

Womanism: Definition and History

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Abstract:

The twentieth century has witnessed great upheavals on many levels, scientific as well as social. Among these upheavals were civil rights and liberation movements all around the world, particularly in the United States. These types of civil movements were the grassroots for diverse Feminist movements in the world in general and specifically in the United States. Although feminism has helped women make great strides towards equality in the USA, many women, especially African-American ones, feel the inadequacy of feminism to deal with the problems of African-American women. As a way to further dissociate themselves from the radical feminists, African-American women writers look for other terms to better describe their own struggle. Although they do not want to throw out the advantages feminism has given them, they do not, at the same time, want to take on the narrowness of the feminist viewpoint. They have tried to form a new vision, a vision that has been described as holistic rather than narrowly monolithic. Some African-American women choose “black feminist” as a label to differentiate their ideology from

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radical feminists. Still, the “black feminist” label does not satisfy the whole gamut of African-American women, and, as a result, some totally reject it. Instead of calling themselves “black feminists,” some African-American women, like Walker, use the term “womanist.” Thus, this paper attempts to introduce the term "Womanism" and its various definition and its long history in the United States of America.

Keywords: Women's rights, Feminism, black feminism, Womanism, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison.

Introduction:

The recent history of women’s movements in the United States started as early as the end of the nineteenth century, and has culminated in a number of movements in women’s struggle. The main concerns of these movements are to look for women’s rights and to fight a number of misconceptions predominant in society about their social status. Most of these misconceptions are related to woman’s relationship to man: “a woman has no value to society except that which man gives her, as the object of his desire and the mother of his children” (Joslin 459).

The year 1848 marked the beginning of the women’s movement in the United States when the first US Women’s Rights convention was held in Seneca Falls, New York. By the 1880s, the United States had produced the first generation of young women to attend college. Although there was no official or political movement that would include women’s activities at that time, women made use of the social meeting

and gathering as a chance to discuss their issues. In these clubs, small groups of women met together and had the chance to talk about their personal lives and feelings (Joslin 4-7). From this exchange of personal testimony and experience came the realization that many experiences thought to be personal were ones that many women recognized and shared. Moreover, these gatherings played an active role in enhancing women's rights. As Katherine Joslin puts it: "Even as women were denied the vote and political sanction for their activities, they were, in truth, active voices in their communities and cities, in their states and in the country as a whole" (1). Women's gatherings in the late nineteenth

Century were the prelude to the Feminist movement in the twentieth century.

The twentieth century has witnessed great upheavals on many levels, scientific as well as social. Among these upheavals were civil rights and liberation movements all around the world, particularly in the United States. These types of civil movements were the grassroots for diverse Feminist movements in the world in general and specifically in the United States. As Susan A. Mann puts it:

The roots of the modern Feminist movement stem, in part, from sexism within the civil rights... just as the women's movement of the nineteenth century arose, in part, from sexism within the abolitionist movement. (134)

Consequently, out of these civil rights movements came feminism. In the 1960s, the Feminist movement worked under the assumption that all women have the same

experience. However, some versions of the movement such as Radical Feminism have redefined the main objective of the Feminist movement. Radical Feminism, the most extreme version of all feminisms, is mainly composed of white women who are looking for their rights in a patriarchal society that denies their freedom. Its main concern is with patriarchy in forms of male control, dominance, and preference throughout all institutions of society as the center of gender oppression. In her book, *Feminism*, Jane Freedman defines the term “feminism” as a “concern with women’s inferior position in society and with discrimination encountered by women because of their sex” (1). Because of this feeling of sex inferiority, radical feminists are struggling for equality between woman and man. In other words, the problem for them has been patriarchy, and therefore, their struggle is to achieve equality and civil rights in opposition to man’s continued domination and oppression. Fundamentally, they argue that "all men are the enemies of all women and proposed solutions to this problem a utopian woman nation, separatist communities, and even the subjugation or extermination of all men" (bell hooks, *Theory* 34). Moreover, radical feminists argue “over the existence of women’s biological and social differences from men and about the best strategies for ending women’s subordinate position in society, either through claiming equality or stating their difference” (Freedman 9).

African-American Women and Feminism:

Although feminism has helped women make great strides towards equality in the USA, many women, especially African-American ones, feel the inadequacy of feminism to deal with the problems of African-American women. For its emphasis on gender and lack of interest in race, African-American women criticize the Feminist movement. As Rose M. Brewer puts it:

Gender alone cannot explain the black woman or man's experience. Feminism must reflect in its theory and practice the race and class terrain upon which hierarchy and inequality are built globally and within the USA. (27)

African-American women's problems are not only concerned with their relationship with men, but also with race and class. With their radical, even aggressive, and angry attitude toward men, radical feminists fail to gain the public understanding of the significance of the authentic Feminist movement. As Sally Quinn explains, "feminism has even been attacked by the feminists themselves who see the Feminist movement as anti-male, anti-child, anti-family, anti-feminine. And therefore it has nothing to do with us" (143).

The issue of male/female relationship is one of several important areas in which disagreement exists between African-American women in general and white feminists. Many African-American women sharply differ with the Radical Feminist movement in the way they perceive men. Feminism, especially the radical part of it, has identified "men as the agents of oppression," and argued that "all other

forms of exploitation and oppression (racism, capitalism, imperialism, etc.) are all extensions of male supremacy” (Joseph and Lewis 55). Unlike radical feminists, African-American women have not disassociated themselves from the men of their community. On the contrary, as Frances Beal says, they “have got to deal with the problems that the African-American masses deal with, for our problems in reality are one and the same” (12). In other words, they have not taken a stand against their fellow men just because they are men. Rather, they believe that any healing process for African-American women should include African-American men as well. Hooks, for example, believes that African Americans’ “collective healing as a people must be a collective process, one that includes black men” (*Sisters* 15).

In addition, unlike radical feminists, one of the objectives of African-American women is to empower African-American man and even believe in him. They believe that their men are also oppressed by white supremacy, and that the problems of African-American women and men are much the same, and as such require common ground and understanding to fight the oppressions they are facing. Toni Morrison, for example, argues that: “Everybody knows, deep down, that black men were emasculated by white men, period. And that black women didn’t take part in that” (Step 17). Other African-American women, such as Alice Walker, argue that the sexist behavior of some African-American men has been attained from the culture of the society, which is predominantly white. For example, Walker points out that her father’s “sexist behavior

was not something uniquely his own, but, rather, an imitation of the behavior of the society around us” (330).

African-American women, thus, believe that since they and their men share the same oppression and history, it is better to keep united to continue their fight and struggle. Instead of dividing themselves over issues of gender and sexuality, they need to be united against issues of racism and social oppression. As Akua Sarr asserts, “in a history marked by racism, colonialism and social repression, it was viewed as more important to present a picture of racial unity than to address sexism and the multiple experiences of black women” (2). In other words, for African-American women, there are larger problems than sex and gender, such as race, class, and poverty that women all over the world are struggling with. Because of these problems, many African-American women and women of color consider the Feminist movement as “completely irrelevant to black women in particular or the black struggle in general” (Beal 12). Moreover, African-American women have criticized the Feminist movement as inadequately confronting the issues facing them and have accused it of concentrating only on the perspectives and concerns of white, middle-class women. hooks, for example, believes that “bourgeois white women had defined feminism in such way as to make it appear that it had no real significance for black women” (*Theory* 33). Many African-American women writers suggest that African-American women and women of color have resisted what they perceive to be the belittlement of their concerns by the Radical Feminist movement. Some African-American

women, like hooks, point out that they turned away from the Radical Feminist movement simply because they felt disregarded and discarded by the other members of the group. As she describes her experience:

When I participated in feminist groups, I found white women adopted a condescending attitude towards me and other non-white participants...they did not see us as equals. They did not treat us as equals. ... If we dared to criticize the movement or to assume responsibility for reshaping feminist ideas and introducing new ideas, our voices were turned out, dismissed, silenced. We could be heard only if our statements echoed the sentiments of the dominant discourse. (*Theory 12-13*)

Other African-American women authors argue that not only the concerns of African-American Women but also other women of color have been marginalized, slighted, and even ignored within the agenda of the Feminist movement. As a result, they have questioned the wisdom of joining such a movement. As hooks puts it:

As a black woman interested in the Feminist movement, I am often asked whether being black is more important than being a woman; whether feminist struggle to end sexist oppression is more important than the struggle to end racism or vice versa. (*Theory 31*)

Consequently, many African-American women think that it is incorrect to conclude that women's oppression is due simply to male sexism. It is more than that. Other oppressive forces subjugate women in the United States such as racism, class, and capitalism. The failure on the part of

white radical feminists to recognize this fact widens the gap between them and their African-American counterparts. As Beal puts it, “if the white groups do not realize that they are in fact fighting capitalism and racism, we do not have common bonds” (12). For many African-American women sexist oppression is only the experience of a small sect of white middle-class women. Race really matters and is more important to them. For African-American women, racism is not something that exists in the distance. Rather it is in everyday situations in workplaces, stores, schools, and daily social interactions, suggesting a larger zone for oppression (hooks *theory* 37). Many African-American women believe that there are no parallels between their struggle and the white women’s liberation movement. Although some agree that there are certain common grounds where they meet, still there are number of differences several of which are basic. As Beal puts it:

The white women’s movement is far from being monolithic. Any white group that does not have an anti-imperialist and anti-racist ideology has absolutely nothing in common with the black women’s struggle. Are white women asking to be equal to white women in their pernicious treatment of third world peoples? What assurances have black women that white women will be less racist and exploitative if they had the power and were in a position to do so? These are serious questions that the white women’s liberation movement has failed to address itself to. (11)

Furthermore, the difference in the nature of the oppression of African-American women and white American

women could be another reason African-American women are detached from the Radical Feminist movement. African-American women are a subordinated group experiencing, more than anybody else in the United States, the consequences of double oppressions. African-American woman's emphasis on race does not mean that they are excluded from being affected and influenced by patriarchy, but rather the relationship between black and white has a long and important history that cannot be exclusively reduced to an analysis limited to sex or class (Joseph and Lewis 80). For example, Ogunyemi believes that the predicament of African-American women could be resolved if they work hard to eradicate both "racism and sexism" (238). Ogunyemi also touches on the main painful issue among African-American women: they are mainly different from their white counterparts because of their excruciating history. Unlike white women, for example, African-American women share, as Ogunyemi says, a common characteristic. She asserts:

As a group, they are distinct from white feminists because of their race, because they have experienced the past and present subjugation of the black population along with present-day subtle (or not so subtle) control exercised over them by the alien, Western culture. (232)

As both African-American and female, two categories that are viewed as lesser, African-American women find themselves in "double jeopardy" and at odds with the Radical Feminist movement. Almost all black women writers agree that African-American women are disadvantaged in several

ways: as African Americans they with their men are victims of a white patriarchal culture; as African-American women they are victimized on racial, sexual, and class grounds by white men (Ogunyemi 235). Furthermore, they agree that white women's experience in the United States is completely different from that of African-American counterparts. Some relate the racial oppression of African Americans to the history of slavery in the United States. Describing the conditions of African-American women as victims of this history, Beal argues that

[b]lack women in America can justly be described as a "slave of a slave." ... Her physical image has been maliciously maligned; she has suffered the worst kind of economic exploitation, having being forced to serve as the white woman's maid and wet nurse for white offspring while her own children were more often than not starving and neglected. (4)

For many African Americans the history of slavery is painful and great, and the scars it has left make it hard for them to forget that history. Since slavery, they have struggled individually and in groups, spontaneously and in formal organizations, to eliminate the multiple injustices they face. hooks in her book, *Ain't I A Woman*, asserts that "as far back as slavery, white people established a social hierarchy based on race and sex, that ranked white men first, white women second, though sometimes equal to black men who ranked third, and black women last" (53).

Surprisingly enough, these ideas come from hooks who is considered the most moderate among African-

American women writers, someone who is trying to bridge the gap between African-American women and white feminists. Despite her moderate and conciliatory stand, hooks expresses her dissatisfaction with the status of African Americans, and emphasizes the pain and suffering they endure in the United States. As she elucidates:

Black people are indeed wounded by forces of domination...are all wounded by white supremacy, racism, sexism, and a capitalist economic system that dooms us collectively to an underclass position....Black people are wounded in our hearts, minds, bodies, and spirits. (*Sisters* 11)

African-American Women and the Civil Rights Movement

African-American women's vocal dissatisfactions started as early as the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, which played a major role in the emergence of black feminism, and later in the womanist movement. Walker in her book, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*, asserts the importance of the Civil Rights Movement for African-American people in general, and African-American women in particular:

The Civil Rights Movement gave us each other forever...some of us knowledge and pride, all of us comfort. It gave us our children, our husbands, our brothers, our fathers, as men reborn and with a purpose for living. It broke the pattern of black servitude in this country...It gave us history and men far greater than Presidents. It gave us heroes,

selfless men of courage and strength, for our little boys and girls to follow. It gave us hope for tomorrow. It called us to life. (128-129)

The Civil Rights movement sparked other black movements such as the Black Power movement, which began with young, northern blacks in the mid 1960's. Moreover, it was "the gateway to the new black feminist scholarship of the past twenty years ... and the mainstream feminist movement of the late 1960s and the early 1970s" (Brewer 14). Although different in some respects, one can easily identify a common characteristic among these movements: their active response to the discrimination and violence being carried out against African Americans in America, and their desire to produce important structural changes in the relationship between African Americans and whites. As Brenda Wilkinson writes, "the civil rights movement brought significant social change. Black people began to search for greater understanding of their beginnings in this country- and in looking back, discovered much to take pride in as a race of people" (3).

Many Americans, especially African-American males and females, joined these movements as a way to express their anger and frustration. They had the chance to join a number of movements including the Black Power movement, mainly dominated by African-American males, and the Feminist movement, widely dominated by white middle-class women. "Blacks began," as Diane K. Lewis writes, "to participate more fully in public activities previously reserved for whites. In such domains they encountered patterns of

sexual discrimination” (42). Like their white counterparts, African-American women “felt frustrated by restraints imposed on them by the men with whom they shared the political arena” (White 9). Out of an effort to meet the needs of African-American women who felt they were being racially oppressed in the Feminist movement, and sexually oppressed in the Black Power movement, the Black Feminist movement was formed. In this regard, the Black Civil Rights movements were the incentive for African-American women to think closely about being dissociated from the Radical Feminist movement.

Definitions of Womanism

As a way to further dissociate themselves from the radical feminists, African-American women writers look for other terms to better describe their own struggle. Although they do not want to throw out the advantages feminism has given them, they do not, at the same time, want to take on the narrowness of the feminist viewpoint. They have tried to form a new vision, a vision that has been described as holistic rather than narrowly monolithic. Some African-American women choose “black feminist” as a label to differentiate their ideology from radical feminists. Still, the “black feminist” label does not satisfy the whole gamut of African-American women, and, as a result, some totally reject it. Instead of calling themselves “black feminists,” some African-American women, like Walker, use the term “womanist.”

The term “Womanism”- “centrally located in the sociohistorical and linguistic worldview of black women” (Troutman 104) — was coined by Walker in 1983, and has been later used and refined by other African-American women writers such as Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi. Walker in her book, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, provides comprehensive and inclusive definitions of the word “womanist.” In her multiple definitions of the term “womanism,” Walker reveals the rationale of why many African-American women prefer the term “womanism” to “black feminism.” Walker’s definition of the term “womanist” is:

A black feminist or feminist of color...Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered “good” for one...interchangeable with another black folk expression: “You trying to be grown.” Responsible. In charge. *Serious*. (xi)

At this point, Walker substitutes the term “womanist” for the other term that usually describes African-American women, “black feminist.” Walker’s choice of a word that does not include the word feminist expresses the widespread fear of African-American women of being associated with any label that contains the word “feminist.”

On the surface, it seems that Walker uses the two terms “womanist” and “black feminist” as interchangeable. In fact, many African-American women see little difference between the two terms, because both maintain a common agenda of African-American women's self-definition and

self-determination. As Barbara Omolade points out, “Black feminism is sometimes referred to as womanism because both are concerned with struggles against sexism and racism by African-American women who are themselves part of the African-American community's efforts to achieve equity and liberty” (xx).

However, later in her definition, Walker says, “womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender” (xii). This statement creates a number of debates among those who are trying to construct a similarity between the two terms “womanism” and “black feminism.” While for some African-American women, Walker’s metaphor itself is yet another indication of the overlapping of the two terms, for others, such as Tuzyline Jita Allan, “this metaphor is intended as a visual illustration of the ideological gap between womanism and feminism (“Walker’s Womanist Gospel” 136). Therefore, while Walker’s definition might appear to others as synonymous with “black feminism,” the term “womanist” suggests, for Walker herself, otherwise. Walker is very careful to explain that both terms should not be viewed as having the same meaning. For example, Walker expresses the insufficiency of any label other than “womanist” to describe African-American women’s experiences. As she confirms:

I dislike having to add a color in order to become visible, as in black feminist. Womanism gives us a word of our own....*Womanist* and *Womanism* were not popularized to narrow or criticize existing terms, but to shed light on

women's experience by increasing the number and richness of words describing it. (In Steinem and Hayes 640-641)

Walker emphasizes that the differences between womanism and feminism are, at root, ideological, and that each has a distinct point of departure for engaging African-American women's realities. The fact that Walker refers to the African-American folk expression as the root of the term refers to the spirit and uniqueness of womanism itself as an expression to exalt African-American traditions and roots. As she puts it:

I choose [womanism] because I prefer the sound, the feel, the fit of it; because I cherish the spirit of the women the word calls to mind, and because I share the old ethnic-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. (In Steinem & Hayes 640)

Walker's desire to be dissociated from the feminist label provides womanist scholars the freedom to explore the particularities of African-American women's history and culture without being guided by what white radical feminists have already identified as women's issues. They have the ability to relate to issues of other women all over the world. To succeed, African-American women "should not be limited to issues defined by their femaleness but attempt to tackle questions raised by their humanity" (Ogunyemi 232). African-American women writers should not confine themselves to the boundaries of the United States, because

women's issues cross national boundaries and transcend lines of color and race.

Walker's concern for women's issues is global. Hence, the importance of "womanism" as a term that pays attention not only to African-American women in the United States, but also to other oppressed women all over the world. Womanists, by this global message, hope to reach a wider audience, to come together in an effort to communicate and understand one another regardless of race, sex, age, or nationality. This womanist global message has been initiated because of the long history of suffering that African-American women have endured in the United States. Fannie Barrier Williams explains African-American women's readiness to endorse this global message in their struggle. A long time ago, she wrote: "The hearts of Afro-American women are too warm and too large for race hatred. Long suffering has so chastened them that they are developing a special sense of sympathy for all who suffer and fail of justice" (*Black Women in Nineteenth-Century American Life* 274)

In her pursuit of this global message, Walker has devoted her most recent years to the struggle of women who refuse to become victims of sexist and racist traditions throughout the world. By emphasizing the holistic and global message of womanism, Walker highlights yet another difference between black feminists and womanists. For example, Walker argues that by concentrating on the issues of African-American women within the United States, Black

feminists fail to address the issues of women throughout the world:

To the extent that Black women dissociate themselves from the women's movement, they abandon their responsibilities to women throughout the world. This is a serious abdication from and misuse of radical Black herstorical tradition. (379)

Moreover, Walker defines a womanist as someone who has "outrageous, audacious or willful behavior" (xi). By describing the African-American women with these adjectives, Walker asserts the psychological needs of African-American women to have qualities that would make possible their survival in a racially oppressive society. In other words, this "womanish" behavior is, according to Tuzyline Jita Allan, "a gesture of defiance with which the black woman-child responds to the unequal distribution of power in society" (*Womanist Aesthetics* 10). This attitude of defiance, on the part of African-American women, has a historical background. Throughout American history, African-American women have been forced to work outside their homes, first by slaveholders and then out of economic necessity. They were always looked upon as outrageous and audacious. Cherry Scott provides a logical explanation for these qualities. She writes:

The history of blacks in American [sic] dictated that black women be strong, intelligent, aggressive and independent, throughout much of their entire lives.... Restless, frustrated and impatient as a result of being misunderstood, separated and alienated from that which she

is very much a part, the black woman may often show signs of anger, ruthless and reckless abandon as she seeks to overcome the obstacles that stand between her and racial equality. (12)

Walker's other definition of the term "womanism" is also informative and illuminating. Walker tries to make the term look more distinct from the other terms, "feminism" and "black feminism." For example, she defines 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. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female. Not a separatist...Traditionally Universalist ... (and) capable. (xi)

Walker's emphasis on and appreciation of African-American women's culture, and her reference to the possibility that they can "love individual men, sexually and nonsexually," makes the term "womanism" more comprehensive than both "feminism" and "black feminism." For instance, despite the fact that Walker's definition incorporates women loving men, sexually and non-sexually, black feminism, on the other hand, does not leave room for this type of relationship. Moreover, unlike radical feminists, Walker encourages African-American women to be more loyal to their men, although she foresees in this relationship a danger that women can be easily manipulated by men. To outflank any patriarchal danger, Walker advocates a sisterhood of African-American women who will support

each other in resisting patriarchy, which she describes as “the enemy within...that has kept women virtual slaves throughout memory” (379). Furthermore, unlike radical feminists and some black feminists such as Audre Lorde, Walker makes it possible for relationships between women to be based not only on lesbianism, but also on “an appreciation of “women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility... and women’s strength” (xi).

In this unique relationship of black women with each other, and black women with black men, womanists hope they can reach the goal where all should work for the benefit of the whole community, and none should be excluded in contributing to that effort. In other words, everyone, African-American female and male, should be “committed to survival and wholeness of entire people” (Walker xi). Therefore, to Walker, womanists should share a worldview of social philosophy, which emphasizes the primacy of a supportive social network of women, family, and community. In other words, a womanist is “not a separatist” (Walker xi). In this case, Walker makes womanism more attractive for many African-American women to endorse, since it implies the idea of African-American unity and African-American Nationalism, which is at the center of the struggle for many African Americans, male and female alike. As Houston and Davis put it:

Some black women are attracted to womanism because at least some of its definitions are compatible with the ideology of Black Nationalism. It promises a way to address feminist issues...freeing Black women scholars and

activists from acting as Euro-American feminism's 'handmaidens.' (11)

Furthermore, Walker, by her emphasis that a "womanist" is an artist, someone who "loves music...loves the Spirit. Loves love" (xii), sheds more light on the term. According to Walker, a "womanist" is an artist who is, at the same time, a fighter, someone who "loves struggle" because she "loves the folk" and "loves herself. Regardless" (xii). Walker, in this definition, tries to reach a compromise on behalf of African-American women to fight and resist on the one hand, and to comply and to integrate with the society on the other. As Tuzyline Jita Allan puts it:

For Walker, the battle against patriarchal society and its multiple sins of sexism, racism, classism and homophobia (among others) needs the womanist spirit of defiance and irreverence, on the one hand, and the desire for social integration, on the other hand. (Womanist Aesthetics 70)

Walker is not the only African-American female writer who presents this inclusive meaning of the word "womanism." Ogunyemi, for example, clearly articulates womanist consciousness, and provides another comprehensive definition of womanism. Ogunyemi is so much influenced by Walker's definitions of the term "womanist" that she herself admits to the overlapping of hers with Walker's. As Ogunyemi puts it: "I arrived at the term "womanism" independently, and was pleasantly surprised to discover that my notion of its meaning overlaps with Walker" (240). Like Walker, Ogunyemi presents multiple

definitions of “womanism.” According to her “womanism” is:

[A] Philosophy that celebrates Black roots, the ideals of Black life, while giving a balanced presentation of Black womandom. ... Its ideal is for Black unity where every Black person has a modicum of power and so can be a “brother,” a “sister”, a “father”, or a “mother” to the other. (240)

Ogunyemi’s definition strikes two similar notes to Walker’s: the idea of celebrating African-American roots and the need and call for African-American unity. For example, Ogunyemi emphasizes the unity between African-American men and women. Like Walker, Ogunyemi believes that African-American men cannot have African-American women's experiences, but they can support African-American women by advocating anti-racist and anti-sexist philosophies in their intellectual and political work. Both Walker and Ogunyemi are concerned with the entire African-American community, and both have advanced the view that “Black women’s struggles are part of a wider struggle for human dignity, empowerment, and social justice” (Collins 41). To reach “human dignity, empowerment, and social justice,” both men and women in the African-American community can, and should, according to both Ogunyemi and Walker, come together in a dialogue to define and address the needs of the entire African-American community. As Lorine L Cummings has rightly emphasized:

Womanists are concerned with building and maintaining the entire black community- no one is excluded from the dialogue. Womanists envision a community of

blacks who are working for the healing of everyone. For this to occur, womanists recognize, there must be open and honest discussion between black men and women. (61)

Moreover, Ogunyemi views a “womanist” as someone who “along with her consciousness of sexual issues... must incorporate racial, cultural, national, economic, and political considerations into her philosophy” (232). Ogunyemi’s definition seems to be more political than Walker’s. In other words, she calls for active political participation for womanists. Unlike feminists, she emphasizes issues that most concern African-American women, womanists, and activists: race, culture, and the economy.

Walker’s coinage of the term “womanism,” and Ogunyemi’s contribution to it are the result of African-American women’s search for a term to better describe their living realities and experiences. Moreover, assuming such a new term proves the capability of African-American women to regain power from radical feminists to name their own movements. As Houston and Davis put it: “Some who reject the label “back feminist” claim the label “womanist.” Many view this as a way for black women to claim the power to name their activist traditions in a way that distinguished it from these of white women” (9).

Although different in some aspects, black feminists and womanists share a culture of resistance. Like womanism, “the overarching purpose of U.S. black feminist thought is,” according to Patricia Collins, “to resist oppression, both its practices and the ideas that justify it” (22). Moreover, both terms have the same roots in sharing the same concern in

dealing with the multiple oppressions that African-American women experience. Houston and Davis write:

Black feminist and womanist ideologies are not monolithic, essentialist views of black womanhood, but are derived from black women's varied, historically rooted patterns of experience...traditions of resistance to multiple, interlocking oppressions. (7)

Consequently, one can argue that womanism is a black feminist vision born out of African-American women's struggle against a number of oppressions. It is a way for African-American women to create "a new identity in both cultures based on a dialectical relationship of cooperation and resistance" (Allan 5). Furthermore, womanism is an attempt, on the part of many African-American women, to move beyond radical feminist ideas into a new stage of social thought regarding the lives of both African-American men and women. For them, feminism is no longer the best theory to analyze the problems of African-American people. To understand and to resolve these problems womanism, rather than feminism, is the best answer. It is a call to move beyond feminism to a new logic and interpretation of African-American women's lives. Womanism is a selective feminism where womanists carefully select the parts of feminism that agree with their worldview and reject the rest.

Toni Morrison and Womanism

Much of the spirit of Walker and Ogunyemi's definitions of womanism is visible in the fiction of many African-American writers including the celebrated Morrison. If Morrison would accept a label at all, undoubtedly she would be more comfortable with Walker's term "womanist" than the term "feminist." Everywhere in her writing, Morrison rejects the impact of the Feminist movement. In one of her interviews, Morrison was asked if the Feminist movement influenced the portrayal and creation of her characters. Morrison's reply to this question was: "not yet. Not Yet" (Jones, Bessie W. and Audrey L Vinson 184). Like many African-American women, Morrison has found the Feminist movement inadequate to deal with the problems of the majority of African-American women. She views the Feminist movement with disinterest, and outspokenly declares that it has played no part in her consciousness, is irrelevant to her, and is simply not part of her reality. Part of Morrison's problem with the Feminist movement is that it has been controlled by the ideologies of upper-middle-class white women. As she puts it:

The early image of women's lib was of an elitist organization made up of upper-middle-class women with the concerns of that class (the percentage of women in professional fields, etc.) and not paying much attention to the problems of most black women, which are not in getting into the labor force but in being upgraded in it, not in getting into medical school but in getting adult education, not in how to

exercise freedom from ‘ the head of the house’ but in how to be head of the household. (“Women’s Lib” 16)

According to Morrison, and in this she is similar to many other womanists, the Radical Feminist movement has failed to address the main issues of African-American women: racism, poverty, and class. For Morrison the experience of African-American women is entirely different from that of whites, and as such, the Feminist movement lacks the ingenuity to deal with their problems. She argues that the experience of African-American women in America, since the time of slavery, has gained them the rights that white women fight for: equality with men in working outside the house. In her interview with Lester, Morrison says:

Black women are much more suited to aggressiveness in the mode that feminists are recommending, because they have always been both mother and laborer, and the history of black women in the States is an extremely painful and unattractive one...we think of slave women as women in the house, but they were not, most of them worked in the field along with the men. They were required to do physical labor in competition with them, so that their relations with each other turned out to be more comradeship than male dominance/ female subordination. (48-49)

Morrison argues that African-American women’s experience outside the house, as a result of the poor economic situations of their life, has not pushed them to declare their enmity of African-American men, but to form instead a gender alliance to fight the racism they are encountering in their society. It leads them to think that

gender solidarity must come second to race solidarity, a belief confirmed in Morrison's views regarding African-American men. She says, "[c]ontemporary hostility to men is bothersome to me. Not that they are not deserving of criticism and contempt, but I don't want a freedom that depends largely on somebody else being on his knees" (Koenen 73).

Unlike radical feminists, Morrison views the relationship between African-American men and women as equal, rather than as "male dominance/female subordination." Morrison, unlike radical feminists, views "comradeship between men and women in the marriages of my grandparents, and of my mother and my father" (McKay 140-141). It is an ideal relationship between African-American men and women where both are working for the best of the whole community. Both African-American men and women, as Morrison says,

[t]o take care of one another...they worked with each other. Sometimes they complained about things, but you always knew that there was some central thing that was bigger than they were, that they were doing. It has to do with raising children, with being morally coherent people. (Koenen 72-73)

Like many womanist writers, Morrison considers the history of slavery as one of the main factors that contributes to the emergence of this special relationship between African-American men and women. Morrison supports this relationship, and makes clear how it should be based on love and cooperation rather than hatred and enmity. Unlike radical

feminists, who reject love relationships between men and women and who view such relationships as a means of male domination, Morrison values love between men and women. In one of her interviews, Morrison confirms that “being in love with somebody, it’s such a fine, fine feeling. It just turns everything up so nicely” (Naylor 195). Moreover, Morrison argues that love relationships between women could also be established, but they should not be interpreted as lesbian relationships. She cautions, “if you have a friend that you love somebody will think that you are lesbian or homosexual” (Koenen 73). As a consequence, Morrison insists that radical feminism, by emphasizing gender issues and ignoring African-American women’s concerns, lost its validity and its relationship with the reality of the African-American woman, and as such, it has been irrelevant to her. In this, Morrison is similar to many African-American women. hooks, for instance, has attacked the white women who dominate feminist discourse today on the basis that they “rarely question whether or not their perspectives on women’s reality is true to the lived experiences of women as a collective group. Nor are they are aware of the extent to which their perspectives reflect race and class biases” (3).

Morrison, moreover, expresses her dissatisfaction with the Radical Feminist movement on a wider base: it fails to address the issues and problems of other ethnic minorities. By ignoring minorities, the Radical Feminist movement has lost its credibility in the eyes of Morrison. She admits in her interview with Lester that:

Feminism followed the civil rights movement, so that the energies began to be turned away from the liberation of black and minority peoples into the women's movement, and it put black women in a peculiar position of having to make choices that were fraudulent: to work for the black movement OR feminism. (52)

Morrison is keen to make a difference between the objectives of both African-American women and radical feminism, and points out that belonging to one has meant contradicting the values of the other. According to Morrison, African Americans' objectives are concerned with wider issues such as the liberation of African-American people, male and female alike, while radical feminists are only concerned with the liberation of a small sector of society. In this Morrison fulfills Walker's definition of a womanist, as someone who, while she "appreciates and prefers women's culture," is "committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female" (xi). Morrison, like Walker, believes in the womanist holistic and global message. As she once declared in an interview: "It seems hopeless if we can't bridge the abysses you see between sexes, classes, and races" (Angelo 257).

Moreover, Morrison herself conforms to Ogunyemi's definition of a womanist in her celebration of the rich history of African Americans. According to Ogunyemi, "womanists explore past and present connections between black America and black Africa" (242). Morrison's novels are full of characters who are proud of being African Americans and from Africa. Throughout her writings, Morrison is interested

in presenting and introducing her ancestors. According to Morrison, “these ancestors are not just parents, they are sort of timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom” (“Rootedness” 343). Later on in the same article, Morrison emphasizes the importance of the presence of the ancestors:

The presence or absence of that [ancestor] figure determined the success or the happiness of the character. It was the absence of the ancestor that was frightening, that was threatening, and it caused huge destruction and disarray in the work itself. That the solace comes... [from] this person who represented this ancestor. (“Rootedness” 343)

Conclusion

To sum up, as a womanist Morrison struggles to empower African-American women, who have historically suffered oppression because of both race and gender. Morrison’s self-conscious concern with these issues stems from her desire to correct the wrongs which have been historically directed against African-American women. Morrison’s struggle started on two fronts: politically, with her desire to end the social oppression by the dominant white culture over her own people; and culturally, by her self-conscious interest in and celebration of the values, beliefs, ideas and traditions of her African-American community.

Morrison reveres African-American women to the extent that her “life seems to be dominated by information

about Black women. They were the culture bearers, and they told us [children] what to do” (McKay 140). Morrison’s interest in depicting the daily struggle of African-American women makes her a womanist writer. As a womanist, Morrison considers her writing as a means to enlighten African Americans in general and African-American woman in particular. Morrison directs her work to subject matters previously marginalized in literature- African-American women and their worlds. No doubt Morrison would echo what hooks says:

Reading fictional narratives where black female characters break through silences to speak the truth of their lives, to give testimony, has helped individual black women to take the risk to openly share the painful experiences. (Hooks, *Sisters* 25)

As an African-American woman writer, Morrison has been successful in expressing and recording, in Mary Helen Washington words,

The thoughts, words, feelings, and deeds of black women, experiences that make the realities of being black in America look very different from what men have written. In this tradition, women talk to women. Their relationships with women are vital to their growth and well being. (xxi)

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