

Nature as an Omnipresent Character

in

Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*

Dr. Anjana .J
Assistant Professor
P.G. Department of English
N.S.S College, Pandalam
Kerala, India

*Certainly I don't believe there is a God beyond nature. The world is God,
Man is God. So is a leaf or a snake*

Alice Walker

Alice Walker is a remarkable Afro-American writer whose ingenious pen drew pictures of the lush green African forests in her celebrated novel *The Color Purple* which bagged the coveted Pulitzer Prize for fiction in the year 1983. Alice Walker reveals an ecological awareness in all her works. Having brought up in an environmentally conscious atmosphere, there is a strong thematic examination of green ideas in Walker's writings. Her ecocentric views are palpable in all her works. Nature for her was the larger whole of which mankind was just a part. Nature was the core of *The Color Purple* which was published in 1983. In its preface, Walker writes:

Having recognized myself as a worshipper of Nature by the age of eleven, because my spirit resolutely wandered out the window to find trees and wind during Sunday sermons, I saw no reason why, once free, I should bother with religious matters at all. (ix)

The Color Purple employs the epistolary narrative mode which recognizes the ecologically rooted nature of human existence. With an overwhelming concern for the environment the author gives voice to the mute and muted around her. She becomes a spokesperson for the women subjected to exploitation and the earth subjected to

degradation. She advocates for an all encompassing concept of love which is the only way out for human race.

The Color Purple deals with the story of Celie, an uneducated black woman tortured by racism and sexism of the patriarchal world. It mirrors the trials and tribulations of Celie who raped by her step-father twice, forced to abandon her children and was forced to marry a widower. Celie's world further crumbles when her only solace, her sister, Nettie goes off to Africa with the missionaries. Celie's life undergoes transformation with her meeting with Shug Avery, the blues singer and also her husband's mistress. Celie looks after the sick Shug Avery with much affection and care which recuperates her soon. It is Shug's words that instill courage and confidence in Celie and provide her with the mettle to stand on her own feet. Shug helps Celie to find her own individuality.

Another character who infuses confidence in Celie's mind is Sophia, her stepson Harpo's wife. Sophia instructs Celie to take life as a challenge and fight it. It is the confidence bestowed upon Celie by Shug and Sophie that makes possible for her to become an entrepreneur eventually. Her creativity in quilting helps her to rise above all oppressions and create a space of her own. Towards the end of the novel, Celie is united with Nettie and her own children, Adam and Olivia.

Walker brilliantly weaves a beautiful thematic quilt with patterns of interrelationship between human beings and the natural world in *The Color Purple* thereby blending the two pertinent questions of race and gender with environmental consciousness. The sexual exploitation and oppression of the female characters has been portrayed as a parallel to the exploitation and degradation of nature. The protagonist of *The Color Purple* Celie wades through her empty existence by identifying herself with a tree. Yet another important character of the novel Shug Avery once remarks:

One day when I was sitting quiet and feeling like a motherless child, which I was, it come to me: that feeling of being part of everything I give it to him straight, just like it come to me. And it, not separate at all. I knew that if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed. (176).

Through her stories, Walker tries to establish the oft-forgotten fact that man and nature are inextricably connected. She attributes identity to animals and plants in her works other than being mere images and metaphors. She trusts in an egalitarian view of nature where all the animals, trees, fishes and humans co-exist with the blessings of their ancestors. Walker's earth centered spirituality is effectively transmitted through Shug Avery who vigorously transforms Celie's life in *The Color Purple*.

This kind of identification with nature is evident throughout the novel. It is replete with innumerable instances which authenticate the ecocentric view of Walker, ascribing utmost importance to nature, putting it on a moral plane at par with human beings. In her confrontation with Mr.____, nature empowers Celie so forcefully that she feels it enter her mind as a force giving her voice:

The white men of Africa annex the territory of the native Olinka tribe for rubber plantation. Celie's sister Nettie who works as a Christian missionary in Africa writes in one of her letters of the brutal massacre of the natural world. "The ancient giant mahogany trees, all the trees, the game, everything of the forest was being destroyed and the land was forced to lie flat"144). When Celie returns from her Pa's home she is shocked by the nature that surrounded her. "... the first thing us notice soon....even the sun seemed to stand a little longer over our heads(164-65).

Celie's final salvation comes when she gets united with her sister. She addresses the letter explaining her reunion with her sister Nettie as follows: "Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God" (249). Celie's spiritual transformation speaks of the connectedness in her world, not only of place, but of nature, creation, existence, and a new understanding of God. Celie has internalized the principles of Shug and is able to view the spirit of animism in all human and non-human beings.

Apart from forcing those territory into ecological disaster, the intruding white men forces the Olinka people to pay rent for their own village and finally expels them from

their own homeland. Women are the most affected when such a disaster occurs. Devastation of the natural world and oppression of women are caused by the same set of attitudes and hence both should be viewed together.

The sexual exploitation and oppression of the female characters has been portrayed as a parallel to the exploitation and degradation of nature. This kind of identification with nature is evident through out the work. The central philosophy of ecofeminists related to the body of female and nature, that nature ie. forests and trees are attacked in the same way as the body of a woman, is substantiated through various incidents. The mentality of possession by the patriarchal society is evident in the treatment of nature as well. Walker gives pensive references to the harmony of human beings and nature which was lost due to the aggravated exploitative assault on the natural world by the materialistic, greedy man. Nettie's letters are testimony to how the natural habitat of the Olinka tribe is getting ruined by the intrusion of rapacious white men. Women are the most affected when such a disaster occurs. Devastation of the natural world and oppression of women are caused by the same set of attitudes and hence both should be viewed together.

Walker's concept of environment is not limited to nature alone but it encompasses the whole web of human and natural world. The consequence of the deeds of the machine man will eventually affect the whole universe as everything is interconnected and interdependent. The natural world has become desolate and derelict due to its arrogant abuse by human beings and the need for a critical consideration for the voice of nature has become very pertinent these days. Alice Walker tries to problematize the question of gender and nature through her work. She had declared that earth is heaven in itself and in order to survive all have to acknowledge each other as part of the same family which includes human family, cosmos, nature and creatures.

Walker positions herself as a writer who deeply reveres nature and all its manifestations. Her credence in the ideology of eco-spirituality is evident as she is able to perceive divinity in living and non-living beings. Walker loves to believe in the existence of a Universal Spirit which protects, sustains and nourishes all the animate

and inanimate beings in the earth. For her, there is no religion beyond Nature. Walker stresses her belief in the spirit in these words, “ It does not surprise me, personally, that scientists are now discovering that trees, plants, flowers have feelings...emotions, that they shrink when yelled at; that they faint when an evil person is about to hurt them (Lauret 11)”.

Walker articulates her reverence for her pagan ancestors who lived in close association with Mother Earth. She says:

I maintain that we are empty, lonely, without our pagan-heathen ancestors; that we must live them up within ourselves, and begin to see them as whole and necessary and correct: their Earth-centered, female reverencing religions, like their architecture, agriculture, and music, suited perfectly to the lives they led. (*Anything* 25)

Walker maintained a holistic outlook towards animals as well. She recognizes that animals are not separate from the humans, but maintains a coherent relation with animals and other entities in nature. She also believed in the divine concept of the retribution of human beings for the service given to them by the tress around, by giving their own body to them after death. It gets decomposed which nourishes the sand. For Walker, the natural environment is not the “other” but an integral part of one’s existence.

The spirituality exhorted by the ecofeminists has intrinsic relation with woman and nature. They stressed on the ancient concept of worshipping nature as Goddess. She was worshipped as nurturer, healer and the one who has all the powers of fighting against evils. As mankind progressed this divine halo attributed to earthly objects and things began to decline gradually. Matriarchy came to be replaced by patriarchal domination.

God was given the colouring of as an oppressive, patriarchal figure in *The Color Purple*. Celie chooses God to be her confidant not because Celie believes in God. It was from her step-father’s threat to prevent her from disclosing the secret of his rape. He said: “You better not never tell anybody but God. It’d kill your mammy” (3). This

statement terrifies Celie and in her dire compulsion to protect her mother from death, she positions God as her confidant.

Shug deconstructs the image of God deeply entrenched in Celie's mind. Shug utters that she never found God in church. Shug's concept of God is close to the African concept of animism that all beings on earth are vitalized by a spirit. Walker herself explains this concept of animism: "a belief that makes it possible to view all creation as living, as being inhabited by spirit" (O'Brien 193). By adhering to this concept, Nature and Earth are revered and all the creations of God are given due respect. But, dismantling the age-old concept of God as White man is indeed difficult. Walker expresses this dilemma, "I am trying to rid my consciousness and my unconsciousness of the notion of God as a white haired British man with big feet and a beard" (Kimberley 52).

Walker urges to dispense the beliefs of the imposed religion and embrace the pagan belief of their ancestors. She urges the present generation to retreat to the ways of their ancestors which give importance to Nature and Earth. In *The Color Purple*, the spiritual transformation of Celie is complete and evident in the last chapter where we find Celie, as a confidant, capitalist entrepreneur addressing the final letter to, "Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God. (259)".

Celie absorbs the philosophy of Shug and is able to view the spirit of animism in all human and non-human beings. When she finds this union of man and nature she breaks herself from the deep seated notions of patriarchy and tries to assert her individuality.

Through the character of Samuel, Walker stresses her idea of animism. Olivia mentions about her stepfather's belief that a common spirit pervades everything: "...And by this he meant spirit in everything, not just in God or the Holy Ghost, who at one time was the Female in the Deity or Jesus Christ (145)". Shug's idea of religion margins on the ecocentric view of life. She has rather a pantheistic outlook of life:

Walker's concept of spirituality rests on the notion that the all-pervading spirit inhabits the whole nature and the whole earth. To discern this, people should respect

and care nature, earth and all the animate and inanimate beings on it. When man fails to see the reflection of God in nature, he starts destroying nature for his selfish needs. People should realize the fact that nature is not something separate from us, we are fragments of it. Walker tries to project an ecocentric spirituality through her works. She envisions a world which negates all types of oppression-be it against woman or against nature. She believes that that the only support in the future for the mankind is nature and in order to thrive in this earth man has to resort to nature.

Walker has never concealed her love for nature. While talking to O'Brien she said : "I realized how much I loved it, and how hard it would be not to see the sunrise every morning, the snow, the sky, the trees, the rocks, the faces of people, all so different (58)".

Alice Walker is bestowed with ecological sensitive literary acumen. *The Color Purple* stands testimony to Walker's ecological spiritualism and biocentric perception of the world.

Works Cited

Chambers, Kimberly R. "Right on Time: History and Religion in Alice

Walker's *The Color Purple*". *CLA Journal* 28.3 (1984): 44-62.

Lauret, Maria. *Alice Walker*. US: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000.

O'Brien, John. "Interview with Alice Walker". In: Barbara T. Christian. Ed.

Everyday Use. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994.

Walker, Alice. *The Color Purple* 1982. Great Britain: Phoenix, 2004. Print

---. *Anything We Love Can be Saved: A Writer's Activism*. New York:

Ballantine, 1997.

Warren, Karen J. Ed. *Ecological Feminism*. London & New York: Routledge,

1994.