Connections made, or at least attempted, where none existed before, the straining to encompass in one's glance at the varied world the common thread, the unifying theme through immense diversity(In Search 5).

Walker also emphasizes the unique place of the Afro American woman and her capability to lead the world due to her unique experience and indigenous culture. In a recent interview with Barat in 2012 Wlaker said :

Male planetary rule ...has led to the degradation of the planet we know experience. Planetary male-only leadership has existed for only a few thousand years and I think most humans can agree, at this point, that it has been a disaster. Women were considered quite capable of leading civilizations...I recently wrote a poem called 'Democratic Womanism', which is essentially leadership of the planet by those women who've had the least to say about earth's direction, while knowing more than almost anyone else about how to work with, protect ,and honour it: indigenous women and women of colour. With our brave allies of all colours and kinds, male and female. (" At Home in thisUniverse" August 2012).

This vision that nominates the Afro American woman being the right one to lead the world is clearly apparent in her famous novel *The Color Purple* as the novel ends with a vision of a united and internationalist community in which people of different class, educational background, gender, sexuality, and national origin come together in a sort of utopia, placing a black woman in the lead of this community. Thus, Womanist writings work on strengthening the mutual racism rather than eliminating racial discrimination.

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