

AL-AZHAR UNIVERSITY  
BULLETIN OF THE FACULTY  
OF  
LANGUAGES & TRANSLATION



جامعة الأزهر  
مجلة كلية اللغات والترجمة

---

**The Impact of Cultural Milieu: A Critical Analysis  
of Alice Walker's  
*Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart***

---

***Shereen Hamed Mohamed Gbr***  
English Department, Faculty of Girls, 10th Of Ramadan,  
Al Azhar University

## تأثير البيئة الثقافية: التحليل النقدي لأليس ووكر "حان الآن الوقت لفتح قلبك"

شيرين حامد محمد جبر

قسم اللغة الإنجليزية، كلية البنات الأزهرية بالعاشر من رمضان، جامعة الأزهر، الشرقية، مصر.

البريد الإلكتروني: [hamed\\_shereen@azhar.edu.eg](mailto:hamed_shereen@azhar.edu.eg)

المُلخَص:

إن للبيئة الثقافية تأثير كبير في تشكيل هوية الإنسان التي تتكون من المحادثات المختلفة، التي يتم تداولها في ثقافة معينة. يحاول هذا البحث تحليل رواية أليس ووكر "حان الآن الوقت لفتح قلبك" لإظهار كيف شكلت رواية ووكر وتشكلت من المحادثات التي كانت منتشرة في الثقافة التي عاشت فيها أليس ووكر، و التي قدمت فيها الرواية. و تُعد نظرية "النقد الثقافي" النظرية الرئيسية التي سيتم إستخدامها لتحليل رواية أليس ووكر "حان الآن الوقت لفتح قلبك"، و تُعد هذه النظرية طريقة لتفسير ثقافة معينة. بالإضافة إلى نظريات: النقد المساواتي(النسوي)، و النقد الافريقي الامريكى، و الدين يمكن إعتباراهما أمثلة على النقد الثقافي، حيث يتم إستخدام كل هذه النظريات لتفسير الرواية، من خلال إستكشاف بعض جوانب الثقافة الامريكية. الكلمات المفتاحية: النقد الثقافي، النقد الافريقي الامريكى، النقد النسوي الأسود، المحادثات.

### The Impact of Cultural Milieu: A Critical Analysis of Alice Walker's *Now Is The Time To Open Your Heart*

Shereen Hamed Mohamed Gbr

English Department, Faculty of Girls, 10<sup>th</sup> Of Ramadan, Al-Azhar University, Alsharqya, Egypt.

E-mail: [hamed\\_shereen@azhar.edu.eg](mailto:hamed_shereen@azhar.edu.eg)

#### Abstract

Cultural milieu has a considerable influence on shaping man's identity which is constituted by various discourses that are circulating in a certain culture. This research tries to analyse Alice Walker's novel: *Now is the Time to Open Your Heart* to demonstrate how Walker's novel shaped and was shaped by the discourses that were circulating in the culture in which Alice Walker has lived and the novel was produced. The main critical theory which will be used to analyse Alice Walker's novel is cultural criticism which is considered a method of interpreting a certain culture. In addition, feminist criticism and African American criticism which could be considered examples of cultural criticism as all these theories are used to interpret the novel by exploring some aspects of American culture.

**Keywords:** Cultural Criticism, African American Criticism, Black Feminist Criticism, Discourses.

---

# The Impact of Cultural Milieu: A Critical Analysis of Alice Walker's *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart*

## Introduction

A literary text is a cultural artifact that reflects the interplay of social, historical, political, and cultural discourses that are circulating in the setting in which the text is written. According to Lois Tyson, a literary text is a part of these interplaying discourses. Tyson points out that a literary text and its social, historical, political and cultural contexts are "mutually constitutive; they create each other. Like the dynamic interplays between individual identity and society". In other words, a literary text forms and is formed by its cultural context (291-292).

In fact, the term 'culture' refers to particular characteristics of people or society, including customs, beliefs, habits, and social behaviors. For cultural critics, "cultural is a lived experience, not a fixed definition. More precisely, a culture is a collection of interactive cultures, each of which is growing and changing, each of which is constituted at any given moment in time by the intersection of gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic class, occupation, and similar factors that contribute to the experience of its members"(Tyson 296).

Affected by her cultural heritage, Alice Walker, an African American novelist who won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, reflects her culture in her novels. In *Now is the Time to Open Your Heart*, like in her other novels, Alice Walker presents some aspects of her own cultural heritage. Alice Walker, as an African American writer, produces, in her writings, the recurring themes of African American literature that show the African American experience and culture. In addition, as a womanist, she demonstrates black female struggle for survival in the past and in the present time.

The research tries to show how Alice Walker's *Now is the Time to Open Your Heart* shapes and is shaped by its cultural context. As a result of the complexities of any given culture, the analysis of a literary text cannot be understood in isolation from the set of discourses in which it was presented or interpreted. The research applies three critical theories: cultural criticism, feminist criticism, and African American criticism to this text. These three theories -which are interpretations of literary texts- are related as they are used to explore many aspects of the same culture. In other words, the paper will study how this text affects and is affected by its cultural context. The paper starts with a brief summary on these critical theories.

---

The paper also explores briefly Walker's life and career to show how she has been influenced by different discourses circulating in her life. Then, the paper analyses Walker's *Now is the Time to Open Your Heart* to show how the novel shapes and is shaped by Walker's cultural context.

The main theory which is used in this analysis of Alice Walker's *Now is the Time to Open Your Heart* is cultural criticism. Cultural criticism is one of the critical theories which is used to interpret any literary text. This form of criticism explores how different aspects of a character's culture, such as religion, gender, class, and race, affect the ways in which a text is produced and interpreted. It is the study of "literature in use, as use"(Templeton 43). Alice Templeton points out that cultural criticism is "the study of literature at work in its social context"(19); it is the study of the relation between any literary text and its social context. According to Templeton, "the experience of a literary text is 'cultural' in the sense that it is a dynamic moment which mediates between the individual and social, and between the past and the future"(21).

Lois Tyson, in her book: *Critical Theory Today*, demonstrates the relations between a literary text and cultural criticism. Tyson states that a literary text maps the discourses that are circulating at the time in which the literary text was written and the literary text is one of those discourses.

So, a literary text shapes and is shaped by the discourses circulating in the culture in which it was produced. She adds that one's interpretation of literature shapes and is shaped by the culture in which the one lives. A literary text, which is a cultural production, "performs cultural work to the extent to which it shapes the cultural experience of those who encounter it, that is, to the extent to which it shapes our experience as members of a cultural group"(297). According to Greenblatt, "the analysis of culture is the servant of literary study, but in a liberal education broadly conceived, it is literary study that is the servant of cultural understanding"(227).

Another critical theory used in the research, is African American criticism. In fact, African American criticism, in this research, is not used to explore whether Walker's text reinforces or undermines the racist ideologies which have oppressed black Americans, but it is used to demonstrate African American culture and experience in Walker's novel; in other words, to explore some important aspects of African American culture, in this text, that are utilized in the cultural analysis of Walker's *Now is the Time to Open Your Heart*.

---

African American criticism is used to analyze any literary text which addresses African American experiences, issues or problems. In general, some critics point out that African American literature which is written by African American women has similar strategies. African American female writers often use recurring literary strategies in their writings such as the use of imagery, the use of domestic activity, and the use of a black female character as the narrator in a novel "in order to give black women authority as the tellers of their own stories"(Tyson 391). In addition, critics point out that both 'orality' and 'folk motifs' are the unique features of African American literary tradition which reflects African American culture.

Before and during the Civil War, African American literature focused on recurring themes that reflect African American experience in America, such as the hardships of slavery and other forms of oppression, as well as the quest for freedom and spiritual survival.

In addition to these themes African American literature presented double consciousness, the importance of cultural heritage and the importance of black women's identity and community.

Black feminist criticism is used, also, in this research to analyze Walker's *Now is the Time to Open Your Heart*. It is used to reveal how gender and race create and form black women's experience and culture. It also deals with the oppressed male systems that have oppressed women; black women (unlike white women) have been oppressed by another force which is racism. In fact, both racism and sexism, according to Lorraine Bethel, shape the basis of African American feminist criticism.

**She states:**

Black feminist literary criticism offers a framework for identifying the common socio-aesthetic problems of authors who attempt to fashion a literature of cultural identity in the midst of racial/sexual oppression. ...Black women... understand their qualities and sensibilities. Such understanding requires a consciousness of the oppression these artists faced daily in a society full of institutionalized and violent hatred for both their Black skins and their female bodies. Developing and maintaining this consciousness is a basic tent of Black feminism. (178)

---

Walker was the first literary figure who used the term 'womanism' instead of feminism to refer to black feminism. She defines a womanist as somebody who "appreciates and prefers women's culture"(Walker xi). Walker's womanism dismisses the white feminist definition of female identity. Like black women writers, Walker in her writings, focuses on African American women's identity which is embodied in recurring themes "that identity may take the form of sacrificing oneself for the good of the family, the community, or the race"(Tyson 391).

### **Influences on Walker's Life and Career**

Alice Walker is an internationally renowned African American novelist, poet, womanist and activist. She is the first black American female writer that won the Pulitzer Prize. Her works have inspired and supported the politically and economically oppressed. Walker's works reflected the predominant influence of her cultural context. Walker's ideas are formed by her life in the rural south, in Georgia, and then by her experiences as an activist and a womanist.

Alice Walker was born on February 9, 1944, in Eatonton, Georgia. She was the eighth child and the youngest daughter of Minnie Tallulah Grant and Wille Lee Walker, who were sharecroppers. Although she grew in poverty, she was fond of reading. In her childhood, when she was eight years old, Walker's brother blinded her right eye with a BB gun while they were playing a game of cowboys and Indians. This incident was a considerable turning point in shaping Walker's identity. Because of the whitish scar tissue in her damaged eye, Walker suffered intense psychological pain that made her shy and timid and withdrew her from the world around her, for a long time. Although this incident was the main source of her misery, it helped and prepared her to be a renowned writer, as she spent a great deal of her time in reading and writing. In addition, Walker's love of reading and writing increased with her mother's encouragement that helped her to relieve her pains. Six years after the incident, when she removed the scar tissue, Walker began, for the first time in her life, to appreciate herself.

Walker attended segregated schools because at that time, in Eatonton, all schools were based on race-segregation. After graduating from high school, with the help of a scholarship, Walker went to Spelman College, a renowned college for black women in Atlanta, Georgia. There, Alice Walker was involved in the Civil Rights Movement. She, then, transferred to Sarah Lawrence College in New York, the mostly white women's college, where she completed her studies and graduated with a

---

bachelor's degree in 1965. After graduation, Walker worked as a teacher, lecturer and activist, and she decided to become a writer.

In 1965, Walker published her first short story, *To Hell with Dying*, and she wrote her first book of poetry, *Once*, that was published in 1966. After two years, Walker married, Melvyn Rosenman Leventhal, a white civil rights lawyer. In 1969, Walker gave birth to her daughter, Rebecca. In the same year, she completed her first novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*. After getting divorce, she moved to northern California after divorcing. Alice Walker's third novel, *The Color Purple* (1982), has gained her international fame. It was nominated for a National Book Critics Circle Award and the novel won the Pulitzer Prize and the American Book Award for fiction in 1983. After achieving her international literary fame, Alice Walker persisted on her struggle in her novels, in the hope of inspiring change and achieving peace, human dignity and freedom.

As a novelist, Alice Walker was influenced by Harlem Renaissance writers, especially Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960). The Harlem Renaissance was an African American cultural movement in 1920s that aimed to create a unique African American identity. Zora Neale Hurston's novels embodied African American culture and the experience of black women at the Harlem Renaissance period. Alice Walker was inspired by Hurston's thoughts, even she embodied them in her novels. Walker appreciated Zora's efforts in defending women's struggles to gain their identities at that time. As a result, Walker decided to honor Hurston's literary heritage. She wrote her article "In Search of Zora Neale Hurston" that was published in Walker's "*In Search of Our Mother's Garden: Womanist Prose*"(1984) which rediscovered and revived Zora Neale Hurston's novels.

Walker's writings affect and are affected by her activities. As an activist, Walker has participated in several activities, such as the Civil Rights Movement, Women's Right Movements, and the Black Feminist Movement, that aim to serve her community. Affected by these activities, Walker, like most of her characters, struggled to end black people's suffering and oppression. Walker asserts this struggle in her interview with Zeligler, when she states "I grew up in the South under segregation. So, I know what terrorism feels like –when your father could be taken out in the middle of the night because he didn't look like he was in an obeying frame of mind when a white person said something he must do. I mean, that's terrorism too. So, I know that feeling" (9), Walker depicts the image of the Black, especially, African American women, who faced racism, sexism and violence. In her novels, Walker motivates the oppressed, especially, black women, to rebel and seek change,

---

in other words, to change their life to achieve their identity despite problems. Gloria Wade Gayles says:

The distinctive voice in Walker's works is the voice of a woman deeply immersed in her blackness, her womaness, and her Southernness. It is a clear voice, neither muted nor strident, and always resonant with Walker's belief in redemption. Even when she writes passionately about problems that ravage the land and the lives of people, Alice Walker emphasizes the healing power of love and the possibility of change: change personal and change in society. (302)

### **A critical Analysis of Walker's *Now is the Time to Open Your Heart***

Alice Walker's *Now is the Time to Open Your Heart* (2004), focuses on the idea of change and the healing power of love. Walker's protagonist, Kate Nelson, who renamed herself Kate Talking Tree, embarks on spiritual journeys as a quest for self.

Kate, who is a 57-year-old woman and a widely published author, is at a meditation retreat because of losing faith, when Mr. Clean, her teacher, told her that "hot" revolutions, like the Afro Caribbean revolution, can never succeed, and the "cool" revolution is the only way to success. She leaves her lover, Yolo, who embarks on his own spiritual journey, and travels with several other women, to the Colorado River, then the Amazon rain forest. In their journeys into self-realization, they share their particular experiences and memories, and ultimately, they can achieve inner peace and heal their suffering with love.

In fact, *Now is the Time to Open Your Heart* embodies Walker's ideas of womanism. In other words, the feminist theory played considerable roles in forming the lives of Walker's female characters as well as Walker's character. They gain their strength by womanist consciousness during the process of their development. In the novel, Walker reflects her own culture and experiences as an African American woman. Her black female characters are abused physically and psychologically by oppressive systems that cause their plight. However, by the end of her novel, they reclaim their identities and achieve their success and victory.

Walker's black female protagonist, Kate, embarks on a journey to reclaim her spirit after suffering from the oppression of sexism and racism. Through her spiritual journey, Kate tries to achieve "womanist wholeness that is denied to her, on account of her race-ethnicity and gender"(Hasanthi 169). Like Walker, Kate is a



---

real womanist who succeeded to discover and reclaim herself spiritually and physically. In other words, Kate's spiritual adventure helps her to recognize the philosophy of womanism and its power in which she finds her relief, as a womanist.

Indeed, Alice Walker has her own womanist philosophy. She points out that the term 'womanist' is more accurate in portraying African American women than the term 'feminist'. In fact, Walker's definition of womanism shows Walker's ethos in a precise way. She produces specific features of womanism and explains these features in her book *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1984). She defines a woman who gains womanist features as one who is able to achieve her identity and, consequently, achieve womanist wholeness to herself and to the others. Walker defines what she means by the term 'womanist' in the following lines quoted from her book *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose*:

1. Womanist, From womanish...A black feminist or feminist of color. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior. Wanting to know more and in great depth than is considered "good" for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: "You trying to be grown." Responsible. In charge. Serious. 2. Also: A woman who loves other women... Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength... Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female... 3. Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the Spirit. Loves love ... Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. 4. Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender. (xi-xii)

According to Alice Walker's philosophy of womanism, a womanist, as quoted above, is a person who "loves the spirit"(xi). In Walker's *Now is the Time to Open Your Heart*, this philosophy is demonstrated by Kate. Like many African American women, Kate believes in spirituality. In fact, spirituality has been used as a form of force that empowers black women. African American women believe that spirituality can protect them from various types of oppression. At the time of slavery, their spiritual strength enabled them "to remain strong when their children, husbands, brothers were taken away as slaves; to remain strong during slavery, even

---

when being raped in the presence of their children, husband, brothers and sisters"(Wane 136-137).

In fact, spirituality has different meanings. One of these definitions is found in Kate's spiritual case which shows that "spirituality is the means of tapping into the universe itself" (Wane 143). Walker's *Now is the Time to Open Your Heart* traces the spiritual adventure of Kate through which she obtains spiritual enlightenment and achieves her self-actualization. With other women, Kate embarks on a couple of spiritual journeys, one on the Colorado River and another on the Amazon, under the guidance of a shaman named Armando. Through these journeys, in which they are searching for their identity, they share their emotions, memories, and sufferings.

Alice Walker, as a black female, has a spiritual belief in the healing power of Mother Earth. The concept of Mother Earth is defined in her novel as "Grandmother". In *Now is the Time to Open Your Heart*, like Walker, Kate believes in the healing power of "Grandmother". Kate and her friends drink "Yage", a holy medicinal plant that is known as "Grandmother", to help them recover from their pains, as "it is claimed that the herb creates spiritual shift and treatment"(Ghazi 20). Debra Walker King states:

As Walker's novel progresses, Yage as medicinal nomenclature morphs into more than a signifier of a plant-based drink...Through Grandmother Yage and its divine-earth force, Kate ascends to higher levels of self-actualization. With enlightenment, she achieves levels of spiritual consciousness void of external confirmation...Kate recognizes she, like the Yage, is Grandmother, a god-force present in every created thing and living being brave enough to move beyond tradition and ideological indoctrination to discover it. (7)

Besides the main concerns of the African-American critical theory Walker emphasized spirituality, which is the main theme in Walker's *Now is the Time to Open Your Heart*. Spirituality is usually embodied in African American literature as a therapy to African Americans' suffering that assist them in connecting with their inner world. In other words, it is a "journey to spiritual awakening, to find oneself, which is an important dimension of their journey to freedom" (Tyson 388). It is one of the prominent characteristics of African American literature that "creates a sense of continuity with the African and African American past"(Tyson 386).

---

Influenced by the cultural context in which she lived, Walker perceived the disadvantages of materialism which is considered more important than spiritual values in modern life. She recognizes the spiritual poverty of modern life and arouses her readers' attention to the importance of spirituality. Following Walker's ideology, Kate abandoned her materialistic life in search for spirituality to find her self-realization and relief. She burns "several hundred-dollar bills just to demonstrate to herself that these items were not the God/Goddess of her life" (14). Through spirituality, at the end of the novel, Kate achieves her self-actualization and self-assertion.

In her search for self-actualization and identity, Kate adopts Walker's womanist philosophy which asserts that a womanist is "a woman who loves other women". She believes in the power of love that manifests itself in the relationships among daughters, mothers, grandmothers, and friends. In fact, Kate's intimate relation with her female friends, Missy and Lalika, shows how the power of love enabled them to heal their wounds and realize their potentials. According to Hasanthi, "Kate helps Missy and Lalika open their wounded hearts with their womanist consciousness" and helps them to develop their womanist consciousness with the help of sisterhood (172).

Walker's *Now is the Time to Open Your Heart* explores how womanism asserts the power of sisterhood.

Walker believes that black women's love for each other helps them to survive as it is considered a necessary means of liberation. According to Bell Hook, black women, who have faced racist, sexist and classist oppression, "must learn to live and work in solidarity.

[They] must learn the true meaning and value of sisterhood" (43). In the novel, Missy, who is one of the travelers on the Amazon, tells Kate how she was sexually abused by her grandfather, Timmy Wimmins, and how that incident ruined her life. She became addicted to drugs. With the power of female friendship, Missy finds in her spiritual journey with Kate the real meaning of female bond that helps her develop herself and realize her potentials. In addition, Lalika, Like Missy, who is a black woman and one of the travelers, shared her painful memories with Kate. Lalika killed a man who raped her friend Gloria. As a result, she was imprisoned. In the prison, she was raped by guards. Kate, as a womanist, shares pain with Lalika and tries to develop Lalika's womanist consciousness that helps her to survive. Hasanthi points out:

---

Repeated rapes, and acts of violence have been a part of her life owing to her susceptible position. Lalika is overburdened by her past as it becomes difficult to her to forget her abusive past. She finds that, it very difficult to forgive those who have wronged her. But with the womanist consciousness she has developed, she becomes self-reliant, audacious and heals the scars of the past like Kate and Missy. (172)

Another intimate relationship between women, in Walker's novel, is the relationship between Kate and her mother. In *Now is the Time to Open Your Heart*, the power of love between Kate and her mother helps Kate to subvert her weakness, satisfy her spiritual needs, and achieve her self-actualization.

Kate dreamed of her mother, who is dead. In the dream, "they were sitting beside the ocean, and her mother gazed out upon it as she spoke: It puzzled me that you did not understand, she said. But how could I understand? Kate asked. I was never told anything. The secret is, you do not have to be told, said her mother"(Walker, *Now* 39). When Kate woke up, she thought about the dream all day. Her mother's face came back to her. As a result of that ambiguous dream with her mother, she took two decisions: first, she has to make the river journey; second, she has to write again. She begins to write a story about a mother and a daughter. In other words, Kate's mother, who is the symbol of love, inspires Kate to search self-discovery and self-realization. In fact, the power of love between Kate and her mother helps Kate realize her potentials. In addition, the power of love between Kate and Mother Earth that has granted the power of healing that helps Kate regain her strength and get rid of her personal traumas.

In accordance with Cultural Critical Theory which asserts that individual identity is formed through the discourses that are circulating in an individual's culture, Walker's womanist philosophy of the power of love between women has emerged from her real intimate relationship with her mother, and grandmother. She finds in this kind of relationship a refuge that protects her from racist, classist and sexist oppression in her society. In addition, Walker's mother, like Kate's mother in the novel, helped her to be a renowned writer. Walker confirms that most of her novels were inspired by her mother. She states that "many of the stories that I write... are my mother's stories" (*Everyday* 47). In fact, affected by the notion of the power of love in which she was brought up and by her social, political and cultural milieu, Walker's womanist philosophy was formed and, consequently, was

---

reflected in her works. Even she states that she wrote *Now is the Time to Open Your Heart* as a memorial to her grandmother. In the preface of the novel, Walker writes that the novel is dedicated to her murdered paternal grandmother; she states that the "novel is a memorial to the psychic explorer she might have become" (*Now* xi).

In fact, Walker's use of ancestors in her writing is steeped in African American culture.

She is a womanist who connects with her ancestors, like Kate in the novel, she realizes that "connecting with one's ancestral past is a source of strength" (Hasanthi 6). Walker states:

I gathered up the historical and psychological threads of the life my ancestors lived, and in the writing of it I felt joy and strength and my own continuity...that wonderful feeling writers get sometimes, not very often, of being with a great many people, ancient spirits, all very happy to see me consulting and acknowledging them, and eager to let me know, through the joy of their presence, that indeed, I am not alone. ("Writing" 453)

In accordance with African American critical theory, which is concerned with demonstrating ancestors as one of the recurring themes of African American literature, Walker depends on the theme of ancestors in constructing her novel. The necessity of using ancestors in Walker's novel indicates the importance of the ancestral character in African American culture and literature. One of the ancestral figures in Walker's *Now is the Time to Open Your Heart* is Remus, a former slave. Through Remus's character, Walker "addressed the explicit connection between the African American ancestral past and the contemporary present" (Heczko 14).

Alice Walker has ascending womanist consciousness which develops the ancestral figure. According to Jana Heczko, Walker's use of the ancestral figure is an ambivalent one. Alice Walker's writings as Heczko says can be first interpreted or "perceived as deeply rooted within the tradition" and second, it can be "perceived as extending the literary tradition and the so-called black aesthetic" (9). In fact, Walker's *Now is the Time to Open Your Heart* can be perceived as a vessel for these different aspects.

The first interpretation was shown previously through the relationship between Kate and her grandmother.

---

It explains how this relationship helped Kate to overcome her personal trauma. Likewise, the African American literary tradition of ancestors appears again when Kate listened to Remus who came to her in her dream. He confers on Kate his wisdom in dealing with racism and how she can overcome any kind of oppression. He says to her that "our job is to remind you of ways you do want to be... There is also the question of loyalty to the dead. We need to avenge, to make right. To heal by a settling score. Healing cannot be done by settling a score"(100). Like Walker, Kate, after listening to her ancestor's speech, realizes the great role of ancestor in healing oneself and "the greatness of the historical past of the blacks" (Hasanthi 6). She feels peace with her ancestor's experience and advice that enlighten her present and future path. In other words, that relationship demonstrates the present needs of the past. It shows how "the ancestral figure is a sublime entity which excites admiration and respect in the subjects living in the present" (Heczko 3).

The second interpretation of Walker's writings as produced by Heczko was explored through Remus's figure. Although Remus teaches Kate how to deal with an oppressing system and how to face difficulties, he needs Kate's help. In their conversation, Remus tells Kate about his plight. As a slave, he had no right to express his opinion freely. With Kate's help, he can express his emotion and feeling. For the first time, he feels a sense of freedom. In other words, he needs the help of a character living in the present. Through Kate-Remus's conversation, Walker highlights the significant relationship between the present and the past. The present needs the past to form its identity and the past needs the present to be existent.

Affected by her cultural context, Walker uses storytelling which is another recurring theme in African American literature and a prominent feature of African American culture. In fact, storytelling, which is one of the folk motifs, is considered a prominent characteristic that distinguishes the African American literary tradition.

According to Tyson, the use of folk motifs that includes several character types and folk practices creates a connection between black American past and present. She adds:

The use of folk motifs includes a wide range of character types and folk practices... These character types include, for example, the local healer, the conjurer, the matriarch, the local storyteller..., the religious leader, and the folk hero. Folk practices include, for example, singing worksongs, hymns, and the blues; engaging in folk and

---

religious rituals as a way of maintaining community and continuity with the past; storytelling as a way of relating personal and group history and passing down traditional wisdom; passing down folk crafts and skills, ... and emphasizing the importance of naming, including pet names, nicknames, and being called out of one's name. (386)

In Walker's *Now is the Time to Open Your Heart*, Remus is an African American storyteller character that Walker uses to demonstrate the considerable relation between the African American past and present. In fact, African American people use storytelling as a means that provides an opportunity for enslaved black people to express their culture, experience, fear, and dreams. It reflects their riotous history and their continuous struggle against oppression. In the novel, Remus, who is a storyteller and a former slave, reflects his severe plight in his conversation with Kate. He explains:

My death took several lifetimes...I was shot through the heart. Killed instantly, they said. They hated I'd been killed instantly, they'd hoped to have some fun with me...There were centuries of terrorism...they stood looking down at me. And you know what, so disappointed was he to be robbed of the good time he'd looked forward to, of torturing me, that he turned on the man, who shot me and hit him. Right there, as I was dying...We are very old, our people. Not many could have suffered as we have and survived. (Walker, *Now* 95-96).

In Remus's character, Walker points out to slavery which is a recurring theme in African American literature. Through the theme of slavery, Walker demonstrates African American history, heritage, experience, and culture. Kate-Remus's conversation reflects the ancient history and life of African Americans. It, also, demonstrates the contemporary history and life of African American people. In other words, Walker's *Now is the Time to Open Your Heart* shapes and is shaped by the culture in which the author lives. In the novel, African Americans who live in the contemporary time, like Kate, have more privileges than the ancient ones. That is shown when Remus tells Kate "You are not a slave. You are wearing shoes" (Walker, *Now* 94). Walker's portrayal of Kate, as a well-published author who has

---

money and leisure time to embark on her spiritual journeys, indicates the vast change in African American life in present time.

In compliance with cultural theory, Walker's *Now is the Time to Open Your Heart* affects and is affected by its cultural context. Walker's experiences, like many African Americans, have been presented to readers through double vision or double consciousness. Double consciousness is "the awareness of belonging to two conflicting cultures: African culture, which grew from African roots and was transformed by its own unique history on American soil, and the European culture imposed by white Americans" (Tyson 362). Indeed, this duality reveals how African Americans face challenge in their identity that creates conflict and confusion in their lives.

Affected by her culture, Kate in *Now is the Time to Open Your Heart*, like Walker, appreciates some aspects of her own cultural heritage and denies some others. Walker's portrayal of Kate's character displays double consciousness in African American people. She reflects their cultural duality. In other words, Kate was portrayed as a black woman who is a representative of African American woman but acts as a white American one. In her mind and appearance, Kate has white human characteristics. Through the novel, Kate's behavior shows that she has a kind of white consciousness. She is proud of being an American and shouts "I am an American" (53). However, Kate's black consciousness emerges through the novel in many situations. One of them is when she refused Mr. Clean's views about revolutions. "She looked at him carefully...she saw he had grown up in an upper-middle-class home, had studied and lived in Europe...Was now a prominent professor at one of the country's most famous universities. Easy enough for him to dismiss the brown and black" (Walker, *Now* 5).



---

## Conclusion

This research is an attempt to explain how Alice Walker's *Now is the Time to Open Your Heart* has influence and is influenced by different discourses circulating in Walker's own culture. The paper used three critical theories: cultural theory, African American theory, and feminist theory, in the analysis of Walker's novel. The analysis demonstrated that Walker's novel has affected and was affected by various aspects of its author's culture. The effect of cultural heritage on the novel was shown through Walker's use of recurring African American themes such as spirituality, ancestors, and slavery. The research also pointed out that Walker's novel effectively participated and influenced in the tradition of African American writing. This was shown through the use of storytelling as a means which reflected African American culture and experience. The analysis, also, revealed how black feminist discourses that were circulating in Walker's time affected Walker's novel.

Black feminist discourses like gender and race violence against black women stimulated Walker's womanist philosophy to emerge as was reflected in Walker's novel. In other words, Walker affected and was affected by black feminist discourses that were circulating in her time. In the novel, Walker reflected her womanist philosophy which was shaped by her culture, history, and experience. As a womanist, Walker remarkably explored and presented her belief in the power of sisterhood and love. In *Now is the Time to Open Your Heart*, Kate as a womanist, like Walker, developed her womanist consciousness and could to achieve her womanist wholeness that helped her to overcome her plight and to help other women to become true womanists. Through the achievement of her self-assurance and fulfillment, indeed, Alice Walker's *Now is the Time to Open Your Heart* demonstrates how the novel shapes and is shaped by its author's cultural context.

---

## Works Cited

- Bethel, Lorraine. "This Infinity of Conscious Pain: Zora Neale Hurston and the Black Female Literary Tradition. *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave*. Eds. Gloria T. Hull & Patricia B. Scott. Old Westbury: Feminist Press, 1982. 176-188.
- Gayles, Gloria. "Black Southern Womanist: The Genius of Alice Walker". *Southern Women Writers, the New Generation*. Ed. Tonettle B. Inge. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1990. 301-302.
- Ghazi, Ahmed. *Ecofeminism as a Means of Spiritual Healing of Kate's Character in Alice Walker's Novel "Now is the Time to Open Your Heart"*.
- 23May. 2020. Web. 3July, 2020  
<<http://www.researchgate.net/publication/341600276>>
- Greenblatt, Stephen. "Culture". *Critical Terms for Literary Study*. Eds. Frank Lentricchia & Thomas McLaughlin. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955. 225-232.
  - Hassanthi, Ranta. *Womanist Consciousness in Alice Walker's Now is the Time to Open Your Heart*. May, 2015. Web. 2 Feb. 2020.  
<<http://www.researchgate.net/publication/338111964>>
- Heczkova, Jana. *Timeless People: The Development of the Ancestral Figure in Three Novels by Alice Walker*. 2008. Web. 22 Jan. 2020. <<http://www.copas.uni-regensburg.de>>
- Hook, Bell. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Centre*. Cambridge: South End Press, 2000.
- King, Debra. *Alice Walker's Jesus: A Womanist Paradox*. 2018. Web. 5 Jan. 2020.  
<<http://www.forumonpublicpolicy>>
- O'Brien, John. *Interviews with Black Writers*. New York: Liveright, 1973.
- Templeton, Alice. *Sociology and Literature: Theories for Cultural Criticism*. 2June. 1992. Web. 3Jan. 2020.  
<<http://www.jstor.org/stable/25111946>>

- 
- Tyson, Lois. *Critical Theory Today*. New York: Routledge, 2006.
  - Walker, Alice. *Everyday Use*. New Jersey: Rutgers University, 1994.
  - ---. *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984.
  - ---. Interview by Robert Zeliger. *Interview: Alice Walker*. 23 Jun. 2011. Web. 23 Dec. 2019. < **Error! Hyperlink reference not valid.**
  - ---. *Now is the Time to Open Your Heart*. New York: Random House, 2004.
  - ---. "Preface". *Now is the Time to Open Your Heart*. New York: Random House, 2004. xi
  - ---. "Writing the Color Purple". *Black Women Writers (1950-1980): A Critical Evaluation*. Ed. Mari Evans. New York: Doubleday, 1984. 453-456.
  - Wane, Njoki. "African Women and Spirituality: Connections between Thought and Education". *Expanding the Boundaries of Transformative Learning*. Eds. Edmund O'Sullivan, Mary O'Conner & A. Morrell. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002. 135-150.