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BLACK CONCIOUSNESS IN ALICE WALKER'S NOVELS WITH REFERENCE TO *THE COLOR PURPLE*, *MERIDIAN* AND *POSSESSING THE SECRET OF JOY*

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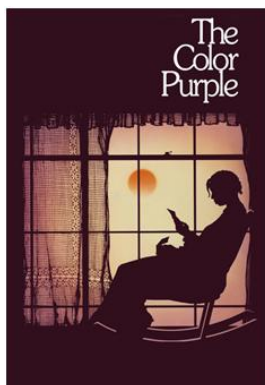
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ABSTRACT

Alice Walker's novels depict the consciousness of black women who have the power of possessing the secret of joy. This paper attempts to find out the trial of the blacks women in search of self and identity in the novels of Alice Walker. In Alice Walker's fiction, black women are depicted as wearing masks in order to face, soften or escape the torture inflicted on them by black men. She introduced the word "womanist" into feminist parlance in her 1983 book '*In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*'. The adoption of "womanist" signified an inclusion of race and class issues in feminism.

Key Words: Black Consciousness, Womanist, Feminist



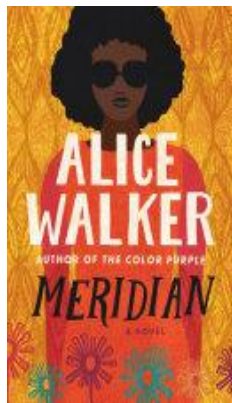
Alice Walker's '*The Color Purple*' depicts the identity crisis of black women. The novel unleashed a storm of controversy. It instigated heated debates about black cultural representation, as a number of male African-American critics complained that the novel reaffirmed old racist stereotypes about pathology in black communities and of black men in particular. "*The Color Purple*" is foremost the story of Celie, a poor, barely literate Southern black woman who struggles to escape the brutality and degradation of her treatment by men. The tale is told primarily through her own letters, which, out of isolation and

despair, she initially addresses to God. The relationship between Celie and Shug Avery is the lesbian continuum spans the whole spectrum of women's friendships and sisterly solidarity.

Walker transforms Celie's individual story into an allegory of the struggle of a black southern woman for spiritual liberation. Celie's personal transformation into the New Negro Woman who can feel and think for herself is indeed amazing. It took a long time and much effort that Walker traces Celie's journey from living in fear of a patriarchal God that is difficult to identify with to Celie's eventual joy and acceptance of herself and others and the serenity to be found in daily life. Celie eventually can move beyond a life full of suffering because she realizes life offers so much more as she hones the ability to change and grow.

By infusing Celie with such a capacity for growth, the author acts as a spiritual guide throughout the novel and "unfolds a model both of and for human beings who are threatened by cultural disorder and by a loss of connection with

themselves, with each other, and with the world" (Lewis 483-84). Celie is essentially an object, an entirely passive party who has no power to assert herself through action or words. Her letters to God, in which she begins to pour out her story, become her only outlet. However, because she is so unaccustomed to articulating her experience, her narrative is initially muddled despite her best efforts at transparency. *The Color Purple* symbolizes the power women can gain from productively channeling their creative energy.



In her second novel, "*Meridian*" centered on the life of a Black Woman whose search for selfhood against the background of rapid socio-cultural changes of the 1960's.

Walker used *Meridian* to showcase her womanist (as opposed to feminist) attitudes. Alice Walker chooses the womanist theory of feminism because she feels it fits her particular circumstances in a better way than feminism. She is a complex and capacious character whose presence and identity cannot be reduced to a simple phrase or formulation.

Some have charged that Walker's brand of feminism has concluded that black women feminists are superior in strength to white feminist women, although the claim is dismissed by Walker herself. She simply sees womanism as a complement to the feminist movement. The womanist movement also gives black women a means of speaking on gender issues without attacking black men. In relation to the survival of the black community, issues such as (dating) and gender equality are addressed in a more complete way by womanism than feminism.

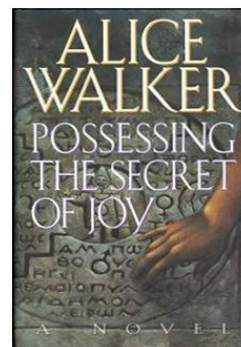
Throughout *Meridian*, Walker stresses the universality of the human experience and suggests that no one has cornered the market on suffering.

Rather, many individuals from a variety of groups and backgrounds share a common history of exploitation, guilt, suffering, violence, and, ultimately, freedom, triumph, and acceptance.

The heroine of the novel "*Meridian*" is deserted by a black lover who then marries a white civil-rights worker, whom he also later abandons. In "*Meridian*," however, the friction between black men and women is merely one of several themes; in "*The Color Purple*" the role of male domination in the frustration of black women's struggle for independence is clearly the focus. Black feminism became popular in the 1960s, in response to the sexism of the Civil Rights Movement and racism of the feminist movement. From the 1970s to 1980s, black feminists formed various groups which addressed the role of black women in Black Nationalism, gay liberation, and second-wave feminism. In the 1990s, the Anita Hill controversy placed black feminism in a mainstream light. *Meridian* is more than a novel about the Civil Rights Movement, and critics have focused on many aspects of this complex work.

In the end, *Meridian* realizes the fatuousness of dying or killing for the movement, concluding that the battle is won in small ways, such as getting blacks registered to vote and improving the lives of people victimized by the unchecked expression of racism.

Alice Walker quotes that "Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender." Womanism identifies and criticizes sexism in the African American community and racism in the feminist community. Womanism recognizes the beauty and strength of embodied black womanhood, and seeks connections and solidarity with black men.



The novel "*Possessing the Secret of Joy*" shows the problems of black women and their culture through

'Tashi' who feels finally that women have the capacity of possessing everything in her life, the main protagonist of the novel. *Possessing the Secret of Joy* is the story of Tashi, a tribal African woman who lives much of her adult life in North America. As a young woman, a misguided loyalty to the customs of her people led her to voluntarily submit to the tsunga's knife and be genitally mutilated (pharoanically circumcised). Severely traumatized by this experience, she spends the rest of her life battling madness and finally realize the importance of womanhood that women only have the power of possessing the secret of joy.

She is haunted by her experiences as a child and on the run from her memories, especially the act of female circumcision that she underwent as a young adult rather than a young child like other children following the tradition of her village. As her understanding grows, so does her capacity to encounter her overwhelming grief. Underneath this grief is her glowing anger. Anger propels her to act. Action brings both feeling - life, the ability to exist with awareness in the moment - and death, of which she finds she has completely lost her fear. The novel delves into her struggles recuperating emotionally and physically from the circumcision as she is enveloped in revelations about the underlying meaning of her culture. Once she has the procedure done things go downhill pretty quickly and Tashi goes mad. The female mutilation in blacks culture explores the suffering of women physically and mentally with those practices which is clearly presented by Walker. Walker's novels projects the concept of consciousness of African-American women.

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