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Unveiling Confessional Mode In Women's Writing Through Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*

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ABSTRACT:

Gender equality is a phenomenon which has been universally discussed but remains unachieved till date. While it is crucial to recognize that men and women are inherently different, not only anatomically but also in their ways of thinking and expressing, the differencing should be realized but not to make it a basis for creating male-dominant hegemonies. Thus, the goal of the socio-political institutions should be equity, not just equality. But that is seldom the practicalities as the patriarchal institutions have suppressed the voices of women and marginalized their viewpoints. A notable example of this marginalization is the difference in their writing styles. While male writings are often free and open in content and opinions, female writings must either be bold enough to challenge societal norms and authentic or censored and restrained to fit within the constraints imposed on women's expression. This is where the confessional writing mode becomes significant, as it enables women to express themselves without fear of censorship. My research will explore the predominance of confessional writing in women's literature through Alice Walker's epistolary novel *The Color Purple*.

KEYWORDS: Women Writing, Confessional writing, Womanism, Race, Afro-American Literature

INTRODUCTION:

We have always talked about equality between men and women and yet failed to establish it. What people need to make out is that men and women are not the same, nor have ever been and neither will be, be it anatomically or their system of thoughts and expressions. And hence it is vitally needed to establish equity rather than equality between them. One enormous distinguishing factor between the two genders is their mode of writing. While men express their thoughts without any censure or filtering, women are by default expected to filter their words and actions. Women have to be either bold enough to defy the society and write to their heart's content or filter their writing to fall under the boundaries created for women's expression. Within this context comes the mode of confessional writing which allows women to express without a fear of censorship. In my research I would be discussing about the predominance of confessional ode in women's writing with special focus on Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple*.

Confessional literature is the writing of the personal or the 'I'. This style of writing emerged in the late 1950s and early 1960s and is an autobiographical account, either real or fictitious, in which intimate and hidden details of the subject's life are revealed. The first outstanding example of the genre was the *Confessions* of St. Augustine (400 A.D.), a painstaking examination of Augustine's progress from juvenile sinfulness and youthful debauchery to conversion to Christianity and the triumph of the spirit over the flesh. Others include the *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (1822), by Thomas De Quincey, focusing on the writer's early life and his gradual addiction to drug taking, and *Confessions* (1782–89), the intimate autobiography of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. André Gide used the form to great effect in such works as *Si le grain ne meurt* (1920 and 1924; *If It Die...*), an account of his life from birth to marriage.

The confessional mode of literature of the mid-twentieth century dealt with subject matter that previously had not been openly discussed in the field of literature. Private experiences with and feelings about death, trauma, depression and relationships were addressed in this type of poetry, often in an autobiographical manner. Some 20th-century writers as John Berryman, Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, and Anne Sexton wrote poetry in the confessional vein, revealing intensely personal, often painful perceptions and feelings. Sexton in particular was interested in the psychological aspect of poetry, having started writing at the suggestion of her therapist. Also in the tradition are the "confession magazines," collections of sensational and usually purely fictional autobiographical tales popular in the mid-20th century. The confessional writers were not merely recording their emotions on paper; craft and construction were extremely important to their work. While their treatment of the aesthetic self may have been groundbreaking and shocking to some readers, these writers maintained a high level of craftsmanship through their careful attention to and use of prosody.

The term feminism can be used to describe a political, cultural or economic movement aimed at establishing equal rights and legal protection for women. Feminism involves political and sociological theories and philosophies concerned with issues of gender difference, as well as a movement that advocates gender equality for women and campaigns for women's rights and interests. Although the terms "feminism" and "feminist" did not gain widespread use until the 1970s, they were already being

used in the public phraseology much earlier; for instance, Katherine Hepburn speaks of the "feminist movement" in the 1942 film *Woman of the Year*.

A general definition of 'feminism' is the belief that women, purely and simply because they are women, are treated unequally within a society which is organized to prioritize male viewpoints and concerns. Within this patriarchal paradigm women become everything men are not (or do not want to be seen to be). When men are regarded as strong, women are weak, where men are rational, they are emotional, where men are active, they are passive, and the binary opposition could go on. Under this rationale, which aligns them with everything negative, women are denied equal access to the world of public concerns as well as of cultural representation. Put simply, feminism seeks to change this situation.

From the first moment of her life, a female is viewed as a secondary person because she was created after Adam's creation. Greek Aristotelian philosophy considers that a woman is inferior to a man because of her posterior creation. Aristotle said about women: 'The female is a female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities, we should regard the female nature as afflicted with a natural defectiveness.' (McCann 45). The traditional role of the woman in a family in society was to get married since early age, to take care of the house and children. Everything stopped here, nothing after this border line, no intellectual development, they had no right to speak in a lot of situations, no right of taking decisions. Women have advanced in all type of domains, at work, in private life, in society. This struggle of women to break free surprisingly began in Ancient Greece, when women had no independence in front of the law; Plato proposed in his *Laws* that women have the same rights as men. They could choose the same education as men have, women would have access to law courts, the right to own property, the claim to live and work in the same way as men, to compete in athletics as the men did. Unfortunately, Plato's *Laws* had no echo at that time.

Simone de Beauvoir wrote that 'the first time we see a woman take up her pen in defence of her sex' was Christine de Pizan who wrote *Epître au Dieu d'Amour* (Epistle to the God of Love) in the 15th century. Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa and Modesta di Pozzo di Forzi worked in the 16th century. Marie Le Jars de Gournay, Anne Bradstreet and Francois Poullain de la Barre wrote during the 17th. Feminism emerged in the US in the 1970s, following only a decade behind the rise of the US women's movement in the 1960s.

The evolution of feminist movement can be divided into three waves. First-wave feminism refers to an extended period of feminist activity during the 19th century and early 20th century in the United Kingdom and the United States. Originally it focused on the promotion of equal contract and property rights for women and the opposition to chattel marriage and ownership of married women (and their children) by their husbands. However, by the end of the nineteenth century, activism focused primarily on gaining political power, particularly the right of women's suffrage.

Scholar Imelda Whelehan suggests that the second wave was a continuation of the earlier phase of feminism involving the suffragettes in the UK and USA. Second-wave feminism has continued to exist since that time and coexists with what is termed third-wave feminism. It was largely concerned with other issues of equality, such as ending discrimination. The feminist activist and author Carol Hanisch coined the slogan "The Personal is Political" which became synonymous with the second wave. Second-wave feminists saw women's cultural and political inequalities as unresolvable linked and encouraged women to understand aspects of their personal lives as deeply politicized and as reflecting sexist power structures.

Arising as a response to perceived failures of the second wave and also as a response to the backlash against initiatives and movements created by the second wave, third-wave feminism seeks to challenge or avoid what it deems the second wave's essentialist definitions of femininity, which (according to them) over-emphasize the experiences of upper middle-class white women. A post-structuralist interpretation of gender and sexuality is central to much of the third wave's ideology. Third-wave feminists often focus on "micro-politics" and challenge the second wave's paradigm as to what is, or is not, good for females. Third-wave feminism also contains internal debates between difference feminists such as the psychologist Carol Gilligan (who believes that there are important differences between the sexes) and those who believe that there are no inherent differences between the sexes and contend that gender roles are due to social conditioning.

Feminist theory emerged from these feminist movements. It is manifest in a variety of disciplines such as feminist geography, feminist history and feminist literary criticism. Feminist activists have campaigned for women's legal rights (rights of contract, property rights, voting rights); for women's right to bodily integrity and autonomy, for abortion rights, and for reproductive rights (including access to contraception and quality pre-natal care); for protection of women and girls from domestic violence, sexual harassment and rape; for workplace rights, including maternity leave and equal pay; against misogyny; and against other forms of gender-specific discrimination against women.

Although the majority of what is considered feminist literature was written after the 1960s, early feminists and their writings were just as crucial a starting point, even though their impact may not have instantly been quite as strong. After the passing of the women's right to vote, much discussion of feminism had ended, but authors like Virginia Woolf continued with their quest and with their writing. Woolf, part of the first-wave feminism, believed that women constituted a sex-class within their social groups and that such a grouping was not simply a sign of victimization but a means of providing women with the germ of organization between women and thus a coherent and radical politics.

With Woolf's basic argument that gender identity is socially constructed and that inequality begins early in the male dominated family, her highly influential book, *A Room of One's Own*, continues to show today's women the social and physical dominance which men possess. In one part of *A Room of One's Own* Woolf writes of what it may have been like if Shakespeare had had a sister:

She was as adventurous, as imaginative, as agog to see the world as he was. But she was not sent to school. She had no chance of learning grammar and logic, let alone of reading Horace and Virgil. She picked up a book now and then, one of her brother's

perhaps, and read a few pages. But then her parents came and told her to mend the stockings or mind the stew and not moon about with books and papers.

So many social obstacles would have prevented her from expressing any of the talent she had. For a woman to write fiction, she must have a room of her own so that what she could offer to other women and to the world has the room to flourish and expand. Obviously the role of the feminist, and the feminist writer, has taken a more active turn since Virginia Woolf and other literary women writing prior to the 1960s. Stemming from females' reactions to a society dominated by men come many written journeys of women whose search inward has connected with women everywhere. These many searches, recorded and shared with women readers, work at exploring both what essentially it means to be a woman in a male environment and her personal growth within.

Women's literature's main contribution to other women is the endless list of autobiographies, memoirs, and diaries. These writers have chosen to give of their experiences wholly to their readers, and what better way to understand and connect than through pure experience? Although different authors obviously will have varied intentions, they inevitably offer (through their own self-awareness) "self-help" to their readers. Self-help does not have the negative connotation here of being needy or dependent; rather it is a springboard for change, and being active and alive through a process of realization. Reading of other women's lives aids in training 'self-confidence and creative powers', allowing readers to explore more of themselves and society than they might on their own.

The significance of confessions relies on placing them in a socio-historical context. Rita Felski, writes that 'feminist confession is less concerned with unique individuality or notions of essential humanity than with delineating the specific problems and experiences which bind women together'. Late in the sixties, during what was called second-wave feminism, the civil rights movement and Vietnam politicized literature. Women's writing of memoirs and autobiographies 'took on a new edge as people began to realize that the publication of life stories by those outside the mainstream constituted political statement.

Some of the most influential works of this "new" literature of second-wave feminists were written by African-American women, which undoubtedly aided in an understanding that the black woman's struggle was one of a different degree of difficulty. Anne Moody's *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (1968) touched the lives of other women as she describes putting herself through a small black college in the South and taking part in civil rights protests. Maya Angelou was another powerful influence, recounting her experience with segregation in the American South as well. In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1970), Angelou shows the confusion of her childhood, sometimes the rage at what she saw, and often the lack of comfort or confidence she had in herself. Since 'black women have suffered cruelly more so in this society from living the phenomenon of being black and female in a country that is both racist and sexist', their plight exemplified an undying power and strength.

Among them is also Alice Walker, whose writing exemplifies the main features and varieties of black feminism, but in no way excludes coalitions with white feminists. Instead, she suggests 'that all feminists are writing one huge story with different perspectives'. However strong a unified women's voice may seem, though, there is still a difference between the "stories" of women of color and those of Euro-American women. One of Walker's features as a writer is her historical account of both black and white men specifically violating black women. In her writing she draws on a spiritual transformation that combines with social circumstances and shows her readers that a black feminist writer has a different history—a different experience—that should not be lost or blurred among the rest of feminist literature.

One can perceive African American literature as a documentation of myriad layers of oppression. Slave narratives became a much preferred form of writing that reflected the abiding forces of racism and discrimination. Largely written in autobiographical form the writers brought into play the threads of personal memory. Slavery was portrayed as a destructive agency causing physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual expropriation. The victim, suffering some sort of personal crisis, desperately seeks an escape—the idea of complete freedom and a metaphoric re-birth. Illiteracy of the slaves further led to their inferior status and exploitation and thus, desire for literacy accompanied by defiance were important components of these writings. The ideas pertaining to escape of the body and liberation of the soul were central to the process of claiming identity. Black women were not only silenced by the white patriarchy, but also by the assumptions of white women and the powerful sexism of Black men. The National Black Feminist Organization, started in 1973, was solely dedicated to the cause of Black women and in 1977, an influential manifesto – *A Black Feminist Statement*— was launched by The Combahee River Collective. Barbara Smith's path-breaking essay, *The Truth That Never Hurts: Black Lesbians in Fiction in the 1980s* asserts that an explicitly unique characteristic of Black feminist writing is a commitment to women's issues and related political concerns and an openness in discussing lesbian subject matters.

"Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender". Alice Walker in her pivotal work, *In Search of Our Mother's Garden: Womanist Prose* (1983), defines the term 'womanist' as derived from "womanish" (a folk term in African American tradition symbolic of boldness, premature adulthood, responsibility and leadership as opposed to frivolous, irresponsible and non-serious). She says: When I offered the word 'Womanism' many years ago, it was to give us a tool to use, as feminist women of color, in times like these. These are the moments we can see clearly, and must honor devotedly, our singular path as women of color in the United States. We are not white women and this truth has been ground into us for centuries, often in brutal ways.

It is a reaction to the realization that "feminism" does not encompass the perspectives Black women. It is a feminism that is "stronger in color", nearly identical to "Black Feminism". However, Womanism does not need to be prefaced by the word "Black", the word automatically concerns black women. A Womanist is a woman who loves women and appreciates women's culture and power as something that is incorporated into the world as a whole. Womanism addresses the racist and classist aspects of white feminism and actively opposes separatist ideologies. It includes the word "man", recognizing that Black men are an integral part of Black women's lives as their children, lovers, and family members. Womanism accounts for the ways in

which black women support and empower black men, and serves as a tool for understanding the Black woman's relationship to men as different from the white woman's. It seeks to acknowledge and praise the sexual power of Black women while recognizing a history of sexual violence. This perspective is often used as a means for analysing Black Women's literature, as it marks the place where race, class, gender, and sexuality intersect. Womanism is unique because it does not necessarily imply any political position or value system other than the honouring of Black women's strength and experiences. Because it recognizes that women are survivors in a world that is oppressive on multiple platforms, it seeks to celebrate the ways in which women negotiate these oppressions in their individual lives.

The Color Purple (1982) by Alice Walker is a novel of celebration of black women who challenge the unjust authorities and emerge beyond the yoke of forced identities. It is situated in Georgia, America, in 1909 and written entirely in the epistolary form, mainly by Celie, the main protagonist and her sister, Nettie. Walker exposes the patriarchy that condones male domination of women. The novel is about the trials and tribulations faced by a black woman under colonialism and black male oppression and her journey to attain knowledge, identity and freedom.

Walker writes through her personal experiences and it deals with the domination of powerless women by equally powerless men. Her work shows a world divided between the chosen (black women) and the unsaved, the poor miserable black men. The epistolary, or letter-writing, form of *The Color Purple* resembles a diary, since Celie tells her story through private letters that she writes to God. Therefore, Celie narrates her life story with complete Candor and honesty. As a poor African-American woman in rural Georgia in the 1930s and a victim of domestic abuse, Celie is almost completely voiceless and disenfranchised in everyday society. However, Celie's letters enable her to break privately the silence that is normally imposed upon her. Celie's confessional narrative is reminiscent of African-American slave narratives from the nineteenth century. These early slave narratives, which took the form of song, dance, storytelling, and other arts, ruptured the silence imposed on the black community.

Slaves took these measures to prevent slave owners from discovering the slaves' ability to communicate, articulate, and reflect on their unhappiness, but Celie takes no such protective measures. Celie's letters, though completely candid and confessional, are sometimes difficult to decipher because Celie's ability to narrate her life story is highly limited. Celie's letters to God unfold her traumatic state, first as a subject of humiliation and sexual torture by an alleged father and then later being sold off as a sex object and slave to a husband who loves some other woman. The form helps Celie survive the crushing circumstances and the letters establish her contact with the outside world. The letters play an essential therapeutic and cathartic role in Celie's life. She confesses thoughts and desires that otherwise cannot be said to anyone.

'One is not born a woman; one becomes a woman'. When the French philosopher and novelist Simone De Beauvoir wrote this in her 1949 book *The Second Sex*, she encapsulated an argument that would propel feminist thinking for the next fifty years or more. In this brief statement she touched upon issues and questions which were simple yet complex like 'What is a woman?'. In the attempt to address this question, feminism has become fracture, divided, and contradictory. It has also strengthened, developed, and evolved. Indeed, feminism can no longer be accurately described as 'theory', i.e. a single and coherent trajectory of thought. Rather it should be understood as a 'discourse': a discussion of multiple related ideas.

Even though the concerns of Womanism might differ from the concerns of Feminism, on a deeper understanding of both, we find the basic similarity bonding them together- a repressed subaltern trying to find a voice of its own. The racial difference between the two does not take away the fact that both are fighting against the 'silence' imposed upon them by the patriarchal society. After all, at the end of the day, as Virginia Woolf aptly said-'A woman has no country. A woman wants no country. A woman's country is the whole world'.

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