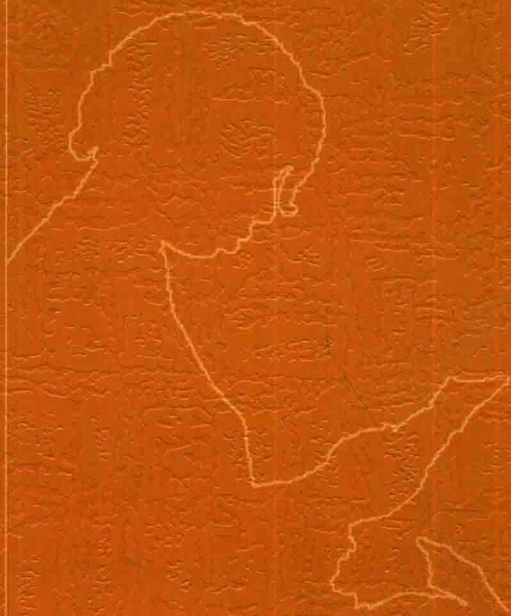


西北民族大学重点学术著作资助项目



A Study of Alice Walker's Novels

艾丽斯·沃克小说研究

水彩琴 著

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Preface

Alice Walker is one of the most remarkable Afro-American women writers in the contemporary American literature. She is not only remembered as the first Afro-American woman Pulitzer Prize winner for fiction but also well known for her promotion of the womanist philosophy and her pursuit of the womanist ideal in both literary writing and social activism. It is a constant theme of her writing and life to strive for a warm, harmonious world, where all humans—male and female, and white and colored—enjoy liberty, equality, independence, and brotherhood, where humankind and every creature in nature coexist equally and peacefully. The culmination of her literary career is marked by *The Color Purple*, her third novel, which is acknowledged as one of the classics in the literary world.

As an Afro-American woman intellectual, Walker first and foremost works as a spokesperson for black women, who are oppressed by whites—male and female—and by black men as well. She has been participating in varied social activities to protest against racism and sexism, and striving for liberty and equality of black women and black people as a whole. In her literary works, she exposes the injustice and sufferings inflicted upon black women in both familial and public lives so as to arouse their consciousness of rebellion and independence on the one hand. On the other hand, she presents the distortion and dehumanization of black men resulting from the white supremacism and the consequent black androcentrism so as to correct their understanding of manhood and awaken their sense of responsibility for justice and equality in the black community. Accordingly, Walker theorized womanism, whose main idea consists of anti-sexism and antiracism,

whose emphasis is put on the unity and solidarity of men and women within black communities, and whose ultimate goal is the spiritual survival of black people, male and female.

Walker is a responsible writer with passion and compassion, and an advocate for all underprivileged people. She is dedicated to preserving the rights of children, women, ethnic minorities, and peoples of the third world, and is involved in such nonviolent social protests as anti-war demonstrations and antinuclear movements, which are necessary for the survival of the planet and everyone on it. Her works (especially the later ones) are concerned with the global issues like animal rights, lesbianism, colonialism, nuclear issues, and environmental destruction. As a matter of course, Walker becomes a womanist cosmopolitanist in her later career, be it in social activism or literary writing. Her womanist scope is extended to encompass not just the whole human world but also the natural world. She is shifting to the improvement of humans' relationships with animals, plants and intangible spirits, and to the further involvement with global issues, and striving for a womanist utopia, where people of all races and colors live harmoniously like flowers of different kinds growing and blooming in "our mothers' gardens," where humankind and nature coexist in a peaceful and mutually beneficial way.

Walker is an Afro-American writer with a strong sense of cultural identity. She takes it as her duty to inherit and claim the black culture, the black folklore in particular. She treasures the black cultural heritage and respects the literary predecessors like Zora Neale Hurston in the Afro-American literature, whose works show great admiration for blackness and the black folklore. She not only discovered Hurston's unmarked grave and bought a modest headstone for the gravesite, but also restores Hurston's works to the reading public from oblivion. With Hurston's inspiration and influence, Walker has her fiction deeply rooted in a matrilineal inheritance, and thus becomes Hurston's devoted follower. As a womanist, she pursues equality and harmony between different races but never advocates obliterating ethnic cultures. For Walker, only when people of different races and colors keep their own unique cultures can the human world become thriving and

prosperous like a garden of flowers.

To make a long story short, womanism is the quintessence of Walker's philosophy and lifetime pursuit. Its highest end is the equality and harmony of the entire human race, and the peaceful coexistence of humankind and nature. Walker has been striving for the end not simply through social activism but also through literary creation. Her works have incarnated the whole process of her pursuit of the womanist ideal, which has in turn become the soul of her literary writing.

Walker is a versatile and voluminous writer. Among her thirty-nine books, written in the literary forms like fiction, non-fiction, poetry, and essays, the seven novels are the most representative in betraying the author's trace of thought. However, the existing data show that the academic world either choose one (mostly *The Color Purple*) or two or sometimes three of them (one of which is surely *The Color Purple*) to explore its/their themes, characterizations, narrative devices, and linguistic features, or make a comparison between Walker's novel-writing (with *The Color Purple* as the only selected text) and that of such Afro-American writers as Toni Morrison and Zora Neale Hurston to excavate the commonality in any given aspect. Scholars have largely focused on the Pulitzer prize-winning book. The other novels (especially *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, *Meridian*, *The Temple of My Familiar*, and *Possessing the Secret of Joy*) have not received the deserving attention from the critical world. Therefore the present book, *A Study of Alice Walker's Novels*, attempts to make a thematic study of all the seven novels, reveal the leading theme throughout these works, and trace the development of the author's philosophy.

The book consists of seven chapters, referring to the biographical sketch, the literature review, the theoretical presentation, and the text analysis. Except that the text analysis takes up four chapters, each of the other three forms one separate chapter. The book begins with the biographical sketch, or, to be specific, a profile of Alice Walker. Following a short sketch of her life, from family background through school education to social activism, is a brief introduction to

her professional career, including the early academic accumulation and the lifetime literary creation. Ending up with a summary of her contribution to the American literature, the first chapter gives a rough but comprehensive account of Alice Walker's personal life, literary achievements, and social struggle.

Chapter II makes a literature review and presents a survey of the critical responses to Walker's novels. As one of the hot topics in the American literature, Walker's works have gained wide attention from both Western (American in particular) and Chinese scholars. The chapter therefore falls into two sections, handling the Western responses and the Chinese respectively. The former occupy much more space only because the native studies are more systematic and authoritative. The literature research reveals that the present criticism and reviews are mostly concentrated on Walker's early novels—*The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, *Meridian*, and *The Color Purple*, particularly the third one—and that, among the later ones (*The Temple of My Familiar*, *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, *By the Light of My Father's Smile*, and *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart*), the scholars appear to be most interested in *By the Light of My Father's Smile*, which is praised as Walker's second greatest novel, only next to *The Color Purple*. The visible unevenness in the existing research makes it a necessary and worthwhile undertaking to study all the seven novels as a whole from a given perspective.

Chapter III is an overview of womanism as a theory. To start with, it offers a conceptual distinction of womanism from feminism and black feminism, identifying its connections with and differences from them. Then it moves on to verify the emergence of womanism. Based on the sufficient information about the social-intellectual contexts, Walker's contribution (i. e., the putting-forward of womanism) is introduced and underscored. The focus of this chapter is put on the development of womanism, which is traced from the rudiments to the improvement and the final formation of the principles, whose heart is the ultimate goal of the "survival and wholeness of entire people" and the concern with sexism and racism. (A. Walker, 1983: xi)

The text analysis is the main part of the book, encompassing the succeeding

chapters. Chapter IV centers on the elucidation of Walker's womanist ideology implied in the male images in her first three novels. This chapter is subdivided into two sections. Through an analysis of the impact of Eurocentrism and androcentrism (i. e. , the effect of racism and sexism) on the shaping of black male stereotypes, the first section concentratedly explores the limitations of the black male stereotypes and their detrimental effect on the life of black females and the black race as a whole, and thus naturally emphasizes the urgency and hardship for black men to undergo a self-healing change to reach the womanist goal of the spiritual survival. In the second section, the focus directly falls on the long and hard struggle of the stereotypical black men for self-redemption and self-improvement. This section examines how these black male characters strive to shake off the confines of supremacist patriarchy, redefine their notion of manhood, regain their masculinity and humanity, and realize their regeneration in their equal and friendly relationship with other blacks (particularly black women) and even whites. Thus it sums up that the black male characters in Walker's first three novels either achieve their spiritual survival or possess the potential for such survival. They well express the author's womanist ideology.

The topic of the fifth chapter is shifted to black women's struggle to attain their liberty and spiritual survival. The discussion centers around the major female characters in all Walker's novels except the first, to reveal the special power of the black women's alliance in their endeavor to destroy the racial and patriarchal hegemony. The selected texts come down to two kinds of women's alliance, one based on sisterhood and the other lesbianism. Accordingly, this chapter contains two sections. The first section chiefly interprets *The Color Purple* and *By the Light of My Father's Smile*, and analyzes how lesbianism, as a female subversive force, overturns the male dominance in sexual relations. The black lesbianism is of political significance in Walker's womanist texts. It spans the whole spectrum of women's friendship and sisterly solidarity and thus subverts the established cultural narratives (i. e. , masculine cultural narratives) of femininity and desire. The second section explains how sisterhood serves as an effective way to unite

black women and support them in their struggle for independence and liberation. The supportive texts include *Meridian*, *The Color Purple*, *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, *By the Light of My Father's Smile* and *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart*. By dissecting the unique manifestation of the black women's alliance, the chapter tends to lay bare the common underlying aim of Walker's writing to awaken black women's self consciousness and stimulate their fighting spirit.

Chapter VI discusses about humanity and harmony in Walker's later works, including *The Temple of My Familiar*, *By the Light of My Father's Smile* and *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart*. It falls into three sections, each dealing with one novel. While the first and third sections place more emphasis on harmony inherent in the novels, the second section puts more concentration on the theme of humanity in *By the Light of My Father's Smile*, though both themes are shared by the three novels. Through analyzing the relationships between men and women, between whites and the colored, and between humankind and nature in these selected works, the chapter tends to demonstrate that the author attempts to incorporate her different 'isms in literary writing so as to highlight her ideal of cosmopolitanism. Walker has been committed to extending and perfecting her womanism, whose goal is now not simply to transcend binary oppositions of male and female, and of white and colored (esp. black), but to attain universal equality and harmony as well. Her writing is dedicated to blurring the boundaries between genders, among races, and even across all species so that her womanism develops into cosmopolitanism.

Instead of a close reading of the selected novels separately, Chapter VII branches out into a comparative study of Walker's and Hurston's works, which is instrumental in understanding Walker better. As a faithful follower of Zora Neale Hurston, Walker plays an important role in transmitting the ethnic culture. Her works, like Hurston's, are deeply rooted in the black folk culture. The abundant raw materials of the black folklore in their works eloquently prove the common bond between the two great Afro-American women writers. This chapter is split up into four sections, according to the different categories—the literary, the lin-

guistic, the religious, and the artistic—of the folkloric materials in the authors' works, each section focusing on one category. Through comparing Walker's fiction with Hurston's in the four aspects, it concludes that Walker not simply echoes but also revises Hurston in both language and text, and, consequently, has developed a strong bond with Hurston in literary writing. She is thus the deserved inheritor of Hurston's theme and literary craftsmanship, and of the Afro-American women's literature in general.

A Study of Alice Walker's Novels, taking womanism as the key, attempts to do a systematic and comprehensive research on the novels from the thematic perspective. It struggles to achieve logic and coherence within chapters and from cover to cover, notwithstanding its obvious digression and discontinuity. Regardless of the flaws and errors, the book is intended to contribute to Alice Walker studies and spice up the criticism on the author's novels. In this sense, it is worth reading, correcting, and criticizing. Any correction, criticism or comment is appreciated and of great value, and will be welcomed.

Shui Caiqin

Contents

Preface	(1)
Chapter I “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens”: Alice Walker’s Activism and Writing	(1)
1.1 Striving for the Womanist Ideal	(2)
1.2 “Living by the Word”	(8)
1.3 Striving through the Word	(16)
Chapter II Beyond Measure: Critical Responses to Alice Walker’s Novels	(20)
2.1 Researches in the Western World	(20)
2.2 Researches in China	(42)
Chapter III From Lavender to Purple: The Formation of the Womanist Theory	(44)
3.1 Womanism, and Feminism and Black Feminism	(45)
3.2 The Emergence of Womanism	(47)
3.3 Womanist Theory	(52)
Chapter IV In Pursuit of Manhood and Humanity: The Transformation of the Male Images	(59)
4.1 The Limitations of the Stereotypes of Black Males	(61)

- 4.2 The Process of Self-improvement: Shaking off the Confines of
Supremacist Patriarchy (85)

Chapter V Over the Racial and Patriarchal Hegemony: Lesbianism

and Sisterhood within Black Women (113)

- 5.1 Lesbianism: The Sexual Subversion of the Male Dominance (114)
- 5.2 Sisterhood: The Possibility of Black Women's Autonomy (138)

Chapter VI Toward Cosmopolitanism: Humanity and

Harmony in the Later Novels (186)

- 6.1 The Pursuit of Harmonious Union in *The Temple of My
Familiar* (187)
- 6.2 The Humanistic Concern in *By the Light of My Father's
Smile* (226)
- 6.3 The Quest for Harmony in *Now Is the Time to Open Your
Heart* (258)

Chapter VII Within the Black Folklore: The Common Bond

between Hurston and Walker (284)

- 7.1 The Literary Folkloric Materials in Hurston's and Walker's
Fiction (287)
- 7.2 The Linguistic Folkloric Materials in Hurston's and Walker's
Fiction (300)
- 7.3 The Religious Folkloric Materials in Hurston's and Walker's
Fiction (314)
- 7.4 The Artistic Folkloric Materials in Hurston's and Walker's
Fiction (330)

Bibliography	(344)
Appendix I	(359)
Appendix II	(361)
Afterword	(362)

Chapter I “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens” : Alice Walker’s Activism and Writing

In my development as a human being and as a writer, I have been, it seems to me, extremely blessed, even while complaining. Wherever I have knocked, a door has opened. Wherever I have wondered, a path has appeared. I have been helped, supported, encouraged, and nurtured by people of all races, colors, and dreams; and I have, to the best of my ability, returned help, support, encouragement, and nurture. This receiving, returning, or passing on has been one of the most amazing, joyous, and continuous experiences of my life. (A. Walker, 1983: xviii)

Admittedly, Alice Walker went through quite a few unfortunate experiences like the shooting that blinded her right eye, the pregnancy that almost led to her suicidal, the divorce, her daughter’s estrangement, and the like. She managed to walk away each time largely because of those kind-hearted people in her life, to whom her heart has been swelling with gratitude, as is depicted in the emotional statement above. Life has taught Walker that receiving and returning bring light, warmth, and happiness to each individual, male or female, white or colored. Only when people of different colors and races care for each other and help each other can the world develop equal and harmonious relationships between individuals, communities, or ethnic groups. Hence, as a writer and activist, Walker not simply shows great concern for the sexual and racial issues in her literary writing and social activism but also has put forward and elaborated her womanist philosophy, which stresses the commitment to “survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female.” (A. Walker, 1983: xi, *italics original*) Meanwhile she

ceaselessly extends her womanist scope to such global issues as animal rights, homosexuality, and environmental destruction, and has been persistently striving for her womanist utopia, where not only people of all races and colors live harmoniously just like flowers of different kinds growing and blooming in "our mothers' gardens" but also humankind and nature coexist in a peaceful and mutually beneficial way. What Walker has done and is doing is attributed to the grateful heart and her belief in a bright future. In other words, out of gratitude Walker is "in search of our mothers' gardens" in her life through literary writing and social activism.

1.1 Striving for the Womanist Ideal

It is not exaggerated to say that Walker's life is one of struggle, a struggle for her own survival and for the "survival and wholeness" of all the underclass. On the one hand, as a girl from a poor sharecroppers' family, Walker got her chance to go to school through her mother's struggle with the landlord; and as a daughter in the family, she not just witnessed the violence and oppression inflicted upon her mother and sisters by her father, and at times, by her brothers (except one), who were all male chauvinists, but also was a victim herself. On the other hand, studying away from home and coming into contact with whites, Walker experienced and witnessed various injustice and inequality in the American society, both inside and outside colleges. She began understanding her own suffering in the social context and came to realize her duty as a contemporary intellectual. She eventually found her role as a social activist or spokeswoman for the underclass, blacks and black women in particular. Walker has been participating in various protests against social injustice and struggles for sexual, racial, and political equality. She is devoted to building "our mothers' gardens," viz., striving for her womanist ideal.

1.1.1 Walker's Parentage and Early years

Alice Malsenior Walker, the eighth and last child of Willie Lee Walker and

Millie Tallulah (Grant) Walker, was born in Eatonton, Georgia on February 9, 1944. Her parents were both sharecroppers and earned only \$300 a year from sharecropping and dairy farming. Before the age of four, little Alice went with her parents to the fields and played while they planted, weeded and picked their crops, nobody looking after her on weekdays. Her brothers also worked in the fields and helped milk cows every morning and afternoon. Her father never enjoyed a vacation in his life. Her mother had to work as a maid, while free from farm work, to supplement the family income. Living under Jim Crow Laws, Mrs. Walker had struggles with her landlord who expected the children to work in the fields rather than go to school. She managed to send all her children to school. Alice Walker began her schooling at four, a year ahead of schedule, and enjoyed the school life very much partly because of her first teacher, Mrs. Reynolds. She studied hard with her, though she was just a little girl, and became one of the brightest students in the school. The school life nurtured Alice to grow like one of the flowers in her mother's garden.

Good times never last long. In 1952, the Walkers moved to a farm in a neighboring county, and little Alice, along with her sisters and brothers, was enrolled in a local school. But just before the new term began, her right eye was accidentally wounded in a game by one of her brothers with a bb gun. Unable to afford a car to get her to a doctor's office, her father tried a home remedy and thus missed the best treatment time. When Alice was brought to a physician a week later, a disfiguring layer of scar tissue had already formed over her eye, which was not removed until six years later. In the new school the wounded Alice was teased by the other students and her grades suffered. Therefore her parents were forced to send her back to the old school in Eatonton and let her live with her grandparents there. Every weekend when she came back to her parents, they, to solace the poor girl with the injured eye, would sit around the fireplace telling wondrous stories about her father's great-great-great grandmother Mary Poole and her mother's grandmother Tallulah, and some other stories that had been passed down in the family for generations. When Alice grew up, she learn-

ed that these tales could be traced all the way back to Africa and to Native American tribes.

Self-conscious and painfully shy, Alice felt like an outcast and turned for solace to reading and to writing poetry. At the age of fourteen she went to Boston to visit her favorite brother, who persuaded her to go to a hospital for an eye operation. Consequently, the scar tissue was removed although she remained blind in the right eye. Back to Eatonton, Alice became self-confident. She began wondering what she would be in future and got the answer quite by accident: on Wednesday, October 19, 1960, when she learned about Martin Luther King, Jr. and his cause on the television, "as in a fairy tale, my (Alice's) soul was stirred by the meaning for me of his (King's) mission—at the time he was being rather ignominiously dumped into a police van for having led a protest march in Alabama—and I fell in love with the sober and determined face of the (Civil Rights) Movement," became interested in the Movement, and was suddenly awakened to her responsibility and mission as a contemporary black. (124)

Walker graduated from high school in the spring of 1961, honored as valedictorian and voted as the most popular girl in the school. Due to the eye injury, she could apply for a scholarship for handicapped students, which enabled her to go to Spelman College, an institution for black girls in Atlanta. She packed to leave for Spelman College in August 1961, with her mother's special gifts—a suitcase, a sewing machine and a typewriter. As Minnie Walker explained it, each of the gifts bore one of the mother's expectations of the daughter: the suitcase was for independence, the sewing machine for self-sufficiency and the typewriter for creativity. Evidently, as a daughter, Alice fulfilled her mother's wish.

1.1.2 Walker's College Life and Social Activism

On the bus to Atlanta, Alice Walker took a front seat which was reserved for whites only and was ordered to move. She did move but it was in those seconds of moving that she became determined to bring an end to the racial segregation and discrimination. She arrived in Atlanta just at the moment of demonstrations led by