

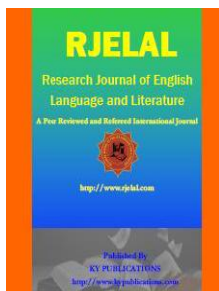


## RESONANCE LEADS TO REFORMATION: AN ECOFEMINIST STUDY ON ALICE WALKER'S *THE COLOR PURPLE*

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### ABSTRACT

Ecological feminism or ecofeminism is an umbrella term for a variety of different positions concerned with the connection between the unjustified domination of women, people of colour, traditional people, poor people and the unjustified domination of nature. Essentially, Afro-American women belong to the most jeopardized group among all humans as they are both Blacks in a racist society and a woman in the patriarchal society. The present study aims to make an elaborate study on Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* on an ecofeminist platform. Celie is the true representation of how nature over the passage of time reorients itself towards harmony and synchronization of the Earth leading to a holistic reformation in establishing a total balance in the society that includes both the humans and nature on an equal pedestal.

**Key words:** ecofeminism, Afro-American women, synchronization, holistic reformation

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Ecofeminism is a word derived from the Greek word *ekio* meaning home. Ecological feminism or ecofeminism is an umbrella term for a variety of different positions concerned with the connection between the unjustified domination of women, people of colour, traditional people, poor people and the unjustified domination of nature. (Warren 2000: 1). Ecofeminists address the crucial issues of our time. Its scope ranges from reproductive technology to Third World development, from environmental dilapidation to a holistic vision in politics and economics. The present study aims to make an elaborate study on Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* on an ecofeminist platform.

Essentially, Afro-American women belong to the most jeopardized group among all humans as they are both Blacks in a racist society and a woman in the patriarchal society. They are left with no

choice other than yield to the affliction and torment for centuries together 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. . 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.

*The Color Purple* published in 1983 is Walker's third novel which focuses on the physical pain, mental agony, violence and death of black women narrated in a time-honoured epistolary technique. The fiction spans to around thirty years in the life cycle of Celie, a naïve Southern black girl who later emancipates into a strong black woman fully realizing her potential physically, economically and spiritually by reconnecting with the nature.

Alice Walker palpably portrays the plight of Celie during her adolescence when she was

repeatedly beaten up and raped by her step father, who forcing himself on her, threatened her stating: "You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy".(3) and hence Celie chose to give vent to her forced silence through a series of letters to God who, because of her experiences, she described with patriarchal, abusive characteristics:

He gave me a lynched daddy, a crazy mama, a lowdown dog of a step pa and a sister I probably won't ever see again. Anyway, I say, the God I been praying and writing to is a man. And act just like all the other mens I know. Trifling, forgifful and lowdown."(10)

Failing to coerce his half-dead wife, Celie's step-father sexually assaults Celie, impregnates her twice, sells her babies and also lasciviously eyes her younger sister Nettie. After the death of Celie's mother, he brings home a child bride who mutely submits to his insatiable sexual demands. Thus not only Celie, but her mother, step-mother and her sister Nettie become victims of sexual oppression in the hands of her step father. Later forcefully married to a widower with four rotten children, Celie again had to endure similar domestic violence. She is tormented to such heights in her wedlock that she cannot stand uttering her husband's name. Celie refers him as Mr. \_\_\_ and her position in the androcentric society is depicted explicitly when her step-father negotiates with Alphonso to seal the marriage transaction. "She'd come with her own linen. She can take that cow she raise down there back to the crib. .... But she can work like a man." (10) Mr. \_\_\_ apparently enjoys this power structure which secures him the sedentary position of sitting on the porch, smoking his cigar and overlooking his children's and wife's work.

Mr. \_\_\_'s visiting sister Kate is outraged at his treatment of Celie and she tries to stand up for Celie, encouraging her to fight back. Celie only states, "I think bout Nettie, dead. She fight, she run away. What good it do? I don't fight, I stay where I'm told. But I'm alive." (22) Thus Celie concludes that while submission may not be the best way of living, it nonetheless has kept her alive. Enduring the domestic violence, she meekly surrenders herself to male dominance which draws parallel to dominance of man over nature. "He beat me like he beat the

children. Cept he don't never hardly beat them. He say, Celie, git the belt. The children be outside the room peeking through the cracks. 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." (23)

Victimization leads to inner strength which provides the impetus to fight much later but never to hate. On the day of the her marriage with Alphonso, one of his children hurt her so badly that blood trickled from her head, but she mutely went on to groom the children. This dispassionate stance of Celie is akin to nature's demeanor towards human superciliousness. "Everybody say how good I is to Mr ----- children. I be good to them. But I don't feel nothing for them. Patting Harpo back not even like patting a dog. Its more like patting another piece of wood. Not a living wood, but a table, a chifferobe. Anyhow, they don't love me either, no matter how good I is." (30)

Sofia, Harpo's wife is paradoxical to Celie who will not allow her husband to use her body as a site of his authority and a signifier of his masculinity. She consents once to the deployment of her body as a means to extricate her from her family so that she and Harpo can fulfill their desire to be together. Rather than being weakened and confined by multiple childbirths, she continues to exert a kind of physical strength that could have only formed under conditions conducive to adversity, oppression, and abuse. She belongs to that clan of women that Toni Morrison calls "a complete woman...she could nurse, she could heal, she could chop wood, she could do all those things...those women (black mammy) were terrific, but they were perceived of as beastly in the very things that were wonderful about them" (qtd in O'Reilly 84).

Sofia and Celie's discussion on Celie's urging of Harpo to beat Sofia to make her submissive to him makes it apparent that Sofia's life has been more similar to Celie's than different. Sofia confronts Celie on the porch and the latter immediately confesses that she was a "fool" and that she was jealous of her power. Women and nature have always engaged in a subtle fight against the patriarchal dominance and Sofia articulates, "all my life I had to fight. I had to fight my daddy. I had

to fight my brothers. I had to fight my cousins and uncles. A girl child ain't safe in a family of men" (40). The two women acknowledge their adversities and different attitudes in dealing with them by laughing as a conclusive act to the scene. Their reconciliation generates an important component of the emerging female world: they decide to make "quilt pieces out of these messed up curtains" that Celie had given to Sofia, who tore them in a moment of anger and betrayal (42). By making something even more beautiful and personal out of torn fabric - figuratively the torn fabric of their lives - they have solidified their sisterly bond, as suggested by their name for the quilt: Sister's Choice. The materialization of the quilt as well as its name first come to the reader's attention when it is mentioned that Celie and Sofia have been working on it and "got it frame up on the porch" (59). Thus the resonance from their past life about the disillusioned position of women and nature in the dominant patriarchal society, slowly but steadily leads to the realization of their rightful place in the ecosystem.

Thus before the former mistress of Alphonso, the blues-singer Shug Avery, comes along, Sofia Butler charges into Celie's narrative like a ray of sunshine with her blunt and disarming attitude, determination, pride, strength and aptitude for self-defense. She is perhaps one of the novel's most attractive and outspoken characters. The arrival of Shug Avery initiates the emancipation of Celie. The fact that an all-embracing concept of love can overcome tensions of gender and race is exemplified in *The Color Purple*. It is Shug's love of Celie that gives Celie a new meaning of life, a new identity and a new 'voice', providing her with enough courage to claim her due liberty. Celie's association with Shug enables her to fight against sexism, forgive her husband for all the years of oppression and domestic violence, and finally also helps Celie's husband realize his misogynist behavior. However, Celie's absorption of love takes a long time, and confirms Smith's claim that in Walker's work "Love is never an unconflicted garden of earthly delights, mystic, romantic, lush. It is, rather, learned, often fought for, birthed in pain." (1999: 472).

Shug's understanding of God, which is closely linked to the holistic concept of love brings Shug and Celie closer. Shug fundamentally changes Celie's belief of God in terms of gender, race and, also, nature. Firstly, in terms of gender, Shug explains to Celie that for her "God ain't a he or a she, but a It" (167). This leads to Celie realization that she has been blinded by the notion that "He big and old and tall and graybearded and white." (165). Thirdly, Shug believes that "God is everything [...] Everything that is or ever was or ever will be" (167), and so it becomes obvious that God is omnipresent, in all living creatures and also in the inanimate world. Shug's belief seems to go hand in hand with Walker's pantheistic world view: "Certainly I don't believe there's a God beyond nature. The world is God, man is God. So is a leaf or a snake." (cf. O'Brien, 1994: 75). She explains to Celie, "God is inside...everybody. God is everything...that is or ever was or ever will be. God love everything you love. It pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it" (196-97). Shug's concept of love has to be seen in close connection with her love of God, The Spirit is an "expansive God of trees, air birds, people ... who 'love everything you love' just wanting to share a good thing." The outcome of the pantheistic principle is that for Walker there is no difference between the earth and The Spirit. This is ascertained by both her statement: "In day-to-day life, I worship the Earth as God - representing everything- and Nature as its spirit" and her dedication of *The Color Purple* to the same Spirit.

Like Nettie and her husband, "not being tied to what God looks like" (218), Celie is awakened, liberated and gains a new 'voice'. It is extremely significant to realize that 'voice', as stated by Yvonne Johnson in her book *The Voices of African American Women*, "is used not only in reference to narrative voice, to 'point of view', but to the process of bringing the self to consciousness, the process of becoming the speaking subject" (5), and Celie achieves the same. Celie now starts writing to Nettie instead of God (152) and, initiating her process of self-knowledge, also wants to see her father for the first time in her life.

Towards the end, Albert begins to recover spiritually and his transformation is confirmed as he confides to Celie the lessons he has gained in life and his remorse for the ways he treated her. Acknowledging that the root of his wrongdoings resulted from his cowardice to defy his father, the symbol of paternal law, Albert says "my daddy was the boss. He give me the wife he wanted me to have" (275). United in their love for Shug and subdued in forgiveness and remorse, Celie's and Albert's reconciliation is signaled by his putting "his arms around [her] and just stood there on the porch with [her] real quiet...[Celie] bend [her] stiff neck onto his shoulder" (276). Albert's transformation makes it possible for him to enter the new world order that is inclusive in nature and fortified against the threat of patriarchal tyranny. It represents a hopeful beginning for all. Without attributing his conversion to the impact of any particular event, Albert concludes that his overall experiences in life made him see the light.

Celie develops an aversion towards her own body due to physical abuse and domestic violence but Shug Avery helps her to discover her own body which leads to the realization of a new identity. Man's dominance over woman denies her of her rights to know her own body which remains a mystery to her. Chris J. Cuomo speaks about this kind of exploitation: "...females are often alienated from their own bodily functions and processes. Woman's health and sexuality has also become a primary site for man's exercise of patriarchal and racist political power." (Ecological Feminism 98) The black women exist in an androcentric society where they become "creatures so abused and mutilated in body, so dimmed and confused by pain, that they considered themselves unworthy even of hope." (Garden 232) In order to heal her wounds and to restore her self-esteem, she has to generate the creative forces which find various modes of expression.

The suffering in silence leads to the discovery of hidden talents and Celie develops her potential as a creative artist. The inner strength enables her to endure the hardship in the hands of the men similar to nature compliantly tolerating the exploitation by humans. Celie's sexual experience

with Shug begins to heal her wounds of body and spirit. She begins to revise her notions of God and men and her position in the patriarchal metaphysics. Shug Avery further draws parallelism between the exploited black women and nature by stating "I knew that if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed." (176) All these stream of actions mobilizes Celie for a positive ramification and Shug Avery rightly channelizes her into a purposeful distraction to make pants. In the crucial dinner scene, when Celie and Squeak announce that they are leaving home to explore their newly discovered identities, Mr. \_\_\_ is dumbfounded on Celie's response. "It's time to leave you and enter into Creation. And you dead body just the welcome mat I need." (180)

Having recognized the communal and interconnected quality of *The Color Purple*, it becomes apparent that Walker's text proceeds from the same standpoint of desire and successfully realizes its dream. Celie, who never intends to make a living from her talent, inadvertently discovers the path towards independence. The masculinist ideology informs household order, as Celie's Pa and Mr. \_\_\_ relegate all household chores to Celie in addition to subjecting her to their sexual needs. An awareness of nature and our duty to it does not differ on account of race. For Walker what's important is be aware of the widening gap between humans and nature and to find some way of reform.

Outwardly it might appear to the onlookers that nature has been subdued by the selfish interests of humans. But Nature clearly understands the ways of man similar to Celie and it would emancipate itself to such extent that human would have no choice other than to meekly submit himself before the mighty nature and live in harmony with nature contributing towards a holistic society. Thus Celie is the true representation of how nature over the passage of time reorients itself towards harmony and synchronization of the Earth leading to a holistic reformation in establishing a total balance in the society that includes both the humans and nature on an equal pedestal.

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