

Alice Walker's Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart as a Womanist Novel

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The expression womanism has its origins in a unique black American women's cultural, ethical and socio-political stance. In 1983 Alice Walker, one of the foremost contemporary American writers and activists, introduced womanism in a collection of essays entitled *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*. She regarded this concept as a more vital and accurate description of black American women's ethos in contrast to feminism, which was and is a predominantly white middle-class women's perspective. As Jacquelyn Grant observes, "black feminism grows out of Black women's tridimensional reality of race/sex/class" (202). Since black women face a multifaceted oppression that is manifested in racism, sexism and classism, they find it especially important to define and express the particularity of their experience. Therefore, "Walker's womanist notion suggests not 'the feminist,' but the active struggle of Black women that makes them who they are" (Grant 205). Moreover, black women endeavor to collaborate with black men in the struggle against racism, concurrently joining all women of the world in resistance to sexism and classism. "To speak of Black women's tridimensional reality, therefore, is not to speak of Black women exclusively, for there is an implied universality, which connects them with others" (Grant 217).

The womanist movement gave rise to the conceptualization of not only a socio-political praxis but also to the birth of a literary tradition. This tradition embodies the genius, originality, and particular concerns of black female writers. Literary critics cite that womanist writers focus mainly on the tridimensional oppression of black women, their spiritual journey towards self-development, their life within the black community (Bell 137) as well as certain global matters, for instance female genital mutilation, famine, war, and poverty. Accordingly, Alice Walker relates in her book *Anything We Love Can Be Saved*:

I create characters who sometimes speak in the language of immediate ancestors, characters who are not passive but active in the discovery of what is vital and real in this world. Characters who explore what it would feel like not to be imprisoned by the hatred of women, the love of violence, and the destructiveness of greed taught to human beings as the "religion" by which they must guide their lives. (4)

Alice Walker realizes this objective in her latest novel *Now is the Time to Open Your Heart* (2004). The novel is also an evidence of the author's commitment to womanism. The main character, Kate Talkingtree, a middle-aged woman, sets off on a spiritual sojourn, on which she discovers the medicinal and aesthetic quality of nature, the significance of human bonds,

and the power of ancestor connectedness. What is more, Kate rejects institutionalized religion, materialism and the evils of violence and “uncivilized” civilization. Her self-discovery is within the paradigm of womanist ethics.

The initial stage of black womanist self-development that empowers black women spiritually and renders them courageous enough to resist injustice is the positive assertion of their humanity against the onslaught of hostile forces. Black women’s “struggle emanates from a deepening of self-knowledge and love” (Christian 82). Fittingly, the main character in Alice Walker’s novel undergoes self-discovery before discerning the paradoxes and dilemmas in the lives of others. First of all, the character Kate needs a change in her life although she is a widely published writer. She maintains an over orderly house, being particularly fastidious about its upkeep. She has gone through several unsuccessful marriages. Discomfort and pain draw Kate’s attention to her self. She notices the aging of her body. One day she hears her knees creaking like “unoiled door hinges” (11) and she finds a “wrenching pain in her hip” (12) almost unbearable. Aging initiates a need for transformation. She dismantles her altar of religious paraphernalia upon which stood her gods and goddesses. In addition, her worldly, physical surroundings appear to be distant, unfamiliar, and uninspiring. They

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

Kate is no longer concerned about the condition of her house. She does not care about the leak in the bathroom, peeling paint or a door that remains ajar. For a reason unknown to her, she loses the inspiration to write and resorts to burning some of her work. She devalues money, burning several hundred-dollar bills “to demonstrate to herself that these items were not the God/Goddess of her life” (14). Deeply inside, she feels psychologically prepared for coming spiritual renewal.

Katie Geneva Cannon contends that black women writers “authenticate (...) how Black people creatively strain against the external limits in their lives, how they affirm their humanity by inverting assumptions, and how they balance the continual struggle and interplay of paradoxes” (*Black* 77). The external hindrances that the character in Alice Walker’s novel confronts are not only material goods and her immediate surroundings, but institutionalized religion as well. Kate ceases to attend organized Buddhist meditation sessions. Although she respects her Buddhist teacher and his advocacy of cool, non-violent revolution, she doubts that he, a well-educated prominent professor, possesses an activist spirit that would motivate him to struggle for the advancement of the poor. She reflects: “Easy enough for him to dismiss the brown and black and yellow and poor white people all over the globe who worried constantly

where their next meal was coming from (...)" (4-5). Kate also discerns the peculiarity of gathered mediators with their "well-fed look," who "were overwhelmingly white and middle- to upper-middle-class and had the money and leisure time to be at a retreat" (5). She feels uneasy, as she is the only black person in the group. Feeling discomfort, Kate chooses to sit outside under a big tree instead of returning to the mediation hall. She sees the tree as an embodiment of profound spirituality that offers equilibrium. Moreover, she questions Christianity. She recollects that even as a child she could never concentrate in church and looked out of the window at trees instead of praying. She was never able "to believe human beings simply by being born, had sinned" (5). Kate seeks to find and define the source and the essence of her life. To achieve this, she needs to form her own moral views and focus on spiritual enlightenment. In her endeavor to do so, she mirrors womanists, who "have fashioned value patterns and ethical procedures in their own terms" (Cannon, *Black* 76).

In *Anything We Love Can Be Saved*, Alice Walker, as a womanist, reflects on how people view and worship God. She states: "All people deserve to worship a God who also worships them. A God that made them, and likes them. That is why Nature, Mother Earth, is such a good choice" (25). The author also cites the "magical intimacy [black people] felt with Creation" (17). They saw Nature as beautiful, inspiring, and reassuring. Unfortunately, due to their connectedness with Mother Earth, black people were labeled pagans harboring sinful attitudes. Alice Walker, however, views paganism positively, defining a pagan as "a person whose primary spiritual relationship is with Nature and the Earth" (17).

This spiritual closeness with Nature constitutes one of the predominant themes in *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart*. The character Kate is embraced by a welcoming tree spirit, which influences her to change her name from Nelson to Talkingtree. Moreover, in order to escape the burden of her husband's oppressive presence, she dreams of "being high on a hillside in the sun" (28). She remembers that at an art exhibition her "bird nature became activated" (20) and she felt as if she could fly. Lastly, she begins to dream about a dry river, which her friends interpret as an otherworldly call for her to search for a wet river. The dry river presumably signifies the decaying essence of life. Therefore, friends encourage Kate to journey to the Colorado River, on a spiritual pilgrimage.

The rockiness of the boat journey induces motion sickness, and Kate's body begins to purify itself. This act of regurgitation is a precondition for her spiritual advancement, allowing an investigation of her inner self. She realizes that painful words have latently resided within her. She feels

an internal roar as of the sound of a massive accumulation of words, spoken all at once, but collected over a lifetime, now trying to leave her body (...) All the words from decades of her life filled her throat. Words she had said or had imagined saying or had swallowed before saying to her father, dead these many years. All the words to her mother. To her husbands. Children. Lovers. The words shouted back at the television set, spreading

its virus of mental confusion. (23)

Furthermore, the ritual promotes contemplation of her first marriage, where both her children and husband treated her as “a service, a servant” (28). Kate remembers the moment she decided to get out of the marriage. After she expressed her wish to be independent, Kate’s husband left her “alone” more than a hundred miles from home, without a car. When she returned home, he sexually assaulted her and left. Kate’s recollection of her resistance to the oppressiveness of her husband provides relief and inner peace on the Colorado rapids. “As her body gave up the last of its bitter memories of her first marriage, she experienced a lightness that actually made it easier to remain seated the long hours necessary, in the boat” (36).

Kate feels a deeper connectedness with Nature. Instinctively, she ingests an unknown yellow flower, which soothes her stomach. She begins to appreciate her natural beauty, especially her gray hair. After a discussion on hair dying and straightening, Kate together with the other women associate gray hair with the wonderful color of stone, water, sky, and rain.

The trip to Colorado does not complete Kate’s spiritual journey. It continues with a further sojourn to the Amazon river, on which ritual participants drink “a frothy liquid that tastes like soapsuds,” (51-52) as preparation before swallowing a sacred medicinal plant yage, known as “Grandmother.” The herb is believed to engender spiritual transformation and healing.

Womanists are not only concerned with self-growth and individual spiritual development, but they engage themselves in the struggle for the betterment of the black community. The womanist character in Walker’s novel is conscious of the socio-political status of black people in America. Kate was a former activist in the Black Freedom Movement of the 1960’s. She knows that most black people are marginalized from mainstream American society. She thinks:

We’re considered second- and third-class citizens of a country whose government never wanted us. Except as slaves. We understand by now the world will be blown to bits, doubtless by this same government, before people of color get their fair share. We can’t afford health insurance, nor will it even ever be applicable, the way things are going. Nobody but us wants to be Black. (56-57)

Kate is an advocate of reconciliation between black and white communities in the struggle for social and economic justice in America. This standpoint is presented by her reference to a white woman poet Jane Stenbridge, who was expelled by black activists from the Black Freedom Movement because some of them perceived her as a “mistress who’d caused them pain” (93). It was their memory of the unforgivable atrocities of slavery that triggered their aversion to a white woman, whom they associated with racist and merciless plantation mistresses. Kate believes that these activists should have recognized that the poet’s “very Being, white and female and descended from

slave owners though it was, might be a note of freedom” (93).

In addition to their concern with the situation of Black America, womanists focus on other people’s pain, suffering and tribulations. They assist the brokenhearted in their process of self-discovery and help to raise their awareness of social injustice. This unity with others is observable among several characters in *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart*, who share the spiritual sojourn on the Amazon. After a time, Kate’s body does not respond to the medicinal herb, which is a sign that she has undergone spiritual renewal. She begins to experience inner peace, which radiates from her and attracts others. Suddenly, those around her on the journey begin to confess their life stories to Kate. She finds out that Missy was an incest victim of her grandfather, the result of which is her inability to establish healthy relationships with men. Lalika killed a man who raped her and attempted to rape a friend. Both women were subsequently imprisoned and sexually assaulted over several months by guards and other inmates. Another person, Rick, an Italian immigrant, confesses to Kate that he comes from an affluent family that profited from selling drugs to black people. He reveals that: “They could sell drugs to blacks but they were not themselves to be hooked on the stuff because if they became hooked on the stuff they couldn’t move up in American society (...)” (146). Finally, intimate conversation evokes among the gathered people a spiritual unity that feels “very ancient and very sweet” (166).

Another focus of womanists is class stratification within American society. Katie Geneva Cannon in her book *Katie’s Canon* observes: “The bittersweet irony of the Afro-American experience forces Black women to examine critically the conventional, often pretentious, morality of middle-class American ideals” (62). Following these thoughts, Kate symbolically burns several hundred-dollar bills as a demonstration of her nonchalance to wealth. Instead, she concerns herself with the fate of poor parents and wonders how they “feed, clothe, and educate their children” (5). She thinks of well-off political leaders, who arrive at peace talks in limousines but have no experience with real suffering. Moreover, they create more destruction, as Kate surmises: “When these men left the peace talks they turned to the military bastion from which they directed their tanks” (78). Another character, Rick, also becomes conscious of class injustice in American society. He remembers: “I felt instinctively that we had too much of everything: food, clothes, money. And my parents, especially my father, was always urging me to take more. Eat! Drink! Buy! (161).” When it comes to global issues, womanists focus on afflictions caused by American foreign policy. In the novel, Kate asks the question: “What would happen if our foreign policy centered on the cultivation of joy rather than pain?” (183). She believes that America could “be the true leader of the world, not its biggest bully” (183). In dismay, she finds out that eight different places were bombed by the U.S. while she was on her journey.

Womanism also refers to a way of being towards women. A womanist , as Alice Walker states, “appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility (...) and women’s strength” (*In Search*, XI). Probably for this reason, Kate in *Now is the Time to Open Your Heart* spends the initial

part of her spiritual journey amongst women. It is women who support her during her hour of need on the Colorado rapids. It is in the company of spiritual women that Kate soul-searches and finds release from the burdens of her painful past.

Womanists also emphasize the multidimensional quality of life that manifests itself in an ability to appreciate and enjoy the experience of one's immediate surroundings. Alice Walker writes that a womanist loves the folk, the Spirit, music, dance, the moon, food, roundness, struggle, and oneself (*In Search*, XI). Womanists are critical of those who have no regard for the beauty of nature, express no appreciation for art and neither attune themselves to the spiritual dimension of art. Kate Talkingtree observes that, in the main, technological advancement and oppressive civilization work against the development of people's humanity. She mourns the loss of one of her sons to "the United States' space program of which she knew little and feared much. Space colonies?" (190). Also another character, Hugh, who is one of the ritual participants, comments on harmful effects of scientific research. He denounces the dishonoring of Native American sacred grounds by scientists in their endeavor to understand Native Americans. He says: "But they didn't really know. They made something up, you know, What the White Man Knows About Folks He's Never Known, and printed it in their journals" (131). He also remembers a Native American man who, together with his son, used to regularly visit a burial place. Thinking of his grandchildren and their attraction to modern devices, Hugh says: "I tried to imagine one of my sons or grandsons walking patiently like that with me. My grandsons play with a little gadget that looks like a handheld TV. They seem to look up from it only when it's time to eat" (129). He thinks that consumerism and materialism have led to a spiritual emptiness of people who exist, but do not truly live. Armando, a shaman that supervises Kate's journey on the Amazon, distinguishes between existence and living. He states: "When you are caught up in the world that you did not design as support for your life and the life of earth and people, it is like being caught in someone else's dream or nightmare. Many people exist in their lives in this way. I say exist because it is not really living" (142-143).

Womanist writers also "reveal (...) a psychic connection with the cultural tradition transmitted by the oral mode from one generation to the next" (Cannon, *Black*, 84). In literary works, this connection is revealed in the incorporation of songs, sermons, and folk tales. In Alice Walker's novel, Armando's singing spiritually empowers those taking part in the ritual. His preaching has also a central role in the spiritual development of other characters. Moreover, a folk tale comes to Kate's mind, once told by an elderly woman, about a frozen snake that bit the man, who saved it. The woman interpreted the tale as expressing "an endless kind of a thing. Do we kill it or do we let it live?" (10). The story underlines the consequences resulting from people's decisions.

Womanists' connections with their tradition and past are exemplified also by their bonds with ancestors. Kate Talkingtree encounters her forebears in dreams. A dream about her mother, who was killed in a car

accident, is the catalyst for Kate's writing of a story about family life. In another dream she meets her ancestor Remus, who was brutally killed by the Ku Klux Klan nightriders. In this dream, Kate invites him to eat corn, even though he is toothless and has bleeding gums. Miraculously, the seeds of corn transform themselves into beautiful teeth. Kate also realizes the importance of remembering the painful experience of her ancestors. Instead of erasing the memory of her father's mangled body, "crashed like an accordion" in a car accident, she understands "she must remember it, linger over her response to it" (42).

In conclusion, *Now is the Time to Open Your Heart* presents womanist ethics through the characters' self-discovery, spirituality, relation to nature and ancestors as well as involvement in the struggle for social and economic justice. Alice Walker's stands firmly within the womanist literary tradition.

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