

Eco feministic Appeal in Alice Walker's ' The Color Purple'

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Abstract

This paper presents Alice Walker's ecofeministic appeal as revealed in her award winning novel "The Color Purple". The author has connected gender, race and ecological issues deftly to bring in an ecofriendly awareness that would save our planet. She shows how an ecological perspective serves as the harbinger of true self-reliance and happiness to the protagonist Celie. The concept that reclamation of the body and spirit are very important for a woman to redeem herself and to nurture nature is promoted throughout the novel. The central theme of the novel is the triumph of good over evil. The protagonist achieves success through women bonding. The women of the novel strive together and achieve feminine and natural liberation from racial and sexual domination and violence. The story of Nettie show that distress and destruction await, when loses his interconnectedness with nature. Walker foresees a world wherein there is a symbiosis of man and nature sans male oppression and environment exploitation.

Right from day one of his existence on the earth, a very fragile planet man has been marring it to make himself. The tempo of tampering the nature has rocketed up with his brainstorming inventions and mindboggling technologies. Like women the earth is crushed under feet by men. The incredulous wonders of nature are being ripped and frayed by the money minded man. The environment that sustains life is enmeshed and chocked by the greedy humans. If we remain silent and indifferent to the progressive erosion and environmental degradation, nature would be negated from the core. Saving the earth before it falls apart has become the key issue of environmentalists.

As the ecological awareness grew, it got blended with the rising feminist consciousness and a new social and political movement named eco feminism also called ecological feminism emerged. Francois d' Eaubonne, a French feminist brought into vogue the term 'Eco feminism' with the publication of her book 'Feminism or Death' in the year 1974. In "Ecofeminism: Linking Theory and Practice" Janis Birkeland (1993) defines Ecofeminism as " a value system, a social movement and a practice, but it also offers a political analysis that explores the link between androcentrism and the environmental destruction. "Ecofeminism questions the dualistic concept endorsed by the patriarchal system such as self/other, man/woman, human/animal, culture/nature and white/non white which finally concludes as "white male identity as separate from and superior to the identities of women, people of color, animals and the natural world."(Gaard 1993,p.9)

Alice Walker uses writing to correct wrongs that she sees in the world around her. "Activism is the rent I pay for living on the planet" (Reader's Digest Feb 2016. 164)is her statement that shows her commitment. In her work "Living by the Word: Selected Writings 1973-1987(1988), Walker has shown that how racism and sexism are closely knit with environmental issues by saying "some of us have become used to thinking that woman 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)

This paper throws light on Alice Walker's contribution to ecological conscience and environmental protection through her images of women and nature in her novel, The Color Purple. The novel speaks about the

association between the oppression of women and exploitation of nature by male dominance. It deftly delineates how the female and the nature are enslaved and thwarted in the commercial market.

The strong prohibition from a powerful man to a weak child ,” you better not never tell nobody but God. It’d kill your mammy,”(3) is the very beginning of the novel which raised a hue and cry from the critics and the readers alike. But the incident narrated is not far from the truth. The author openly discloses that the rape scene”.....is based on Walker’s great- great-grandmother, who was raped and impregnated at age 11 by her master, Walker’s great-great- grandfather.”(Winchell 85) To be raped and more than that to be silenced to bear the brunt of anguish in solitude seemed to be the piteous lot of many a young girl in the South. Celie mitigates her pain by writing letters to God. Like a tree she remains silent and unresponsive. She never gives vent to her pent up feelings. She simply destroys her emotions: “It all I can do not to cry. I make myself wood. Celie you a tree” (Walker,23)Wendy Wall(1998) says”Celie’s attempt to negate her pain by desensitizing creates within her emotionally hollow spaces” that subsequently lead to her isolation and unresponsiveness.

For almost thirty years from the age of thirteen, Celie has been sexually abused, verbally dominated and physically assaulted leading to her deplorable physical, mental, psychological and emotional bruises. Throughout her life she has been subjected to male dominance. Her life history is the story of the black woman in the South who is triply burdened by gender, race and class. Yet these black women do not wallow in self pity. Neither do they blame their society nor do they succumb meekly. They put up a valiant struggle and triumph amidst adverse circumstances.

Women bonding has always been a source of strength and inspiration to the black women of Africa and America. In ‘A Room of One’s Own’, Virginia Woolf asserts that she and many other women writers gained strength, empowerment and artistic inspiration from their mothers. This view is endorsed by Alice Walker in her ground breaking essay,’ In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens’. To the author mother means not only her own biological mother, but also other female relatives and neighbours and all those women who have inspired her. This is what Virginia Woolf meant when she

said,".....the experiences of man is behind the single voice." In her 'A Room Of One's Own.'

In 'The Color Purple' Walker shows how the concept of sister hood sustains the women in distress. Celie, her sister Nettie, Squeak, Sofia and her sisters form a group and nurture each other. Walker asserts that women should bond with each other, pull themselves out of their fragmented lives, cement their stories together and gain identity, self confidence and empowerment.

Through Shug Avery , the Blues singer, Walker presents her pantheistic view. God cannot be confined to a shrine. Initially Celie believed in a god who was,"big and old and tall and grey bearded and white."(175) Shug introduces a different god to Celie. She says," God ain't a he or she , but a It."(176). Her god is a "God(who) love everything you love."(177) Celie's god of old time religion gives place to an expansive god of trees, air, birds and people. Celie learns that reverence and respect for all creations- trees, the color purple, humanity- is the cure for all the ills of the world.

Thus, a change for good takes place in Celie only after she develops an ecofeminist consciousness and builds up a true union with nature. Celie addresses her last letter "Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear everything. Dear God."(259). She stands testimony to Walker's view of an empowered woman who "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)

Man's evils appears to be trivial and impermanent in the face of the wonders Of creation' flowers ,,wind, water, big rock...."can sustain women oppressed by the Violence of patriarchy , which vainly assumes god-like powers for itself . But the power of violence is nothing when compared to the in exorable force of nature exhibited even in its minor manifestation like a blade of corn, little wild flowers and a field blooming purple. The oppressed, suffering women can empower themselves by imbibing this force from the nature .

Celie later learns through Nettie's letters that her sister and her minister husband have to understand the presence of this same loving creator who loves all and repudiates no part of creation. Alice Walker portrays the

character of Nettie as an eco feminist. The novel can also be read as the story of the victory of Nettie. Nettie's successful life is a perfect contrast to the pathetic life of her sister Celie. While men like Albert and Alphonso goaded by their detestable male chauvinistic views thwart and crush Celie under their feet, Rev Samuel a well educated and broad minded pastor aids Nettie to bloom and flourish. Nettie understands the Olinka tribes, their worship of the roof leaf and their struggle to preserve the beauty and strength of their settlements .She comes to hear the story of the greedy chief who wanted more than his share of land to grow more and amass more wealth. The land which was hitherto used to grow roofleaf the life protector was used to cultivate cash crops like cassava, millet and groundnuts.

Infuriated Nature sent a violent storm to teach the greedy chief a lesson. All the houses were destroyed. There were no roofleaves to be found and the shelterless villagers could not withstand the wrath of nature. A fatal fever set in and people died in scores. Nearly half the village was wiped out in a short period of six months. After a long period of five years the roofleaf became plentiful and the people started worshipping the roofleaf. Walker throws light on the ecological responsibility of the Olinka tribe. The author seems to warn the modern man that dire will be the consequence of his selfish and unmindful meddling with nature.

Nettie understands the interconnectedness of nature and culture in the Olinka tribe. She observes that to the Olinka " the roofleaf is not Jesus Christ but in its own humble way, is it not God?"(Walker 139). It rankles at her heart to think how the Whites in the name of modernization destroy their fields and homes. The harsh white emperor feeds his greed by replacing the Olinka territory with rubber plantation. The trees that are venerated by the villagers are sawed down and hauled off to build the ship and the captain's furniture and roads crisscross the enter terrain. The tribal people who are inextricably bound with the land which they consider as their sacred mother are bent down with a heavy sense of loss and dislocation.

Initially Nettie visualises the Olinka as a natural and self describing people. So she is shocked to find them vulnerable enough to fall an easy prey to the selfish white invader. The hunting territory being destroyed the men are forced to delve farther and farther away to find game. The women tend to whatever little is left to them. " They sing to the earth and to the sky and to their cassava and groundnuts. Songs of love and farewell." (Walker, 156). The devastation of the Olinka tribe shows how the inevitable bond between man and nature is ruthlessly ruptured by the modern man's pursuit of development. Walker envisages a symbiotic establishment of man and nature

sans male oppression and environment exploitation. It is high time that we pay heed to Walker's emphatic appeal and be aware of the unwanted outcomes of environmental exploitation like global warming, soil erosion, depletion of natural resources, drastic climatic changes etc and take necessary, immediate action to preserve our fragile planet for the future generations.

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