

An Ecofeminist Study of Alice Walker’s “The Color Purple”

V.Bhuvaneswari * Rosamma Jacob

School of Social Sciences and Languages, VIT University, Vellore, Tamil Nadu, India

* E-mail of the corresponding author: vbhuvaneswari@vit.ac.in

Abstract

This paper describes the contribution of Alice Walker’s novel “The Color Purple” to the seminal ideas of ecological conscience and environmental protection, using schemes that intertwine ecocriticism with feminist criticism. The methodology involves the discourses on the images of women and nature in “The Color Purple”, the association between the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature by male dominance, enslaving the female and nature in the commercial market. Through an ecofeminist lens, this paper finds that Alice Walker infuses her novel with a theme of feminine and natural liberation from domination and violence. Alice Walker foresees the establishment of symbiosis, in which there is no male oppression or environment exploitation.

Keywords: domination, ecofeminism, ecological conscience, male oppression, interconnectedness.

1. Introduction

Nature abounds with incredulous wonders. Our heritage of natural resources is being ripped and frayed. But it is propitious that we have the ability to solve this crisis and avoid the worst. Man driven by the desire for profit, threatens to destroy the environment/non-humans. Non-humans that sustain us are enmeshed by the humans. While Race, Class and Gender oppressions have actually found a place in the literary theory and criticism Nature has been neglected and negated from the core. The theology of creation places God as the architect of the Universe at the periphery. Life sprang ex nihilo or from lifeless chaos, there arose a rampant dualism from a deep-seated belief that differentiates the earthly being from the divine. The same theology places man (as God’s authority on earth) not woman at the apex. God’s abode is heaven and the human soul is destined to escape, going home to immortality in heaven. Thus domicile is somewhere else with God, beyond this earth and God is not revealed in Nature but is enigmatic. When the ecological consciousness grew on one side it got merged with the rising feminist consciousness and opened new avenue called ‘ecofeminism’. Ecofeminism, described as feminist environmental philosophy, emerged in the 1970’s drawing influence from the second wave feminism and green movement. With the publication of ‘Feminism or Death’ in 1974 by Françoise d’Eaubonne, the French Feminist, the term ecofeminism came into vogue and occupied a pivotal position in the ongoing debates on feminism and ecology. As an activist an academic movement, ecofeminism as a distinct discourse perceives critical connections between women and nature. Ecofeminism is a social and political movement which points to the existence of considerable common ground between environmentalism and feminism, with some currents linking deep ecology and feminism (Ruether, Rosemary Radford 1993).

2. Background and Literature Review

In the late eighteenth century political revolutions in America and France were accompanied by momentous social upheavals that put new emphasis on individual rights. The best minds of the age were speaking out in favor of democratic libertarian ideals – for free white males, at any rate. The rights of women (along with black slaves, Indians, and indentured servants) were generally disregarded (Schneir 1994,p. 2). Ecofeminism seeks to strengthen the bonds between women and nature by critiquing their parallel oppressions and encouraging an ethic of caring and a politics of solidarity. Although ecofeminism advocates a "pronature" stance, Haraway's theories of "artificialism" and the cyborg break down the schism between nature and culture and even nature and technology, thus radically destabilizing the whole concept of "nature" (Alaimo 1994, pp. 133-152).

Ecofeminists broke new ground stating that the exploitation of natural resources and the degradation of women are interconnected. They introduced a feminist perspective quite contradictory to the traditional patriarchal ways of relating things to the environment. Janis Birkeland (1993) in "Ecofeminism: Linking Theory and Practise" defines Ecofeminism as "a value system, a social movement and a practice, but it also offers a political analysis that explores the links between androcentricism and the environmental destruction.". Since its inception ecofeminism critiques the dualistic concept of the patriarchal system such as self/other, man/woman, human/animal, culture/nature and white/non-white thereby constructing "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). Ecofeminism contrives to obliterate these detrimental dichotomies which are nurtured by western creeds.

3. Alice Walker and The Color Purple

In the chaotic ebb and flow of human affairs, Alice Walker sees writing as a way to correct wrongs that she observes in the immediate world around her. Her recognition of misogyny and exploitation of the environment as parallel forms of male domination, undoubtedly takes an ecofeminist stance. In an interview with John O'Brien Walker admits that she is committed to the cause of black women but equally to the cause of nature. She has openly declared her love of nature, which is one of the reasons why, she did not commit suicide. Walker's writing is suffused with a concern for the environment. Walker reproves that the earth has become the nigger of the world and will assuredly undo us if we don't learn to care for it, revere it, and even worship it.

Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* published in 1982 is an epistolary novel. It deals with the story of Celie, a black woman in the South. Celie writes letters to God in which she reveals her life--her roles as daughter, wife, sister, and mother. Through writing letters, women not only record their lives but also reflect upon them, a source of personal growth. In *The Color Purple*, as in her other writings, Walker focuses on the theme of double repression of black women in the American experience. Walker contends that black women suffer from discrimination by the white community and from a second repression from black males, who impose the double standard of white society on women. The primary theme of the novel, though,

reflects Walker's desire to project a positive outcome in life, even under the harshest conditions her central character triumphs over adversity and forgives those who oppressed her. This central theme of the triumph of good over evil is no doubt the source of the book's great success and that is achieved by the protagonist by her close association with all beings of nature irrespective of race and gender. The protagonist shifts her attention from an anthropocentric male god to an ecocentric god. A god of trees, a god of birds and air and all other things. This perspective leads us to view the novel through an ecofeminist lens.

4. Women, Culture and Nature

Celie's condition is deplorable. She is abused physically, sexually, emotionally and socially. She becomes pregnant at a young age. Culture norms condemn her though she is faultless. Her forced physical degradation inculcates feeling of inferiority in her that exiles her from the traditional camp of "good girls". The novel begins with the threat "you better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mummy." (Walker 1982, p. 1). The warning implies that God knows and he understands. He compromises with male wickedness and accepts a woman's silence. Throughout her life she has been subjected to a cruel form of male dominance. Metaphorically dumb and left with nobody to share she turns to write letters to God. The female body becomes the target of male aggression and so woman like Celie begins to view their bodies with animosity. Thus, Celie hates her feminine self, a *raison d'être* of her inferior position. The black woman lives in a society where men are aggressive and women remain acquiescent. Walker reminiscences the black mothers and grandmothers as "creatures so abused and mutilated in body, so dimmed and confused by pain that they considered themselves unworthy of hope" (Walker 1983, p. 232). This situation stems from the patriarchal culture that replicates the historic gender-based relationship between men and women. It clearly demonstrates the power over the powerless. A practical movement ecofeminism not only condemns these patriarchal perceptions but also aims to eradicate it, thereby negating any hierarchical notion of difference.

Walker gives the epistolary structure to the novel which subverts the predominantly male code of western literary tradition. Celie addresses her letters to God because she has no one else to write to and because she is so afraid to tell any one. To survive beatings, Celie destroys her emotions: "It all I can do not to cry. I make myself wood. I say to myself, Celie, you a tree" (Walker 1982, p. 23). Wendy Wall (1998) explains that "Celie's attempt to negate her pain by desensitizing herself creates within her emotionally hollow spaces," subsequently leading to fragmentation, alienation and unresponsiveness. Just like a tree which gives way to man's exploitation, Celie remains quite and silenced. Celie recognizes that trees must also despise men for their attempts at deforestation and effluence.

Celie gets to know the beauty of her body only by the arrival of Shug Avery, her husband's lover. Shug introduces Celie to the mysteries of the body and making it possible for Celie to the discovery of speech which eventually leads to the freedom of speech and liberation from masculine brutality. Celie needs a mentor and a friend whom Sharon Hymer calls a "narcissistic friendship" (Hymer 1984, p. 423). Sharon further projects Shug as an initiator of all the activities and a provider of a value system and lifestyle which Celie faithfully embraces. It is Shug who changes the perspectives of Celie. Initially Celie has viewed God

as a man with whom she can share her confidences and who can provide the necessary protection from the world around her. Shug, the female liberator infuses self- confidence in her. Now Celie perceives God as a man who acts like other men “trifling, forgetful and lowdown” (Walker 1982,p. 199).Faith germinates and Celie’s life rejuvenates when she breaks the shackles of male supremacy. Even religion is revitalized when it extends to encompass the segregated and God loses “Its” color and gender: “God ain’t a he or she, but a It” (Walker 1982,p. 202). Religion is created by man and when religion loses its limitations imposed on it by white, male hierarchy, faith opens in many directions” (Sypher 1956,p. 249).Walker never rejects or reprimands the society to which she belongs but accuses its limitations that are imposed upon it which makes it closed and restrictive.

It is through Shug that Walker imparts her pantheistic view.God is not confined to a shrine but God is in nature and within us. In an interview with O’Brien “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” (Walker 1983,p. 265). Throughout the story, Celie is the center of this community of women, but the one who knows how to survive, to be independent, to be free from the clutches of patriarchs and the one who wants to change herself and others especially the life of tribal people is her sister, Nettie. Although Celie is the central character in the novel it can also be read as the story and victory of Nettie, the ecofeminist, who understands the Olinka tribes, their worship of the roofleaf, their struggle to preserve the pristine beauty and strength of the settlements around their lives. Nettie joins with the missionary family of Samuel and Corrine and leaves for Africa. They are welcomed by the tribal people.It is during the welcoming ceremony one of the villagers recited the story of the village chief and his greediness.He wanted more than his share of land in order to plant more.His greed increased and he began to cultivate cassava, millet and groundnuts on the land on which the life protector, roofleaf grew. Nothing can withstand nature’s fury. Soon there came a storm to teach a lesson to the chief’s greed. The storm destroyed all the houses and that the huts remain roofless and there is no longer any roofleaf to be found.For nearly six months the people of Olinka were subjected to the wrath of nature. Ultimately the people ended up with fever.Soon the village began to die and half the village was wiped out. As soon as the rain stopped they rushed to the old roofleaf beds and tried to find the old roots. It took five years for the roofleaf to become plentiful. The rootleaf became the thing they worship.

5. Interconnectedness of Culture and Nature

Walker recognizes the interconnectedness of culture and nature in the Olinka tribe. She identifies the relationship between the local cultural preservation and the defence of biological diversity.Thus by projecting the Olinka tribal life Walker shows the most ecologically responsible people. Nettie observes the exploitation of the Olinka’s life as a result of the clearing the way for culture.To the Olinka “the roofleaf is not Jesus Christ but in its own humble way, is it not God?” (Walker 1982,p. 160).For these people the roofleaf is not simply a thing but an embodiment of the very essence of life. Nettie, in one of her letters, writes “the Olinka territory has been destroyed and their women folk spend all their time in the fields, tending

their crops and praying. They sing to the earth and to the sky and to their cassava and groundnuts. Songs of love and farewell. We are all sad here, Celie” (Walker 1982,p. 179). The white man explores and exploits the Olinka territory for its rubber plantation. Nettie first perceives Olinka as a natural and self-describing people but astonished to find them vulnerable to invasion of the white emperor. The Olinka though happy to welcome the road but never thought it will be for the worse. The road actually destroys their fields and homes. The church, the school including Nettie’s hut were levelled down. In anger the village chief went to the coast seeking explanation and reparation for laying the road. He returned to the village with the breaking news that the whole village including its territory belongs to the rubber manufacturer in England.

Like a cancerous cell that slowly penetrates into the body and destroys it the white man slowly enters to the Olinka village and seize it. At first, they build roads for transporting their goods. Second, the trees which are venerated by the tribes are hauled off to make ship and captain’s furniture. Third, the land is planted with something that cannot be eaten. And finally the tribes are forced to work as slaves in their own land. The tribes feel a terrible sense of loss and dispossession because they are inextricably bound to their land and consider it as the sacred mother. The devastation of the Olinka village is a perfect example of modernization or the presumed pursuit of development which leads to the ecological and cultural rupture of the bonds that the tribes have established with nature. Ecofeminist Vandhana Shiva in “Ecofeminism” discuss a similar situation, but in the Indian context. “The culturally rooted tribal is made physically homeless by being uprooted from the soil of his ancestors” (Shiva 1993,p. 98). The native’s traditional practices have played a key role in conserving the forest and its pristine beauty. Abandonment of these traditional practices by modernism accompanied by colonial characteristics of oppressive tendencies has led to the present ecological crisis.

6. Conclusion

All strands of ecofeminism are ultimately anti-dualistic, rejects transcendence and embrace immanence interdependence with nature. Ecofeminism tries to transform the men who are the culture bearers of oppression. Women must stand up against the unfair treatment they receive at the hands of men and they must do this by helping one another. The women in the novel band together to support and sustain one another throughout the novel. The bond of sisterhood is important, both literally in the persons of Nettie and Celie, Sofia and Odessa and metaphorically in the persons of Mary Agnes and Sofia, Albert’s sister and Celie, Tashi and Olivia and of course Shug Avery and Celie, who embody the twin roles of sisters and lovers in their relationship. Formation of mutually beneficial bonds among women is the only answer to a suffocatingly male-controlled world when women are systematically commodified, demoralised and dehumanised.

Traditionally, women are thought to gravitate more towards the “SHE” cluster of issues social security, health care and education. While men are considered in the “WE” issues war and economy. But it is high time that we take a look on the key issue to save the “damsel in distress”(Earth) before it falls apart. A sword of

Damocles hangs over our head. It will be devastating if we remain silent and guilty of myopic indifference to the progressive erosion and environmental degradation.

References

Alaimo, Stacy. (1994), “Cyborg and Ecofeminist Interventions: Challenges for an Environmental Feminism”, *Feminist Studies* **20**, (1), pp.133-152.

Birkeland, Janis. (1993), “Ecofeminism: Linking Theory and practice” in Greta Gaard (ed) *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, (p.19)

Gaard, Greta. (1993), *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Hymer, Sharon. (1984), “Narcissistic Friendship”, *Psychoanalytical Review* **71**, 423-439.

O’Brien, John. (1983), “From an Interview”, in Alice Walker (ed) *In Search of My Mother’s Garden: Womanist Prose*, USA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc. (pp.244 - 272)

Ruether, Rosemary Radford. (1993), “Ecofeminism: Symbolic and Social Connections of the Oppression of Women and the Domination of Nature”, in Carol Adams (ed) *Ecofeminism and the Sacred*, New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, p.13.

Schneir, Miriam. (1994), *Feminism: The Essential Historical Writings*, New York: Vintage.

Shiva, Vandana. (1993), *Ecofeminism*, New Delhi: Kali for Women.

Sypher, Wylie. (1956), *The Meanings of Comedy*, New York: Doubleday.

Walker, Alice. (1982), *The Color Purple*, New York: Pocket Books.

Walker, Alice. (1983), *In Search of My Mother’s Garden: Womanist Prose*, USA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc.

Wall, Wendy. (1988), “Lettered Bodies and Corporeal Texts in The Color Purple” *Studies in American Fiction* **16** (1), 83-97.

This academic article was published by The International Institute for Science, Technology and Education (IISTE). The IISTE is a pioneer in the Open Access Publishing service based in the U.S. and Europe. The aim of the institute is Accelerating Global Knowledge Sharing.

More information about the publisher can be found in the IISTE's homepage:

<http://www.iiste.org>

The IISTE is currently hosting more than 30 peer-reviewed academic journals and collaborating with academic institutions around the world. **Prospective authors of IISTE journals can find the submission instruction on the following page:**

<http://www.iiste.org/Journals/>

The IISTE editorial team promises to review and publish all the qualified submissions in a fast manner. All the journals articles are available online to the readers all over the world without financial, legal, or technical barriers other than those inseparable from gaining access to the internet itself. Printed version of the journals is also available upon request of readers and authors.

IISTE Knowledge Sharing Partners

EBSCO, Index Copernicus, Ulrich's Periodicals Directory, JournalTOCS, PKP Open Archives Harvester, Bielefeld Academic Search Engine, Elektronische Zeitschriftenbibliothek EZB, Open J-Gate, OCLC WorldCat, Universe Digital Library, NewJour, Google Scholar

