

Feminism and Womanism (A Comparative Analysis)



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Abstract

Feminism as a movement began in the western world for the rights of women in various social, economic, political and domestic fronts. Feminism was never restricted to just one straight line of thought and movement in one particular direction but it became a movement that voiced the multiple issues with which women had been fighting for centuries. Later, with women emerging as writers and readers of literature they began to talk about the absence of women writers from literary canons and about the content and style of women writing, and terms like 'gynocriticism' and 'écriture feminine' started creating waves. Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* is one of the most critically admired essays. Virginia Woolf had delivered two lectures in October 1928 which were later shaped into the literary text. The essay talks about 'space' needed for women, physical space in the house as well as the literary space that had been for years controlled and dominated by male writers. However, feminism though it seemed to represent the views of women universally but there were certain pockets that were left unattended and consequently were heard voices of disagreement that feminism was actually not fulfilling the purpose of all women, like black women. Thus, came into the literary scenario the voices of black women who came up with the coinage 'Womanism'. Alice Walker first used the term 'womanist' in a short story 'Coming Apart' in 1979. 'Womanism' can be understood as a more comprehensive term, a theoretical framework that incorporates not just white women but black women with their sufferings and struggles as well.

The present paper intends to study the two movements 'Feminism' and 'Womanism' in the light of Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* and Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*.

Keywords: Feminism, Womanism, Space, Male Dominated, Black, Gynocriticism, Ecriture Feminine.

Introduction

In her essay *A Room of One's Own* Virginia Woolf points out that, women are generally sidelined and occupy marginal positions in society. She posits questions like "Why did men drink wine and women water? Why was one sex so prosperous and the other so poor? What effect has poverty on fiction? What conditions are necessary for the creation of works of art?" (Chapter Two). The answers to these questions are necessary so as to trace the trajectory of women in literature. Woolf can be seen as the representative of feminism, a feminist. Walker as a womanist, asks:

Did you have a genius of a great-great-grandmother who died under some ignorant and depraved white overseer's lash? Or was she required to bake biscuits for a lazy backwater tramp, when she cried out in her soul to paint watercolors of sunsets, or the rain falling on the green and peaceful pasture-lands? Or was her body broken and forced to bear children (who were more often than not sold away from her) – eight, ten, fifteen, twenty children – when her one joy was the thought of modeling heroic figures of rebellion, in stone or clay? (Walker, 402-03)

The fine line that separates 'feminism' from 'womanism' or to put it in other words, the element that distinguishes the two is the factor of racism. It could be possible that white women claim that when they talked about women they talked about all women, but then Walker insists that feminism did not incorporate black women issues.

Aim of the Study

The purpose of this study is to bring out the points of distinction that exist between the two movements 'feminism' and 'womanism' through

their precursors Virginia Woolf and Alice Walker respectively. When Walker says that womanism is to feminism as purple is to lavender what is it that she means, and how womanism becomes a more comprehensive movement, an umbrella which covers feminism in its circumference.

Review of Literature

The paper has been based on the two essays by two strong thinkers and women writers: Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* and Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*. A great experimenter and an explorer of the stream of consciousness technique, Virginia Woolf is a stalwart in the realm of English Literature. Novels like *To the Lighthouse* and *Mrs Dalloway* show her genius as a writer. In her article "An Introduction to *A Room of One's Own*", (published in May, 2016), Rachael Bowlby, discusses how Virginia Woolf addresses important feminist issues like those of education, sexuality and gender values. Similarly, Alice Walker is an American novelist, short story writer, poet and activist. Famous for her novel *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker won Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and National Book Award. In her short story *Coming Apart*, Walker coins the term 'womanism' and explains the reason and the root of its origin. Patricia Waugh's *Literary Theory and Criticism*, has a chapter on *Feminisms* by Fiona Tolan brings out very concisely a brief history and key features and terms which feminism talked about. It also speaks about the 'voices of dissent' like those of black women who did not unanimously agree that feminism was completely fulfilling all issues of all women. In their recent article "Alice Walker's *Womanism: Perspectives Past and Present*", Aleksandra Izgarjan and Slobodanka Markov, discuss how womanism advocates inclusiveness instead of exclusiveness, whether it is related to race, class or gender.

Virginia Woolf: A Room of One's Own

Women face several constraints and the most imposing one is the economic constraint. Since women do not earn, financial dependence becomes the gravest drawback that curbs their movement and their aspirations to become writers. Woolf says that while boys easily get access to formal education, girls never get this opportunity; they are not even allowed to enter libraries. The character of Judith Shakespeare, a creation of Woolf's imagination, exemplifies quite subtly what is so easily disregarded by men and imposed and justified for women that women need no education and that women cannot be creative genius. Judith was equally talented but could not pursue her talent because she was a woman. Judith was confined to her house and was forcibly engaged. When her father wanted to marry her off, she ran away as no one cared for her aspirations. She fails miserably as an actress and is impregnated by an actor-manager. Judith ends up her life by committing suicide.

Woolf asserts that a woman's intellectual capacity is directly proportional to the educational culture of any society when she says in Chapter One, "...I thought of the...shut doors of the library, and I thought how unpleasant it is to be locked out; and I

thought how it is worse perhaps to be locked in; and, thinking of the safety and prosperity of the one sex and of the poverty and insecurity of the other and of the effect of tradition and of the lack of tradition upon the mind of a writer, I thought at last that it was time...". To disallow a woman from entering libraries is like curbing the freedom of their minds and not letting them grow, learn and develop. Woolf states that though men idealize women in fiction but in real life women are subjugated and considered inferior beings. While men are less concerned about restricting the growth of knowledge in women, they were more concerned about preserving their own superiority. "How is he to go on giving judgment, civilizing natives, making laws, writing books, dressing up and speechifying at banquets, unless he can see himself at breakfast and at dinner at least twice the size he really is?" (Chapter Two). Men needed crowns and glory; They needed women as 'inferiors' so that they could emphasize their superiority, as Woolf adds, "That is why Napoleon and Mussolini both insist so emphatically upon the inferiority of women, for if they were not inferior, they would cease to enlarge." (Chapter Two)

There was hardly a 'woman' in literature. It was always an 'image' that performed its robotic task excellently well in projecting one-sided portrayals and the so-called 'heroines' were looked at in awe by ordinary women readers who wanted destinies just like them. Woolf remarks that women were portrayed by men as individuals never lacking in personality and character. "Indeed, if woman had no existence save in the fiction written by men, one would imagine her a person of the utmost importance; very various; heroic and mean; splendid and sordid; infinitely beautiful and hideous in the extreme; as great as a man, some think even greater." (Chapter Three) But this is woman in fiction. In reality she was 'locked up, beaten and flung about the room'. In Woolf's own words:

A very queer, composite being thus emerges. Imaginatively she is of the highest importance; practically she is completely insignificant. She pervades poetry from cover to cover; she is all but absent from history. She dominates the lives of kings and conquerors in fiction; in fact she was the slave of any boy whose parents forced a ring upon her finger. Some of the most inspired words, some of the most profound thoughts in literature fall from her lips; in real life she could hardly read, could scarcely spell, and was the property of her husband. (Chapter Three)

This explains that women were never known to the world as 'women told by women'. Women never talked about their own selves, never expressed their mindsets or their reactions to circumstances. All this was etched out by men and women were absurdly learning about women through men, which was strange, misleading and controlled conditioning.

Objectifying women, treating them as possessions, and physically abusing them, at the

same time taking away from them the right to privacy and the right to education are some of the crucial issues against which Woolf raises her voice in her essay. Woolf reasons out that women have not been able to enjoy the leisure of any other work because they are bogged down with pregnancy and child raising. It was impossible for women to earn money and the law denied them the right to possess what money they earned.

Woolf confides that her aunt had left her five hundred pounds a year for her lifetime. For Woolf money was far more important than the vote because Woolf had been earning her livelihood doing odd jobs at "newspapers, by reporting a donkey show here or a wedding there; I had earned a few pounds by addressing envelopes, reading to old ladies, making artificial flowers, teaching the alphabet to small children in a kindergarten. Such were the chief occupations that were open to women before 1918." (Chapter Two) Those five hundred pounds every year made a remarkable impact on Woolf's psyche. She knew that she did not have to struggle for the basic necessities of life like food, clothing and shelter. This had a direct impact on her physically for she did not need to put in a lot of effort for livelihood; and this in turn cast an impact on Woolf's degree of hatred and bitterness towards men. She realized that monetary backing made her confident: "I need not hate any man; he cannot hurt me. I need not flatter any man; he has nothing to give me." (Chapter Two)

Woolf traces the gradual process of emergence of women writers when there was nothing to derive from in the writing history of women. From the poetry of aristocratic and affluent women like Lady Winchelsea to the writings of Margaret of Newcastle who "frittered her time away scribbling nonsense and plunging ever deeper into obscurity and folly". With Mrs Aphra Behn came the turning point in women's writing. "Mrs Behn was a middle-class woman with all the plebeian virtues of humour, vitality and courage; a woman forced by the death of her husband and some unfortunate adventures of her own to make her living by her wits. She had to work on equal terms with men. She made, by working very hard, enough to live on." (Chapter Four) Woolf goes on to talk about Jane Austen, Brontes and George Eliot that established a female way of writing. There came into light 'a woman's sentence' which was quite different from a male voice. She speaks about Mary Carmichael's *Life's Adventure*. Carmichael's style of writing was broken and abrupt and was very different from Jane Austen's. Her depiction of love between women through her statement "Chloe liked Olivia" was not only unconventional and breaking the norms but it was discussing an omission, 'lesbianism' that had never been studied or taken into consideration. "Let us admit in the privacy of our own society that these things sometimes happen. Sometimes women do like women." (Chapter Five) Woolf establishes quite clearly that women have stories to narrate and experiences to share which men don't know about or don't have an understanding of or would not want the world to know about. But by not letting women read and write has been like shutting the doors of

experiences and curbing the richness of minds that would make literature of the world even more fertile.

In Chapter Six, Woolf expresses that there has always been a trend of pitting of one sex against one sex and as happens in private school stage of human existence there are 'sides' and it is a system that one side beats another side and the winning side receives from the hands of the Headmaster a highly ornamental pot. But Woolf believes that there has to be honesty in expression irrespective of what decrees or standards the Headmasters demand or expect: "to submit to the decrees of the measurers the most servile of attitudes. So long as you write what you wish to write, that is all that matters; and whether it matters for ages or only for hours, nobody can say. But to sacrifice a hair of the head of your vision, a shade of its colour, in deference to some Headmaster with a silver pot in his hand or to some professor with a measuring-rod up his sleeve, is the most abject treachery..."

Woolf shows the chain that how breaking one link was enough to keep women down and low, subjugated and subordinate for centuries. The chain could never be utilized by women as they never could get access to the primary links for their establishment as individuals with separate and complete identities. "Intellectual freedom depends upon material things. Poetry depends upon intellectual freedom. And women have always been poor, not for two hundred years merely, but from the beginning of time. Women have had less intellectual freedom than the sons of Athenian slaves. Women, then, have not had a dog's chance of writing poetry. That is why I have laid so much stress on money and a room of one's own." (Chapter Six)

The writer says towards the end, "Now my belief is that this poet who never wrote a word and was buried at the cross-roads still lives. She lives in you and in me, and in many other women who are not here to-night, for they are washing up the dishes and putting the children to bed. But she lives; for great poets do not die; they are continuing presences; they need only the opportunity to walk among us in the flesh." (Chapter Six)

Alice Walker: In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens

Creativity is inborn. Creativity in any individual lies in the being of that person and seeks an expression. Walker asks, "How was the creativity of the black woman kept alive, year after year and century after century, when for most of the years black people have been in America, it was a punishable crime for a black person to read or write? And the freedom to paint, to sculpt, to expand the mind with action did not exist." (Walker, 403) Yet black women 'did not perish in the wilderness' and Walker gives strong reasons for that which even black women did not know about.

Women were treated like slaves and were kept uneducated. Woolf claims that no woman could have had Shakespeare's genius because it was an impossible feat and if ever there was any tint of genius to be seen then it was visible in women who were labeled as 'witches' and 'lunatics' and 'Anonymous', she argues, was most likely a woman.

Woolf asserts that the mind of the artist is quite susceptible to the discouragement and vulnerable to the opinion of others. And women were always discouraged from speaking their minds out. For Woolf it was essential for women to be educated and that they had sitting rooms to themselves. Such facts were also relevant as to how many became mothers before they reached twenty-one and what did they do from morning eight to evening eight. Building up on these necessities and weighing their relevance, Walker takes the argument to another level and gives it a fresh insight. Walker quite subtly states that what would happen of women like Phillis Wheatley, a sickly frail black slave in the 1700s, who owned not even herself and as Walker states "had she been white, would have been easily considered the intellectual superior of all the women and most of the men in the society of her day." (Walker, 404) This way Walker introduces the missing elements in Woolf's essay. In a very polite way she brings to light the grievances of black women that remained untouched by white women and that 'feminism' as a movement (though not deliberately but insensitively) failed to consider a whole community of black women.

In *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, Alice Walker signifies on Virginia Woolf. Laurie McMillan gives the meaning of 'signifying' through Henry Louis Gates explanation that "it is a critical approach with African American roots that enacts repetition with difference. The repetition pays tribute to the precursor writer, while the difference is a way of revising the precursor's story or practice, often exposing its limitations." (McMillan, 113) *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* thus is an essay that discusses the African American women's creative genius that could not be curbed despite the fact that they were put into adverse circumstances and found expression as witnessed in the creative writing of Phillis Wheatley or in the gardening skills of her own mother. Creative expression is necessary, whether it be through writing or through gardening. So while Woolf says that no one can be a creative genius if they are enslaved and kept uneducated, but Walker insists that creativity can never be chained, if not through poetic genius then through other abilities that could never be curbed or kept under wraps. Talking about Black women's creative ability, Walker shares her own mother's gardening talent as an alternative expression. Walker discusses the "invisibility of a black women's literary heritage and begin to build – or rebuild – a tradition of storytelling and creative expression that can help support the African American community." (McMillan, 114)

The African American women have suffered greater atrocities. They have been subjected to multiple jeopardy. Their injustices have been far more horrific compared to the injustices on white women. "Then you may begin to comprehend the lives of our "crazy," "Sainted" mothers and grandmothers. The agony of the lives of women who might have been Poets, Novelists, Essayists, and Short-Story Writers (over a period of centuries), who died with the real gifts stifled within them. Walker calls these black women as "Saints" because they were not just

laborers in cotton plantations who had to work from morn till night, but they were treated as sex toys by their white masters and at home they were beaten and whipped by black men as much cruelly as by whites. Walker says, "...they became more than "sexual objects," more even than mere women: they became "Saints." Instead of being perceived as whole persons, their bodies became shrines: what was thought to be their minds became temples suitable for worship. These crazy Saints stared out at the world, wildly, like lunatics – or quietly, like suicides, and the "God" that was in their gaze was as mute as a great stone." (Walker, 401)

Walker super-adds a few insertions which not just highlight the differences that were overlooked by Woolf but they also emphasize that African American women are more discriminated than middle-class white women.

...any woman born with a great gift in the sixteenth century [insert "eighteenth century", insert "black woman", insert "born or made a slave"] would certainly have gone crazed, shot herself, or ended her days in some lonely cottage outside the village, half witch, half wizard [insert "Saint"], feared and mocked at. For it needs little skill and psychology to be sure that a highly gifted girl who had tried to use her gift for poetry would have been so thwarted and hindered by contrary instincts [add "chains, guns, the lash, the ownership of one's body by someone else, submission to an alien religion"], that she must have lost her health and sanity to a certainty." (Walker, 404)

Walker thus uses Woolf's ideas and re-conceptualizes them, makes additions to them, so that they speak about the experiences and situation of black women. With the oppressive history of black women who were regarded as the mules of the world, Walker is able to create a far more alarming, pressing and personal discrimination that is political, racial, sexual, class based, power based, all at the same time. Thus Walker succeeds in, if not dwarfing, then definitely pointing at the narrowness of Woolf's concerns and the concerns of feminism in the larger scale.

There is a tone of anger and defiance in Walker's statement: To be an artist and a black woman, even today, lowers our status in many respects, rather than raises it: and yet, artists we will be." (Walker, 405) Walker states that black women have been treated and represented more in images and less as human beings with emotions and sentiments. She lists down some images in the light of which black women are seen: 'mules', 'matriarchs', 'superwomen', 'mean and evil bitches', 'castraters', 'sapphire's mama'. These images sufficiently speak about the method of domination and method of self-justification that was adopted by whites to claim their superiority, morality and their civilized society as against the 'inferiority', 'immorality' and 'wildness' of

black women and by degrading black women they indirectly castrated black men of their manliness.

Describing her mother Walker says, "...she seemed a large, soft, loving-eyed woman who was rarely impatient in our home. Her quick, violent temper was on view only a few times a year, when she battled with the white landlord who had the misfortune to suggest to her that her children need not go to school." (Walker, 406). A calm and peace loving woman, Walker's mother rarely lost temper and whenever she did it was due to the ill-treatment and discrimination of whites against blacks, especially her own children whom she loved dearly and labored day and night for their good life and education. Walker enlists all the works that her mother used to do for her children: from making their clothes to making towels and sheets she stitched it all. She spent the summers canning vegetables and spent winter evenings making quilts enough to cover beds for the whole family. She labored on the fields as well from sun up to late night with equal physical strength as her husband. In an almost poetic outpour Walker expresses her surprise and sense of wonder that she never saw her mother steal any moment of tranquility when she could reflect upon and contemplate. There was never a moment of pondering over private thoughts yet the spirit was undefeated – "I went in search of the secret of what has fed that muzzled and often mutilated, but vibrant, creative spirit that the black woman has inherited, and that pops out in wild and unlikely places to this day." (Walker, 406)

Walker goes on to investigate the source that fed the creative spirit of black women. Her mother was overworked and had no spare time to indulge into creative instincts. Yet the spiritual quotient of these women was too high. Walker gives examples of works where creativity of black women found a way of expression. Quilting was one such job where black women's genius manifested itself.

...in the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., there hangs a quilt unlike any other in the world. In fanciful, inspired, and yet simple and identifiable figures, it portrays the story of the Crucifixion. It is considered rare, beyond price. Though it follows no known pattern of quilt-making, and though it is made of bits and pieces of worthless rags, it is obviously the work of a person of powerful imagination and deep spiritual feeling. Below this quilt I saw a note that says it was made by "an anonymous Black woman in Alabama, a hundred years ago." (Walker, 407)

Walker insists that she became a storyteller like her mother and absorbed not only the stories themselves, but something of the manner in which her mother narrated them, that urgency and that knowledge all was told and Walker also feels that it needed to be recorded for future generations. As observed by McMillan, "Here, 'stories' and 'lives' become intermingled, and stories themselves become ubiquitous – they are unconsciously 'absorbed'...she looks in her own backyard – her personal past – in

order to answer larger questions about black women's literary heritage." (McMillan, 116)

In the words of McMillan, "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens' most significantly places importance on the mother as a source of inheritance, support, inspiration, life, nourishment, and instruction – in short, the mother empowers the daughter, whether she takes the form of a literary precursor, a peer, or a literal maternal figure. The essay brings personal writing, storytelling and literary criticism together to form meaningful narratives." (McMillan, 117)

Walker tells that her mother was an artist in many ways. Telling stories was as natural as breathing for Walker's mother. The stories ended abruptly as there were innumerable household chores that could not be left unattended. Alice Walker realized many years later that her mother wretched magic in her gardens. Describing those gardens and her mother's unparalleled potential Walker writes:

She planted ambitious gardens – and still does – with over fifty different varieties of plants that bloom profusely from early March until late November. Before she left home for the fields, she watered her flowers, chopped up the grass, and laid out new beds. When she returned from the fields she might divide clumps of bulbs, dig a cold pit, uproot and replant roses, or prune branches from her taller bushes or trees – until night came and it was too dark to see.

Whatever she planted grew as if by magic, and her fame as a grower of flowers spread over three counties...whatever rocky soil she landed on, she turned into a garden. A garden so brilliant with colors, so original in its design, so magnificent with life and creativity, that to this day people drive by our house in Georgia – perfect strangers and imperfect strangers – and ask to stand or walk among my mother's art. (Walker, 408)

Walker says that her mother's face used to glow with radiance and she was so much into the task that her being almost became invisible and that was due to perfect oneness with her most loved activity. She was the Creator in those moments, with her hands, eye, the entire body and her soul "Ordering the universe in the image of her personal conception of Beauty." (Walker, 408)

Walker pays tribute to her mother and through her she acknowledges and salutes all black women for being artists in their own way. For their "ability to hold on, even in very simple ways, is work black women have done for a very long time." (Walker, 408) Leaving a legacy of respect the black mothers have struggled for their daughters and have fought for all black women. They painted vivid and daring pictures on the walls of their huts, they sang the most beautiful songs sweetly over the compounds, they decorated their huts, they grew

flowers, they wove mats and quilts, and were the most interesting story tellers.

Conclusion: "Womanism is to Feminism as purple is to lavender"

While thinking about pornography and what it means to a white and a black woman and how it influences a black man's mindset, his desires and craving for white women, Walker says "I felt demeaned by selling of bodies, threatened by the violence, and furious that my daughter must grow up in a society in which the debasement of women is actually *enjoyed*." (Coming Apart, 95) In Coming Apart, a story about pornography, sexual violence, lesbianism and black man-woman relationship Walker writes, "The wife has never considered herself a feminist – though she is, of course, a "womanist." A "womanist" is a feminist, only more common." (Coming Apart, 100)

Walker tells the story by way of introducing the essays of Audre Lorde, Luisah Teish and Tracy A. Gardner. Explaining the term "womanist" Walker writes that "womanist" encompasses "feminist" and also means instinctively pro-woman. It has strong roots in Black women's culture. It came to Walker from the word "womanish," "a word our mothers used to describe, and attempt to inhibit, strong, outrageous or outspoken behavior when we were children: 'You're acting womanish!'...An advantage of using 'womanist' is that, because it is from my own culture, I needn't preface it with the word 'Black' (an awkward necessity and a problem I have with the word 'feminist'), since Blackness is implicit in the term; just as for white women there is apparently no felt need to preface 'feminist' with the word 'white,' since the word 'feminist' is accepted as coming out of white women's culture." (Coming Apart, 100)

Alice Walker speaks out as a black woman, writer, mother and feminist. Walker insists that 'feminism' as a movement was undoubtedly a movement of revolution and that is why she takes up Woolf's essay as a foundation to build upon. While Walker acknowledges Woolf as her predecessor, she feels insufficient when she reads into the lines and when she incorporates words like "slaves", "the wives and daughters of sharecroppers", and tries to include the experiences of women like "Zora Neale Hurston", which proves to quite an extent she felt that feminism did not completely include and define the experiences of black women.

Talking about "room" and "spaces", to think of having a private room for one's own self (for black women) was like day-dreaming for too much of leisure and luxury. Black women lived in one-room shacks, all cloistered, with no toilets and with hardly any sense of privacy or decency. They were frequently raped by both white and black men. These enslaved women never owned their own bodies leave aside the requirement of a separate room to pursue their writing or poetic skills. It was too ambitious for black women to think of it as they lacked too much in self-confidence and self-assertion. Always suffering from low self-esteem and identity crisis, these women never had time to love themselves. They hated their

black skin and were pitted against white women with white concept of beauty.

Further, Walker highlights the differences in the two concepts through the explanation of artists and creators. While Woolf focuses on the writing abilities of women that were never given a vent due to lack of education which they were forcibly deprived of, Walker goes on to say that black women have always been artists and creators whether back home in Africa or in America as slaves. Black women were painters, excellent at quilt making and singers, and so many other creative activities. They labored from sun up to sun down and yet their creativity found expression most profoundly.

So there was the need for a term that was more inclusive, more humane and more universal. 'Womanism' as a movement talked about women and stood for the survival of black race with its ethnicity, culture and history. Co-existence marks the root of 'womanism' that speaks for both men and women and not just white women as feminism insufficiently catered to but black women as well.

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