

## Research Article

## Contextualizing Alice Walker in the Tradition of African American Women Writers

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**ABSTRACT**

History and fiction are the two central concerns of the present research. Historiography is a branch of knowledge which explores the possibilities of intersection between history and fiction; hence, it formulates the backbone of the study. Historiography interrogates the omissions, contradictions, and hidden politics in the making of history, using imaginative and personal elements such as memory, letters, stories, myths, diaries, and paintings. Thus, historiography has become a counter-hegemonic tool at the hands of contemporary post-colonial and post-modern writers, like Salman Rushdie and Amitav Ghosh, who interrogate the master narratives of history. The works of all these contemporary novelists deal with alternative materials of history, and hence, they can be considered as subjective, historiography attempts on history, as they challenge the received history. Kunal Basu is an emerging Indian English novelist, whose works essentially represent the contemporary notion of historiographic fiction. Like Salman Rushdie and Amitav Ghosh, Basu uses cultural materials of history not only to reflect a historical time but also to problematize it. The present study reveals the historiographic techniques used by Kunal Basu in rendering a subjective perspective to history. This research project deals with three novels of Basu, namely, *The Opium Clerk*, *The Miniaturist*, and *The Racists*. All these novels are set in different historical backgrounds, but they sketch alternate versions of these historical times. The setting of Basu's first novel, *The Opium Clerk*, depicts the life history of the protagonist, Hiran. Through the personal experiences of Hiran, Basu revisits the colonial history of India and exposes the politics behind the Opium Wars between Britain and China. In *The Miniaturist*, Kunal Basu presents a transcendental picture of the Mughal era, interpreting the historical figure of Akbar through the imaginative paintings of an artist. In his most recent work, *The Racists*, Basu provides a post-colonial version of the history of Western anthropology.

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### CONTEXTUALIZING ALICE WALKER IN THE TRADITION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN WRITERS

This is a study showcasing on contemporary African American fiction has brought into focus many aspects of African American social life. African American women writers like Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor, Terry Mcmillan, and Toni Cade Bambara have successfully brought to life in their works the troubles and difficulties of racism and other forms of oppression. These novelists also focus on various strategies of countering forces of oppression. They also deal with the effects of certain systems of abuse - be it patriarchy or capitalism.

Contemporary African American women novelists have also designed a wide range of thematic and textual strategies to signify the distinct African American cultural roots. Further,

they are concerned with the different roles played by the Black women in shaping a better society. Identity figures as a major concern in the novels of these writers and they try to redefine black woman's identity in terms of psychological, anthropological, sociological, and textual studies.

African American novelists like Morrison, Walker, and Naylor try to demonstrate in their works how women become agents of knowledge. Very often, they portray African American women as self-defined and self-reliant individuals who counter the triple jeopardy of race, gender, and class. Morrison's characters such as Sula, Eva Peace, and Pilate are the clear examples of such figures. African American novelists also impart that there was a vital amount of knowledge to analyze relations of domination and resistance.

Writers like Morrison and Walker have also evolved an Afrocentric feminist thought which offers consciousness



and empowerment. In contrast to the Eurocentric notion of community and self, the Afrocentric models found in these novelists emphasize connections, caring, and healing. These writers are also aware that Black women had been denied the right of self-expression in the past. Hence, they try to validate and valorize the experiences of their foremothers and whereby they reclaim a legacy of endurance.

African American women novelists are supported by the huge corpus of African American feminism generated by critics and theorists like bell hooks, Hazel Carby, Patricia Hill-Collins, Barbara Smith, and Hortense Spillers. These critics have opened up many approaches to racial and ethnic studies. They have also helped the African American novelists in grounding their novels on theories which critique all forms of domination.

African American women writers have been at the margin of American literature all through the three centuries starting from 1700 to the 1970s. They were also not visible in African American literature till writers like Zora Neale-Hurston and Toni Morrison came onto the literary platform in a big way. These writers started presenting fictional characters who are involved in struggles to maintain their human dignity in a capitalist, alien, and a threatening world. Being both Black and female, they started writing from unique vantage points which gave them perspectives that could cut across layers of institutionalized racism and sexism. Soon Hurston and Morrison became the inspiration for a large number of Black women writers like Maya Angelou, Toni Cade Bambara, Gwendolyn Brooks, Gayl Jones, Alice Walker, Ntozake Shange, and Sonia Sanchez.

One of the central concerns of the African American women's writing is the quest theme - a character's personal search for a meaningful identity or for self-sustaining dignity in a world that imposes isolation, meaninglessness, and parochialism. Toni Morrison's *Sula* and Alice Walker's *Celie* and *Tashi* are involved in such self-redeeming quests. Black women writers are also aware that they are confronted with social forces such as patriarchy and capitalism which alienate them in a developed nation.

Black women novelists also foreground their concern for self-esteem. Their heroines mostly begin from a point of being marginalized and lost. Claudia Tate in *Black Women Writers at Work* rightly observes how this engagement with self-esteem is significant in Black women's writings:

Self-esteem is so primary an issue in writings by Black women that it deserves special attention. Many heroines suffer from a loss of pride and personal worth. In most cases, it is difficult to know the origin of this loss that is to say whether it resulted first from her forming destructive relationships or whether it caused her to form such relationships. However, once these two lethal forces are linked, the heroine becomes entangled in an ever-worsening situation. A chain reaction is set into motion: As her self-esteem deteriorates, she becomes more and more trapped in destructive relationships, which erode her self-esteem even further. She becomes increasingly desperate to the point where she can either summon enough spiritual energy or exert a furious effort to save the destructive relationship and restore her self-esteem,

or she can continue in the downward spiral to utter wretchedness.<sup>[1]</sup>

Black women novelists are also concerned about the spiritual well-being of their protagonists and they also point out in their works how such women must assume a responsibility for strengthening their identity by learning to love and appreciate themselves. Hence, Black women novelists celebrate womanhood - its pains and pleasures, female sexuality, mothering, caring, and relationships.

Alice Walker was born as a daughter of a share-cropper in Georgia. She graduated in 1965 and also took part actively in the Civil Rights Movement. Today, she is one of the best known novelists in the United States, having published great novels such as *Meridian*, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, *The Color Purple*, *Possessing The Secret of Joy*, *The Temple of My Familiar*, *By the Light of my Father's Smile*, and *Now is the Time to Open your Heart*. *In Love and Trouble* is her collection of short stories which deal with personal relationships. Walker is also a successful prose writer who has interesting prose works such as *In Search of our Mothers' Gardens* and *Living by the Word*. She has also generated a comprehensive Black Feminist theory called Womanist Theory which has redefined Feminism by including the interests of men. She redefines Feminism with an all-engulfing theory based on the philosophy of love both sexual and non-sexual love that exists between two women or between two individuals leading to happiness.

Walker holds clear views about the function of a 20<sup>th</sup> century Black woman writer. She emphasizes that a Black woman writer has to study the Black community and the White world very closely. In her interview with Claudia Tate, Walker states unambiguously how a Black woman writer's survival depends on the community and relationship:

We Black women writers know very clearly that our survival depends on trust. We will not have or cannot have anything until we examine what we do to and with each other. There just has not been enough examination or enough application of findings to real problems in our day-to-day living. Black women continue to talk about intimate relationships so that we can recognize what is happening when we see it and then maybe there will be some change in behavior on the part of men and women.<sup>[2]</sup>

Walker also believes that writing is a form of self-realization. She says that writing enables one to be more than what one truly is. She is also aware that she represents the working class and hence she has a basic antagonism towards capitalism. She explains that she has to deal with history to know where she really is and hence her novels are rooted strongly in African American cultural history.

Walker further describes a womanist as "a woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually, appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility and women's strength."<sup>[4]</sup> By deriving her definition of womanist from a folk idiom, Walker tries to invoke the factor of inspiring influence, insisting that there is a necessity of a historical community of Black women. Walker also tries to state that a sense of heritage is essential in understanding Black women's creativity. By redefining feminism, thus Walker

finds new spaces within feminism for gay men and women and defies the hegemony of heterosexual orientation. She also tries to connect the notion of self with the strength it derives from nature and thus she binds natural world and identity together. Alice Walker also invokes “great spirit”<sup>(5)</sup> and acknowledges her relationship with that spirit. Although she seldom uses the word God, one can understand that her concept of this spirit is not without divinity. Walker considers her journey of life as a movement from religion to spirituality. She also makes it clear that she would like to deconstruct the notion of God by trying to cleanse the word of its Eurocentric connotations. Walker’s notion of God is an all-inclusive concept. She believes that one must be open. Kimberley Rae Connor in *Conversions and Visions in the Writings of African-American Women* talks about Alice Walker’s notion of religion and its deeper implications:

By blending Native American, Hindu, Buddhist, and African forms of spirituality with her Christian upbringing, Walker derives her own unique form of religion. That is not to say her religion is exclusionary or utterly solipsistic. Indeed, Walker is evangelical in her writings, over and over again encouraging people to acquire a deeper sense of their own sacrality and the sacrality that surrounds and inhibits everything.<sup>(6)</sup>

Walker also acknowledges her ancestors in the same way she honors spirits. She considers Zora Neale Hurston as a spiritual grandmother and also reckons many artists, musicians, and quilt-makers having passed to her the spark of creativity. She considers them as “spirit-helpers”<sup>(7)</sup> and observes that she derives great joy in acknowledging them.

However, Alice Walker is not content with the spiritual and esthetic legacies of the Black women writers. She considers her art as a means to propagate justice. She also conceives her life and art as agencies of changes that provide the means of resistance and growth. Walker strongly believes in changes and the need for changes. She believes that personal and social changes teach human beings the ways of tiding over violence, oppression, and abuse.

As a writer, Walker feels connected to all writers - writers of different race, gender, and nationality. By doing so, she connects herself to the universal urge for writing and the art of storytelling. By reclaiming her cultural roots and by linking herself to her literary foremothers like Zora Neale Hurston and Sojourner Truth, she makes her art of storytelling as an act of retelling. The folk connections of her narratives make them resonate with African American cultural tradition.

Black women writers, in general, try to demystify the images of black women as depicted by the White writers and the Black male writers. Alice Walker also shares this agenda, and she attributes some specific qualities to a Black woman which makes her different from a White woman. Walker’s creative and critical writings reflect her political and social concerns regarding the treatment of the Black woman in literature. Her novels, in particular, show the development of her protagonists into women. She tries to redefine the term woman with the help of womanism which is a form of Black Feminism. She considers a womanist as a person who is bold and single-minded. Her protagonists also manifest these qualities in their journey toward selfhood.

Men in Alice Walker’s novels have been abusive in their youths, and they come to an essential understanding of their lives with the help of Black women. In presenting these men, Walker first depicts what has come to be the stereotypes of Blacks, essentially those destructive patterns of emotional and psychological responses of Black men to Black society, their women, children, Whites, and themselves.

Walker’s novels are in general celebration of womanhood, wherein she accords the ultimate position of creator to a woman. Her women have stories to tell, and their stories testify the victimization and marginalization of Black women. However, the stories that they tell have a redeeming effect on themselves. Storytelling purges these women of their suffering and poor self-image and they emerge as creators or artists who can create a wide range of things - plants, music, painting, stories, clothes, and even community.

Alice Walker’s notion of Black female subject’s identity is configured in almost all her novels. This notion of identity is determined by many factors such as self-expression, writing, resistance, and sexuality. All these aspects of self have been competently handled in all her works. These factors are theorized in her non-fiction, *In Search Of Her Mother’s Gardens*. Walker emphasizes the importance of creativity of the Black woman and this creativity is closely linked with the idea of self-definition through self-expression. This notion gets reflected in varying degrees in *The Color Purple* and *Possessing the Secret Of Joy*.

In *The Color Purple*, Celie’s identity crisis is the result of her being treated as an object by both her father and Albert. She is made to feel that her role is passive even in love-making, and hence, she is forced to believe that a Black woman does not have positive sexuality. In comparison, Tashi’s case in *Possessing The Secret of Joy* is a far more serious identity issue. She is a victim of a dangerous and wholly unnecessary form of suffering. When she undergoes the infamous “bath,” she has to surrender her sexual identity forever. What is left in her is the possibility of a political identity. Her revolt and resistance gain her some amount of self-respect. Ironically, she surrenders to circumcision thinking that she will become a complete woman. However, she realizes after the circumcision that she is permanently impaired, sexually. Thus, Walker in *The Color Purple* and *Possessing the Secret Of Joy* highlights the link between sexuality and African American woman’s identity. In both the novels, she emphasizes the point that sexuality destroyed is personality damaged and suggests that positive sexuality leads to a great amount of self-liberation as in the case of African American female subjects.

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