



Reading Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* through the lens of Ecofeminism

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Abstract: In this paper, it is examined that how Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple* contributes to the ideas of ecological consciousness and environmental protection, by using a combination of ecocriticism and feminist criticism. It is analyzed that how the portrayal of women and nature in the novel draws connections between the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature by male dominance. Using an ecofeminist perspective, the paper concludes that Alice Walker's novel promotes the liberation of women and nature from domination and violence, and envisions a future where there is no oppression of women or exploitation of the environment.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, nature, feminism, patriarchy, exploitation and domination

Introduction:

Nature is full of incredible wonders, but our natural resources are being destroyed due to human greed for profit. Non-human beings that sustain us are being harmed by human actions. Unfortunately, literary theory and criticism often ignore the importance of nature while discussing issues like race, class, and gender. Theology traditionally places God and humanity above nature, leading to a belief that the physical world is separate from the divine. However, in the 1970s, the emergence of ecofeminism brought attention to the connection between feminism and environmentalism. This movement highlights the commonalities between the two and emphasizes the importance of the relationship between women and nature. In the late 1700s, political revolutions in America and France brought about significant social changes that emphasized individual rights. However, these rights were mainly for white men, and the rights of women, black slaves, Native Americans, and indentured servants were largely ignored. Ecofeminism aims to strengthen the connection between women and nature by criticizing the parallel oppressions they face and promoting an ethic of care and solidarity. Ecofeminists have made a significant contribution by asserting that the exploitation of natural resources and the mistreatment of women are interrelated. Their feminist perspective is in direct opposition to the traditional patriarchal approach of considering the environment as separate from human issues. This groundbreaking concept highlights the importance of considering the relationship between gender, society, and the environment in order to create a more sustainable future. What makes ecofeminism distinct is "its insistence that nonhuman nature and naturism (i.e., the unjustified domination of nature) are feminist issues. Ecofeminist philosophy extends familiar feminist critiques of social isms of domination to nature" (Warren 4). Ecofeminism is an "ideology which authorizes oppressions, based on race, gender, class, sexuality, physical abilities and species is the same ideology which sanctions the oppression of nature" (Gaard 2). Ecofeminism criticizes patriarchal society's thoughts that "white male human identity [is] separate from and superior to the identities of women, people of color, animals and the natural world" (Gaard 9).

The Color Purple and Ecofeminism:

Alice Walker clearly adopts an ecofeminist position in that she recognizes environmental exploitation and sexism as parallel manifestations of masculine dominance. Walker acknowledges that she is dedicated to both the cause of nature and the cause of black women. Walker's prose is drenched with environmental concern. Walker asserts that if we don't change, the planet will undo us and become the world's nadir. *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker is an epistolary novel published in 1982, which tells the story of Celie, a black woman living in the South. Through her letters to God, Celie shares her life experiences and ponder over them, which leads to improve her personal growth. The novel focuses on the double repression of black women in American society, facing discrimination from both the white community and black males. Despite these

challenges, the novel's central theme is the triumph of good over evil, as the protagonist overcomes distress and forgives her oppressors. The novel's success is attributed to its ecofeminist perspective, where the protagonist shifts from a male-centered God to an ecocentric God, embracing all beings of nature regardless of their race and gender.

Celie is in a terrible state as she is subjected to physical, sexual, emotional, and social abuse. At a tender age, she becomes pregnant and despite not being at fault, cultural norms condemn her. The abuse she endures makes her feel inferior and separates her from the traditional group of girls. The opening line of the novel is "you better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mummy" (Walker 1). This threat connotes that God knows and understands everything. It is described about the society in which men are wicked and dominant, and women are often silent and subject to male aggression. Women like Celie, the protagonist, feel acrimony toward their own bodies due to the violence and mistreatment they experience. They turn to writing letters to God as a way of expressing their thoughts and feelings in a safe space. This societal structure leads to women feeling inferior and hating their feminine selves. In this society, men are aggressive and women are expected to acquiesce to their dominance. Black women are the "creatures so abused and mutilated in body, so dimmed and confused by pain that they considered themselves unworthy of hope" (Walker 219). This scenario arises due to the patriarchal society that mirrors the historical gender roles of men and women. It is a clear example of those who have power exerting it over those who do not. The ecofeminist movement not only criticizes these patriarchal beliefs but also seeks to eliminate them entirely, in order to eliminate any stratified distinctions between individuals. In the novel, Walker uses an epistolary format that challenges the male-dominated conventions of Western literature. Celie writes letters to God because she has nobody else to confide in and is too scared to share her thoughts with anyone. "...all I can do [is] not to cry. I make myself wood. I say to myself, Celie, you a tree" (Walker 27). Celie "attempt(s) to negate her pain by desensitizing herself creates within her emotionally hollow spaces" (Walker 84). The situation described results in division, disconnection, and lack of accountability. The analogy of a tree being exploited by humans is used to illustrate how Celie is also silenced and passive. Celie understands that trees, like herself, may resent humans for their destructive actions and pollution.

When Shug Avery, the lover of Celie's husband, comes into her life, Celie begins to appreciate the beauty of her own body. Through Shug's guidance, Celie discovers the mysteries of the body and learns to express herself, ultimately leading to her liberation from the abusive men in her life. Celie sees Shug as a mentor and friend. Shug introduces Celie to new activities and a different lifestyle, which Celie adopts wholeheartedly. Shug also changes Celie's perspective on God, whom she had previously viewed as a male confidant and protector, and instead Shug becomes a female liberator who instills self-confidence in Celie. Now Celie's views are that "God ain't a he or she, but a It" (Walker 213). No Celie believes in pantheism, and thus considers God's existence in nature. In a 1973 interview Walker states, "Certainly I don't believe there is a God, although I would like to believe there is a God beyond nature. The world is God. Man is God. So is a leaf or snake" (qtd. in Scholl 265).

The protagonist of the novel, Celie, is the representative of a community of women, who has the ability to survive, be independent, and free herself from patriarchal control. However, her sister, Nettie, is the one who desires to transform herself and others, particularly the lives of tribal people. Nettie is an ecofeminist who empathizes with the Olinka tribe, their reverence for the roof-leaf, and their struggle to maintain the beauty and strength of their colony. Nettie, along with the missionary family of Samuel and Corrine, travels to Africa and is warmly welcomed by the tribal people. During the welcome ceremony, one of the villagers tells the story of the greedy village chief who wanted more land to plant more crops on the land where the life protector, roof-leaf, grew. However, a storm destroys all the houses and leaves the huts roofless, resulting in a lack of roof-leaf, and the people suffer from fever, ultimately leading to the death of half the village. The roof-leaf becomes scarce until the villagers eventually find its roots after five years, and it becomes the object of their worship. Overall, the novel can be read as Celie's story, but it can also be seen as the story of Nettie, who is committed to the welfare of the Olinka tribe and understands their traditions and struggles. For Olinka tribe, "the roofleaf is not Jesus Christ but in its own humble way, is it not God?" (Walker 165). The Caucasian man exploits the land of the tribe to establish a rubber plantation. Initially, Nettie views the Olinka as a self-sufficient and natural people, but she is surprised to discover their vulnerability to the invasion of the white ruler. The Olinka people are happy to receive the new road but are unaware of its negative consequences. The road ends up destroying their homes and fields, as well as the church, school, and Nettie's hut. The village chief is outraged and travels to the coast to demand an explanation and compensation for the road construction. Upon his return, he informs the village that the entire area, including their land, is now owned by the rubber manufacturer in England. Walker acknowledges the close relationship between culture and nature within the Olinka tribe, and how the preservation of local culture is linked to the protection of environment. Through her portrayal of Olinka tribal life, Walker depicts them as the most environmentally conscious people. However, Nettie observes that the Olinka's way of life is being exploited due to the prioritization of culture over the environment. The white man slowly infiltrates the Olinka village like a cancerous cell, destroying it from within. They first build roads to transport their goods, then cut down the tribes' revered trees for their ships and furniture. Next, they plant crops that cannot be eaten on the land. Finally, the tribes are forced to work as slaves on their own land. This causes the tribes to feel a deep sense of loss and displacement, as they have a strong connection to their land, which they consider sacred. The devastation of the Olinka village is a clear example of modernization, where the pursuit of development leads to the rupture of ecological and cultural bonds that the tribes have

established with nature. “But the culturally rooted tribal is made physically homeless by being uprooted from the soil of her/his ancestors” (Shiva 98). The forest’s natural beauty has been preserved thanks to the traditional practices of the indigenous people. However, the rejection of these practices due to modernization and colonialism’s oppressive tendencies has resulted in the current ecological crisis.

Conclusion:

Ecofeminism is a belief system that opposes the dualistic view of nature and humanity and instead emphasizes the interconnectedness of all living beings. It rejects the idea of transcending nature and emphasizes the need to embrace it. Ecofeminism seeks to challenge the cultural oppression of women by transforming the men who perpetuate it. Women must come together to support one another and resist unfair treatment. “They must unite the demands of the women’s movement with those ecological movement to envision a radical reshaping of the basic socio-economic relations” (Ruether 204). In the novel, female characters come together to create a supportive sisterhood as a means of survival in a male-dominated world. The formation of mutually beneficial bonds among women is seen as the only solution to the oppressive conditions they face.

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