



An Exploration of Nature and Woman in the novel *The Color Purple*: An Eco-feminist Study

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Abstract: Eco-feminism is an admixture of a political and philosophical theory and as a movement which juxtaposes the concern of nature with woman as both are suffering from male dominated society. Nature and woman both can be the best companion for a man if he treats them well. This is what eco-feminism wants to teach to the patriarchal society of the world. And this is also the key consideration of Alice Walker in her masterpiece novel *The Color Purple* (1982). This novel provided to Alice Walker a distinguished place in the canon of black female writers in modern America. Throughout the novel Walker displays her eco-feminist consciousness to fabricate a harmonious society where everyone and everything i. e. human and nature, man and woman, human and animals can co-existent peacefully; as an Eden garden where Adam and Eve can live peacefully without a Satan like social evils. The novel contains vivid imageries of nature and pathetic condition of women and also the exploitation of both the nature and woman in the male dominated society. The paper will explore the relation between nature and woman how they are equally suppressed in the male dominated society. The paper will go after the psychological impact of colonizer on the colonized people and also the all time pervaded theme racism in the Black Literature. And the paper will also analyze Alice Walker as an eco-feminist and ecowomanist writer in the novel *The Color Purple*.

Key words: eco-feminism, ecowomanism, racism, ecological conscience, exploitation, interconnectedness, nature.

I. Introduction:

Eco-feminism as a word combines itself ecology and feminism and as a theory it differs from radical feminism and go for a harmonious society. It seeks emotional, philosophical, spiritual and natural connection between woman and nature.

The French writer Francoise d'Eaubonne coined the term in her book *Le Feminisme ou la Morte* (1974). It is the next branch of feminism and political ecology that retraces the suppression and exploitation of women and nature. "Eco-feminists argue that patriarchal society's values and beliefs have resulted in the oppression of both women and nature. It ignores women's work, knowledge and 'situatedness' (her immediate location in nature, where the relationship with the environment is far more intimate that of a man's)" (Nayar, Pramod K, 2017, p. 249).

Although, naturally, biological differences are accepted by women, but the consideration that woman is inferior to man in all the arena is not accepted to women, and it should not be. From the ancient time nature is symbolized as woman and now the very fact is true that the connection is very strong between woman and nature. In Indian culture nature is also symbolized as female and called 'Prakriti'; with full of destructive and constructive energy. Vandana Shiva, in her book *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India*, opines that "Without Shakti, Shiva, the symbol for the force of creation and destruction, is as powerless as a crops"(p. 39). Western thinking of nature is different from Indian perspective they have thought that nature is there to cater human needs and that very thinking they also kept for women. John Lock, a prominent English philosopher and also known as the "Father of Liberalism," had a belief that all the humans must consider their land as their private property. The worst destruction begins when British industrialization and colonization began to stretch their wings to all over the globe. Natives of the colonies were reckoned as a part and parcel of nature but now they became the victim of colonizers. The colonizers raped their culture, custom, beliefs, and their natural resources. Nature had to bear the brunt due to industrialization and it is continuously bearing disservice. Charlene



Spretnak opines that, “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 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” (p. 6). We find strong resistance in Romantic literature where some writers and philosophers seek their shelter in nature. Wordsworth as a writer and Jean Jacques Rousseau as a philosopher were the biggest lover of nature. Rousseau considered nature as innocent but civilization as artificial and vitiated. Jeremy Bentham was one of the first person who has sympathy for animals he completely opposed cruelty to animals.

Alice Walker is a prolific American writer who has written novels, short stories, poetries and she also works as a social activist. In 1983 she is bestowed with Pulitzer Prize for her most famous novel *The Color Purple* which is a paragon for eco-feminist study. In the work of Alice Walker nature and woman play an indispensable role and she endows full opportunity to her characters to explore their identity in the male structured society. As a writer she begins her writing with the poem her first published work is a poetry collection named *Once* (1968), and then she shifted her writing to novels and short stories and published her first novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* in 1970. Her other famous works are *Meridian* (1976), *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989), *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down: Stories* (1982), and *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992). In all her works it seems that the ink of her pen is filled with the pain of women especially Black woman, for it she coined the term ‘Womanist’ in her collection *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* in 1983. The term was so influential and it united and concerned about the Black women and the feminist movement with the common pain of race, class, and gender exploitation. The notion of Alice Walker about woman and nature establishes a world of ecowomanism in the novel *The Color Purple*. This paper will ascertain ecowomanist consciousness of the protagonist of the novel who wants to create such utopia where man, woman, and nature could live peacefully and harmoniously.

II. Discussion:

The novel begins with an unorthodoxly manner where an uneducated 14-year-old African-American teenager girl Celie write a letter not to human but to God to complain for rape which is done by her own step-father Alphonso. For the past

woman it is deemed that women are not for pen and pencil but for the domestic servant in the patriarchal society. Here in the novel Alice Walker breaks this pedantic and conservative thinking of male dominated society. In the novel when Harpo is asked to bring water then he negates and shows the male supremacy over female:

Harpo, she say. Harpo the oldest boy. Harpo, don't let Celie be the one bring in all the water. You a big boy now. Time for you to help out some.

Women work, he say.

What? she say.

Women work, I'm a man. (Walker, 2014, p. 22).

Celie, the protagonist of the novel, relates her pathetic situation to a docile tree when she is beaten by her abusive father and stated that, “It all I can do not to cry. I make myself wood I say to myself, Celie, you a tree. That's how come I know trees fear man” (Walker, 2014, p. 23). Celie sensate herself hapless in the male dominated society; a place where no one takes care of woman's emotions, feelings, and even her consent. She said about her husband whenever he makes physical relationship with her, he “never ast me how I feel, nothing. Just do his business, get off, go to sleep” (Walker, 2014, p. 74).

Alice Walker peeps into every nook and corner of male dominated society where every rules, custom, culture, language, religious institutions, myths etc. are phallogocentric. That unethical phallogocentric construction of society requites an adverse repercussion as Celie's fear of men is the result of it. Celie writes about her physical suffering and mental torture that, “He beat me today cause he say I winked at a boy in church. I may have got somethin in my eye but I did't wink. I don't even look at mens. That's the truth. I look at women, tho, cause I'm not scared of them” (Walker, 2014, p. 7). Alice Walker can be seen in the novel as a social activist and her consideration for the Black people who were suffering from colonial rule where Blacks were selling and buying as a cattle and they were punished and treated also like cattle. In a letter Nettie wrote to her sister Celie about slave trading that, “I read where the Africans sold us because they loved money more than their own sisters and brothers” (Walker, 2014, p. 119). Racism is the most pervaded theme in the Black literature so it is also present in the novel and Alice Walker opines that, “... black people can not be naked because they can not be white” (Walker, 2014, p. 249). In the colonial rule the colonized were deprived of several human rights and they are not allowed to



seek pleasure centric deeds as Nettie describes in a letter to her sister Celie that, "Only white people can ride in the beds and use the restaurant. And they have different toilets from colored" (Walker, 2014, p. 121).

As an eco-feminist writer Alice Walker's concern is so deep towards nature and woman and through her novel she endeavors to retrace the deep connection between woman and nature and finds that all living and non-living things are interconnected and ostensibly women have special connection with nature. When a woman finds herself as a destitute human being in male dominated society she automatically finds nature as her best companion and the healer of her all agonies, as in the novel Shug Avery states that, "My first step from the old white man was trees. Then air. Then birds. Then other people. But one day when I was sitting quite and feeling like a motherless child, which I was, it come to me: that feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all. I knew that if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed" (Walker, 2014, p. 176). Alice Walker is also concerned about the destruction of natural resources for native people where nature plays the role of doctor and administers medicines to Olinka people as Nettie writes in a letter that, "In plowing under the Olinka's yam crop and substituting canned and powdered goods, the planters destroyed what makes them resistant to malaria. Of course they did not know this, they only wanted to take the land for rubber, but the Olinka have been eating yams to prevent malaria and to control chronic blood disease for thousands and thousands of years" (Walker, 2014, p. 232).

The men generally have a thought that products and services of nature and women are free and they are legal owner of them so they started to exploit mercilessly as Nettie tells her sister that, "But the roadbuilders were literally up in arms. They had guns, Celie, with orders to shoot! It was pitiful, Celie. The people felt so betrayed" (Walker, 2014, p. 153). Alice Walker seems full conscious during creating the eco-feminist world; she has paid heed to every aspect of nature. Her love for animals can be seen through her characters in the novel, Celie talks to Mr about Shug Avery's love of animal and said that, "She love elephants now. He wait a little while, put all the shells back in place. Then he ast me, You like any special thing? I love birds, I say" (Walker, 2014, p. 229). Eco-feminism provides equal dignity, care, and love to all living and non-living things and especially stands by those who felt destitute and marginalized in male dominated society. Alice Walker, like Wordsworth, has

pantheistic perspective of God and believes that God is not beyond nature and it can be clearly seen that she keeps an Indian notion of God, i. e. everything is a part of God and God is present in everything.

From the very onset of human era the suppressed and marginalized people had to fight to seek their fundamental rights and individuality for which they are deprived of. The meaning of women's life is structured with men and didn't have their individual identity and existence, and the men have full control over their signifier and signified. As Simone de Beauvoir opines in the introduction to *The Second Sex* that, "She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute---is the other" (Beauvoir, 1972, p. 16). Walker's female characters are not too much traditional and docile but eventually they began fighting with male dominated society's rules and regulations and certainly retouched their poor social and economical condition. Celie tells Sofia's struggle in her life that, "She say, All my life I had to fight. I had to fight my daddy. I had to fight my brother. I had to fight my cousins and my uncles. A girl child ain't safe in a family of men" (Walker, 2014, p. 39).

Alice Walker displays in the novel *The Color Purple* that 'sisterhood' has a great power to tackle all the miseries of women, all her female characters, Celie, Nettie, Shug Avery, Squeak, and Sofia, fabricate a sisterhood-group to heal each other. As an eco-feminist Alice Walker never envisions a world where is no need of men but searches for an 'ecowomanist' utopia where every living and non-living can enjoy their life in a better ecological system. Celie breaks away herself from her husband and starts making pants which are traditionally for men but Alice Walker tries to harmonize the social structure also by a dress which can be used as a unisex. Celie describes in a letter to her sister Nettie that, "That was the day he come to visit me while I was sewing and ast me what was so special bout my pants. Anybody can wear them, I said" (Walker, 2014, p. 246). Here Celie demolishes typical thought of society where male is reckoned superior than female. Myths are also male-centric in the present society as Harpo admonishes Squeak in the novel and says that, "Shut up Squeak, he say. It bad luck for women to laugh at men" (Walker, 2014, p.181).

Alice Walker sets forth psychological and philosophical connection of Celie and Shug Avery with nature and God. Eventually Celie reestablishes her faith in God, nature, and people as she writes at



the end of the novel, “Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God. Thank you for bringing my sister Nettie and our children home” (Walker, 2014, p. 259). Women are emotionally too much charged so they are deeply connected to everything and their bond with nature is equally strong and they can feel nature more than men, Shug Avery asks Celie that, “You ever notice that trees do everything to git attention we do, except walk” (Walker, 2014, p. 177)? By doing her sisterhood job and as a mentor Shug changed the outlook of Celie’s life, although, Celie was in want of a friend who could appreciate her whom Sharan Hymer pens as a “narcissistic friendship” (Hymer, 1984, p. 423). Shug made Celie realize that God is not in control of men as the religious institutions are but free from everything and He belongs to every particle in this cosmos, she said to Celie that, “The thing I believe. God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God,” she also believes, “God ain’t a he or she, but a It” (Walker, 2014, p. 176). From it’s beginning eco-feminism critiques the White-male supremacy and his dualistic notion of the male-centric social system such as man/woman, mind/body, culture/nature, human/animal and white/colored thereby forming “white male human identity as separate from and superior to the identities of women, people of color, animals and the natural world” (Gaard, 1993, p. 9). Eco-feminism unearths to root out these pernicious dichotomies which are watered by western creeds.

III. Conclusion:

Eco-feminism rejects dualistic concept of male dominated and male-centric society and it promotes ecowomanistic approach rather than unbearable male-centric approach. It stands by every oppressed strata of society. Woman must support to each other against the ill-treatment by the society or by men and they must band together as in the novel all the female characters form a sisterhood, like; Celie and Nettie, Albert’s sister and Celie, Tashi and Olivia, Sofia and Odessa, and the strongest one was of Celie and Shug Avery who also establish relationship of lover. The key message of eco-feminism Alice Walker delivers to the world through her character that in the novel Shug Avery said that, “Everything want to be loved” (Walker, 2014, p. 177). The perdition of the Olinka tribe sets forth how in the name of development the modern man uproots the inalienable connection between man and nature. The novel also gives a wakeup call to teach the greedy man that you must respect nature if you want to live peacefully in nature. That is why

Vandana Shiva quotes Mahatma Gandhi’s line in her work *Staying Alive* that, “There is enough in the world for everyone’s need, but not for some people’s greed” (Shiva, 2015, p. 6). Nature and woman can be the best companion if you treat them well and by this notion Alice Walker promotes an eco-friendly and ecowomanistic ways of life.

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