

## Themes of Alice Walker's Poetry

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### ABSTRACT

Alice walker, the prominent figure in African American literature, has the Midas touch in different genres of literature. Her versatility is evident as she shines as a novelist, short-story writer, poet, essayist, critic and editor. She knitted together art with activism and never wanted to keep aloof from the sour experiences of reality. Her protest through words and deeds were for the downtrodden and the marginalized.

Walker's poetry is a marvelous composition, which unveils personal meditations on depression, isolation, pregnancy and public calls for revolution for women and people of colour. But her poetry is admired for its ability to tap into universal truths and emotions common to all people regardless of colour or gender. The simple form and diction is blended with contemporary social issues so as to maintain an organic whole for her poetry.

The poems shower vehement criticism on the social evils and exhort men to act against the atrocities prevailed in the society. The blend of feminism is evident in her poems and she applies the word "Wasichu" to address who is racist, sexist, classist and environmentally insensitive. Walker's poetry happens to be revolutionary and she thinks that art can bring changes in the society. According to her, art is life, which can enforce the weak and challenge the atrocities. The arms race and bloodshed in the name of defense and security demolishes the life and property of innocent men.

The language of her poetry is simple and vivid that the readers can get the exact picture in their mind. The inner voices of man and the chaos of the outside world are marvelously depicted in her poems. The poetry of Alice Walker is relevant in the modern world which is devoid of love and makes streams of blood and mounds of corpses. Her poems protest against the evils and pervade the fragrance of peace and harmony.

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### 1. Introduction

African American literature is blessed with the renowned versatile genius, Alice Walker, who with her characteristic elegance, made the unheard voices of the marginalized and downtrodden audible to the outside world. Her versatility is evident as different genres of literature got her Midas touch. She gave birth to novels, poems and short stories, which portrayed real life in all its manifestations. Being a true writer she was unwilling to escape from the hard reality and thus she knitted art with activism and fought with words and deeds for the weaker sections of the society.

Though she is known for her epoch making novel *The Color Purple*, her poetry is a marvelous composition of personal meditations of depression, isolation, pregnancy and public call for the empowerment of women and people of colour. But the portrayal of universal truths and emotions are common to all irrespective of colour or gender. Her poetry shower vehement criticism on the social evils and exhorted man to act against the atrocities prevailed in the society. Experts say: "the true empathy Alice walker has for the oppressed woman comes through all her writings...." (Washington 88).

### 2. Walker's Poems

Walker's attitude towards poetry is well depicted in her poem *I Said to Poetry*. The poem is an imaginary conversation

with personified Poetry. The poem says that a writer cannot escape from writing if he/she is true to her soul. Through the poem Walker expresses that a poet cannot finish with poetry as the emotions and feeling will suffocate and will be forced to write. It is only through poetry one can feel and imagine. It is clear as the Poetry tells her:

...But think about the time  
you saw the moon  
over that small canyon  
that you liked so much better  
that the grand one—and how surprised you were  
that the moon light was green  
and you still had  
one good eye  
to see that  
Think of that.(27-35)

Poetry, for her, is nothing other than her inner mind speaking to her. Other than poetry she finds refuge in religion as she says "I'll join the church".

Realism is an indispensable part of Walker's poetry. According to her a poet cannot be blind towards the violence in the society. He / she cannot simply enjoy the beauty of nature. The beauty of the nature can be enjoyed if there is peace and harmony in the world. In a world of chaos one cannot be romantic. Walker realizes that contemporary world is full of

violence and chaos where the poor are pierced by the rich and mighty.

Walker's protest against the immoral life of the Western world and arms race is evident in her poems. The poem *Thousands of Feet below You* delineates the heart rending plight of a boy in a war front:

Thousands of feet  
Below you  
There is a small  
Boy  
Running from  
Your bombs. (1-6)

The poem is relevant in the modern world, where the weak and marginalized are butchered by the mighty. The contemporary world is witnessing human rights violations in the invasions of Iraq, Afghanistan, Palestine and Sri Lanka, in the name of defense and security. The innocent people are butchered and those who are left with life are good for nothing.

In the line "Now, driven, / You have shattered/ His bones"(17-19), the shattering of bones means the utter demolition of the body as there is no symbol for the existence of the human being in this world. The 'boy' is the central character in the poem. It symbolizes that the conquerors aimed at destroying the younger generation so as to hinder the development of a specific ethnic group. It is a fact that in all the wars and conflicts children are killed in plenty. It means that the conquerors want the group to be extinct.

Gerry Bates says:

Alice Walker adheres to similar themes in her writing. In her Personal life she is an activist; her protest activity spills over into her creative works. Her concerns are the environment, healthcare women's issues and global affairs. She manages to make these protests into her creative forms. (45)

The voice for the marginalized is clear in the last line of the poem

*Set A Place for Him*. She wanted to find a rescue for the marginalized and weak in the world so as to invite the attention of the people. According to her art is life. She thinks that art can bring changes in the society. She attacks the immorality and obscenity prevailing in the Western society. The values and ethics are far away from the Western culture according to her. In the poem *Gray* she blames the western attitude towards love. Love, a divine feeling, is materialized by the West. It had changed to a sensual feeling accompanied with lust in the modern concept. The poem *Gray* is an imaginary conversation with her friend.

'How long does it take you to love someone?'  
I ask her  
'A hot second' she replies.  
'And how long do you love them?'  
'Oh, any where up to several months'

'And how long does it take you  
to get over loving them?'  
'Three weeks', she said, 'tops'.(10-17)

The poem is relevant in the modern culture which gives little importance to divine love. Love that exists in the modern world is material love or the love for the body. Immortal love has disappeared from the world.

The poem *You Too Can Look, Smell, Dress, Act This Way* attacks the modern women whose culture and dress code seems to be obscene and vulgar. She compares the modern women with the rustic Jane Goodall who is untouched by make up or trimming. Walker tears the faulty face of modern women who wanted to hide themselves in make up and artificiality. The attitude of the commercialized world is well portrayed in the poem. Pamela. A. Smith says: --- "Walker's poems are womanist, whatever their subject--- are by their very nature ecowomanist".

The poem is relevant in the modern society, where the world had an affinity to copy the Western Culture. The third world is moving away from their own culture and is living with the borrowed culture. It is a great pity that the Indian culture is lost and had borrowed the Western Culture which is devoid of ethics and values.

The blend of eco-criticism is evident in her poem *We Have a Beautiful Mother* as she attacks the exploitative mind of modern man, which trespasses to the nature disturbing its harmony and peace. She considers earth as her mother in the lines:

We have a beautiful Mother  
Her green lap  
Immense  
Her brown embrace  
Eternal  
Her blue body  
everything  
we know.(23-30)

The poem is relevant in the contemporary world, where man is struggling to live in global warming and natural catastrophe as a result of his exploitative mind towards nature.

### 3. Conclusion

Feminism plays an important part in the early poems of Walker. The poetry collection *Once* is personal which unveils the problems of women in the society. Thus, through her poetry she wishes to create a revolution in the society. Her art and activism in a number of great causes of latter twentieth century -racial justice, women rights, earth saving- are expressions of her commitments to mutuality, sensuality, and freedom. Her poetry, by mixing reality with protest, conquers the hearts of millions of readers and makes them to think and act.

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