

**ECOWOMANISM IN ALICE WALKER'S *THE COLOR PURPLE***

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Women and nature are indispensable parts of the works of Alice Walker and she has empathetically written about them. Through her novels, Walker has brought into focus the exploitation of women and the environment. Her Pulitzer Prize winning novel *The Color Purple* (1982) is a manifestation of ecowomanism. Walker in her novels has given equal importance to men, women, animals and inanimate nature to promote an ecocentric world view through womanism. In the novel, *The Color Purple* she has linked environmental issues to questions of gender and race. This paper traces the ecowomanist consciousness of the main female characters in the novel. The ecowomanism that goes beyond ecofeminism, employed in the novel, asserts that both nature and women are to be handled with care. Walker shows how an ecological perspective when linked with womanism is a harbinger of true self-reliance and happiness for women. Shug, Celie, Sofia and Squeak enrich their lives with ecowomanist awareness, overcome tribulations, become truly self-reliant and triumphant by the end of the novel. Walker through the novel asks women to develop and put forth their ecowomanist awareness in action, by promoting eco-friendly ways of life.

Keywords: *Ecocriticism, Ecowomanism, Ecofeminism, Ecology, Ecosphere*

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Women and nature are indispensable parts of the works of Alice Walker and she has empathetically written about them. Through her novels, Walker has brought into focus the exploitation of women and the environment. Her Pulitzer Prize winning novel *The Color Purple* (1982) is a manifestation of ecowomanism. Definitions of the words ecology and ecosystem, throw light on the interconnectivity amidst the flora and fauna on planet earth. The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines 'Ecology' as "the relation of plants and living

creatures to each other and to their environment" ("Ecology," Def. 485). It defines 'Ecosystem' as "all plants and living creatures in a particular area considered in relation to their physical environment" ("Ecosystem," Def.486). Both the definitions show the connectivity between the animate and inanimate world. Perchance, human beings have dominated the ecosystem and have modified it for their benefit. This has created an imbalance in ecology which needs to be corrected for posterity on the planet earth. Moreover, the relationship between man and the



non-human part of the environment has been a lopsided one, with man dominating the rest, even women. Walker in her novels has given equal importance to men, women, animals and inanimate nature to promote an ecocentric world view through womanism. In the novel, *The Color Purple* she has linked environmental issues to questions of gender and race.

Ecocriticism talks about environmental degeneration, pollution, global warming, climate changes, and species extinction. It stresses on the need to usher in environmental awareness through proper representation in literature. Ecocritics like Cheryl Glotfelty, Lawrence Buell and Greg Garrard, through their works like *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1996), *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing and the Formation of American Culture* (1995) and *Ecocriticism* (2004) have talked about the ecological crisis faced by modern man, and have suggested ecological solutions like returning to nature and interdisciplinary study of environmental degradation. They haven't focussed on the link between oppression of women and degradation of the environment, which is important for the emancipation of both women and the environment. The term 'Ecofeminism' first appeared in 1974 in Françoise d'Eaubonne's *Le Féminisme ou la mort*, in which she talked about the direct link between the oppression of nature and the oppression of women. It is to be observed that: "Sexism and exploitation of the environment are parallel forms of domination" (Warren i). As adroitly pointed out by Spretnak "Ecofeminism will address not only the interlinked dynamics in patriarchal culture of terror of nature and the terror of elemental power of the female, but also the ways of the mesmerizing conditioning that keeps women and men so cut off from our grounding in the natural world, so alienated from our larger sense of self" (6). Ecofeminists have depicted how women are tied to nature and how feminist issues cannot be separated from ecological issues. They haven't linked issues of racism to environmental issues along with that of gender, which ecowomanism does.

Alice Walker coined the term 'Womanism' in her collection of essays titled *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983) to speak about and against the oppression faced by women of colour. In it, she has said that, a womanist is "A black feminist or feminist of color. . . . Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength. . . ." She has further stated that a womanist "Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. Regardless" (Walker *In Search* xi-xii). From the aforesaid definitions, it is clear that love for nature is an integral part of womanism. Walker through her literary oeuvre has showcased her concern for black women and the environment. As hinted by ecofeminists Spretnak and others, Walker advocates 'ecological wisdom' as a route to the prevention of environmental degradation. She has surpassed the concept of ecofeminism bringing into focus the questions of race along with gender, by proposing an un-anthropocentric attitude towards nature, to solve the problems created by the nexus of race and gender. As put forth by Smith the term Ecofeminist "expresses the perception that the degradation of the Earth is of a piece with the subordinating and bullying of women, racial minorities, the poor and the marginalized, the term 'ecowomanist' expresses the burden of this perception on a woman of color" (476). Moreover, ecowomanism is based on the authentic experience of African American women.

Walker as a committed ecowomanist incites her readers through a composed, reticent investigation and study of the threats shoved on nature by human beings in their specious ways. She suggests that the indemnities of environmental pollution, deforestation, and global warming need to be corrected by developing true ecowomanist consciousness. She upholds the view that, this alone can topple patriarchal hierarchy and preserve the interests of women and the environment. The works of Alice Walker are effectual pieces of protest, that reverberate with environmental issues like nurture nature, deforestation, nuclear disarmament and



preservation of nature centered culture and many other issues concerned with the upliftment of women. The novel *The Color Purple* brims with ecowomanist consciousness. This paper traces the ecowomanist consciousness of the main female characters in the novel. The ecowomanism that goes beyond ecofeminism employed in the novel, asserts that both nature and women are to be handled with care.

Black women much before their import to America have been children nurtured by nature within a matriarchal culture that protected their interests. After their import to America, they have been denied a true understanding of nature along with their own true nature. Their being and interests have been sabotaged to nurture and protect the interests of patriarchal culture instituted and propagated by the white man. Submerged and subjugated under a white patriarchal system, nature alone remained their source of happiness and solace. On account of their closeness to nature, they were labelled and castigated as pagans, heathens and witches. Moreover, patriarchal religiosity in the name of Christianity disengaged them from an ecocentric world view and coerced them to an anthropocentric world view. Walker through her works has sincerely tried to usher in an ecocentric worldview to protect the interests of nature and human beings as pointed out by Capra. Capra in *The Web of Life: A New Synthesis of Mind and Matter* (1996) has clearly elucidated the "complex interweaving of living and non-living systems within a single web" (209). Walker like Capra endorses the preservation of the ecosystem for the better survival of women of colour and mankind.

Walker in her work *Living by the Word: Selected Writings 1973-1987* (1988) has shown how racism and sexism are connected to environmental issues by stating that "some of us have become used to the thinking that woman is the nigger of the world, that a person of color is the nigger of the world, that a poor person is the nigger of the world. But in truth, Earth itself has become the nigger of the world. . ." (147). Walker in *The Color Purple*, the most famous of all her novels, has put forth the aforesaid perspective. It brings into focus the metamorphosis

in the life of Celie the protagonist of the novel, after she develops an ecowomanist consciousness, and establishes a true communion with nature. Walker shows how an ecological perspective when linked with womanism is a harbinger of true self-reliance and happiness for women. Though gender issues amidst racism pervade the novel, it is the ecological perspective that gives the women characters the duress to reclaim their selves. Walker in the preface to the tenth edition of *The Color Purple* has rightly said that purple is the "color that is always a surprise but is everywhere in nature". As implicated in the aforesaid statement, the novel truly showcases the links between race, gender and nature.

Walker in the novel explores the connections between women and nature through spiritual amendments. She has said that "In day-today life, I worship the Earth as God-- representing everything-- and nature as its spirit" (Walker Anything 9). She argues that an anthropocentric, patriarchal Christian view that the universe is only for man, will be very taxing for the ecosystem and she recommends paganism as a way of promoting an ecocentric worldview. As pointed out by Pamela Smith, Walker asks for the adoption of "pan-religious and pantheist sensibilities" (7), as they alone can save the ecosphere. Celie in *The Color Purple* realizes this perspective through the enlightenment of Shug. She makes Celie realize that she is not an insignificant part of creation. Real redemption happens for Celie when she "discovers that she is part of 'the creation,' that she fits into the natural order of the world, . ." (Barker 61-62). This spiritual rebirth of Celie is far away from patriarchal religiosity and is an outcome of her developing ecowomanist perspective.

Walker through the novel drives home the point that the critique of patriarchy alone can lead to the preservation of the interests of women and the earth. She showcases that patriarchal forces erase rituals and culture that embrace female sexuality and pleasure. Walker in the novel advocates that a free female sexuality alone can give humans a respite from their burdened sexuality. Free sexuality is part of animate nature and Walker argues against it, being tabooed. Regarding this, Loyal King has astutely stated that: "Walker's womanist is in touch with her



own fluid sexuality, which she shares at her discretion and pleasure with women and/or men. The womanist embraces and openly expresses her sexuality in relationships with others" (138). The lesbian relationship that Celie has with Shug can be viewed as an attack "on male hegemony, especially the violent abuse of black women by black men, . . . as a revolutionary leap forward into a new social order based on sexual egalitarianism" (Bell 263). Shug embraces her bisexuality with grace and so does Celie later on. Sofia discovers her sexuality with Buster. Squeak discovers it after overcoming the trauma of rape. The solacing sisterhood offered by the women around her, helps her open up, and overthrow unwanted male domination. Walker opines that an unencumbered sexuality can bestow wholeness on the lives of women and help them nurture humanity and nature, and she has promoted the same through the novel.

Walker in her work *Anything We Love Can Be Saved: A Writer's Activism* (1997) has disclosed her urge to take a walk amidst nature and see its beauty. She has said that this brings to her mind many blacks who she has known "are flexible like the grass and sheltering like the trees" (111). The solacing quality of nature has been given importance in the text *The Color Purple*. Celie imagines herself as a tree, while facing domestic violence under Albert. Celie tells Harpo, her stepson: "I say to myself, Celie, you a tree" (Walker *Color* 22). Imagining herself as a tree, gives her the strength to combat oppression, offer resistance and make life a happy ride. Shug shelters the other women characters in the novel, like a tree, under her ecowomanist wisdom and makes them self-reliant. Furthermore, Celie as a self-reliant entrepreneur gets firmly rooted like a tree and offers employment to many women. Walker advocates that human suffering and devastation of nature, can be surmounted when the toxicity in the mind, body and the earth are removed completely. Moreover, the text is profusely laden with vivid descriptions of nature.

Reclamation of the body and spirit are very important for a woman to redeem herself and nurture nature and Walker promotes this concept through the novel. Celie discovers herself with the

help of Shug, and in the process reclaims both her body and spirit, by saving it from domestic abuse, nurturing it, and discovering her sexuality. Sofia Butler, wife of Harpo finds a new home and boyfriend to overthrow the nonchalance, and male chauvinism of Harpo. Squeak overcomes the domination and domestic violence of Harpo and reclaims her voice. Celie and Shug revitalize themselves with ecowomanist awareness and become whole and are ready to face life with renewed strength. Walker through the novel showcases that nature is the greatest revitalizer of life.

Preservation of matriarchal culture alone can outcast patriarchal domination, and protect the interests of women and the environment. Walker clearly showcases this in the novel. Celie is introduced to soothing blues songs by Shug and Squeak. They introduce her to the possibility of finding one's voice and being, and highlighting them for the positive catalysis of the self. Walker through *The Color Purple* endorses the idea of Sherley Ann Williams, who has talked about the solacing quality of blues songs as they express the pain and triumph of the black community. She has said: "pain plays a large part in Black music is evident in the lyrics of the blues, . . . Yet, there is the beautiful lyricism . . . which also expresses triumph and transcendence, the sly humor and laughing confidence, the will to make it on through, to work it on out . . ." (144). The women characters in the aforesaid novel realize this and revitalize themselves with blues songs, to realize their selves and lessen the burden of racism, sexism and classism by establishing an emotional connection with the black community on the whole. With their help, they come close to nature and their true nature.

Walker asks women to stand against patriarchal power by dismantling the hierarchies established by organized religion and cultural practices that place women and mother earth below the interests of man and his monopoly. Walker believes that "all of creation is of the same substance and therefore deserving ... same respect ... We are connected to them [animals] at least as intimately as we are connected to trees" (Walker "*The Universe*



Responds" 307-308). Having said so, she has spoken against the anthropocentric view of man's supremacy over the rest of nature. Walker endorses the view that connectivity between things in this world is cyclic. Walker has said that a womanist "Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. Regardless" (Walker, *In Search* xii). This definition implicates the ecological perspective of womanism. The ecological womanism or ecowomanism employed in the novels gives equal importance to both animate and inanimate aspects of nature. The healing circles that the women characters in the novel establish with their sisterhood, are evocative of the aforesaid statement. Eleanor Jane, the mayor's daughter in *The Color Purple* realizes this and comes in unison with Celie, Shug, Sofia and Squeak, keeping aside her hierarchy. The reversal of gender roles showcased at the end of the novel between Celie and Albert, and Sofia and Harpo hint at the dismantled hierarchies in the novel. The dismantled hierarchies aid in establishing better relationships between men and women, blacks and whites in the novel, and help the women characters preserve their interests including nature.

Walker has talked of a pantheistic perspective of God in an interview with John O'Brien. She has said that "Certainly I don't believe there's a God beyond nature. The world is God, man is God, So is a leaf or a snake . . ." (75). The aforesaid quote reflects the ecological perspective of her thinking and her womanist ideology. She speaks against the thought of Eve being labelled as a temptress. She defies the thought pattern that God is a 'he' and is traditionally found in the "white folks' white bible" (Walker *Color* 202). Shug elucidates to Celie, to overlook the hierarchy established by white Christianity by explaining to her that "God is inside you and inside everybody else You come into the world with God. But only them that search for it inside find it. And sometimes it just manifest itself even if you are not looking, or don't know what you are looking for" (Walker *Color* 202). Departure from Christianity to pantheism, first followed by Shug and later on by Celie can be best summarized in Shug's words as "My first step from the old white man was trees. Then

air. Then birds. Then other people" (Walker *Color* 203). Walker having made Shug say so, in the novel, asks women to be authoritative tools of change for themselves, planet earth and future generations. This initiates a positive change in Celie's conception of God. Celie realizes how racism has been deviously connected to Christianity by whites and patriarchy. Commenting on this aspect of the novel, Rashmi Gaur has fittingly recorded that "Celie's changing attitude to life records a shift in her attitude towards God too. . . . At a later stage when she is put on a path of recovering her identity she is also able to understand the full extents of gender-based and racial connotation of Christian patriarchy" (173). Nettie and Samuel though Christian missionaries dwell deep on the act of "not being tied to what God looks like" (Walker *Color* 218). This helps them overthrow white monopoly of Christianity. The ecowomanist thread in the text encourages unity between God, humans and nature especially between God, women and nature. This realization empowers the women characters in the novel.

Resurrection of nature, its worship and preservation are of utmost importance to ecowomanism and Walker has talked about them in *The Color Purple*. Celie finds solace amidst the clamour of plantation life, nurturing nature on the farm. Shug makes her realize that "it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it" (Walker *Color* 167). Later on, Celie becomes a self-reliant entrepreneur and builds a home in Memphis for herself amidst nature with many artefacts of nature, symbolic of her ecowomanist awareness. Celie and Shug impart this awareness to the other women characters in the novel and accentuate their ecowomanist awareness. Nettie's stay in Olinka speaks about how, nature worship and preservation be it as simple as the worship of the roof leaf can act as a source of strength to fight oppression. Moreover, Walker has cleverly linked issues of environmental pollution, deforestation, and global warming with Nettie's stay in Olinka. She has showcased how destruction of greenery leads to the aforesaid problems, one after the other, even in a thickly vegetated country like Olinka. As pointed out by Bush "Through Netties



story, the theme of women's exploitation by men is set in the larger context of the exploitative relationship between races and nations" (1039). The act of making a spiritual union with nature helps Nettie in healing herself after having seen the ecological disaster the white man has made out of Olinka.

The Ecowomanist transformation in Celie is established by the fact that Celie addresses the last letter to everything that matters to the ecosphere. She starts it writing "Dear God, Dear Stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear everything . . ." (Walker *Color* 292). With her ecowomanist metamorphosis, Celie gets all that she wants, and deserves in life. Walker, the writer par excellence, environmental activist, lover and "worshiper of nature" (Walker *In Search* xi), through the novel endorses the view that close contact with nature is a manifestation of the female spirit and it helps women in realizing their true potential. Shug, Celie, Sofia, and Squeak enrich their lives with ecowomanist awareness, overcome tribulations and become truly self-reliant and triumphant by the end of the novel.

The women characters in the novel overcome all the hindrances that have hindered their mental and spiritual evolution earlier. Ecological womanism needs hard-headed persuasion and application and Walker recommends this through the novel. Through the novel, she drives home the point that the subjugation of women and the conflagration that men have made of mother earth needs immediate amendments. Walker through the novel asks women to develop and put forth their ecowomanist awareness in action, through their activism, and by promoting eco-friendly ways of life.

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