

# Ecofeminist Inclusivity leading to Wholeness in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*

Abirami.V.

Assistant Professor of English, Kumaraguru College of Technology, Coimbatore, India

**Abstract:** Ecofeminism, built on transformation and inclusivity aims at reframing the hierarchal dualistic power structure and not annihilating the existing power structure. The progress of Afro-American Women's fiction is a mirror-image of the intensity to represent the interconnectedness between the subservient nature and the submissive women. Ecofeminism voices against dualism that degenerates one over the other. But when one complements the other, then such a dualistic concept leads to heterogeneity which later evolves as wholeness and fullness. The present study analyses the patriarchs in the Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, their initial domineering position in the fiction, the further progress made by the characters and the course of events which lead them to take an ecofeminist stance and thereby lead a life of harmony and gratification.

African American literature holds a distinctive position in the global literary arena and in particular, Afro-American women writers have consistently attempted to use the range of one's voice to express the totality of the crises as they emerge from a dominant culture that oppresses nature and women alike. The progress of Afro-American Women's fiction is a mirror-image of the intensity to represent the interconnectedness between the subservient nature and the submissive women. Ecofeminism, built on transformation and inclusivity aims at reframing the hierarchal dualistic power structure and not annihilating the existing power structure. The main strengths of ecofeminism is its ability to raise awareness of the dualised and dominant patriarchal structures; its competence to propose alternative perceptions of reality; its propensity to assist in restructuring the current global crises due to its holistic view of life i.e. by including all feminine forces, perceptions and realities.

To realize the transformative potential of ecofeminism, women and men have to work together. Each must acknowledge the other's equitable inputs; women must recognize the suppressed longing of many men to be caring and to express their feelings; and both must recognize that women also have internalized the patriarchal strategies of domination. It requires a careful process of transformative politics building, while at the same time deconstructing existing systems that reproduce structures of domination. In the process of creating new realities, one should be careful not to construct any new universal theories. Ecofeminism traces the origin of domination over nature and gender to patriarchy. Patriarchy as defined in the dictionary of sociology is the family pattern that men who have ruled rights and dominate all the members of the family. In the patriarchal hierarchy, female culture is related to body, flesh, material, nature, emotions and like whereas, male culture is linked to spirit, intelligence, culture and sense. Merchant referring to the manner in which women and nature receive an analogous approach from the patriarchs in "Ecofeminism and Feminist Theory" states that "in fact bring the nature and all her descendants to you, let her serve you, be your servant" (37).

An Ecofeminist society is conceivable only when both the oppressed and the oppressor realize that dualism is the cause of all panacea in the environment and come to terms to lead a balanced and content life together. In "Ecofeminist Imperative" Ynestra King highlights the interconnectivity of ecofeminism thus:

. . . we believe in the philosophy of nonviolence—that no person should be made into an 'other' to despise, dehumanise and exploit. As women we have been an 'other' but we are refusing to be the 'other' any longer and we will not make anyone else into an 'other'. Sexism, racism, class divisions, homophobia and the rape of nature depend on this process of objectification. (12)

Alice Walker propagates womanism, which unlike feminism is not a separatist theory. It is an inclusive concept as it is stated that Womanist "Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and or nonsexually" (ISMG xi). While feminists claimed that all men are the enemies of all women and the solution to this struggle is to create a utopian world excluding men, womanists on the other hand are not separatists as they have realized that all men are not women-haters. They have known fathers, brothers, husbands, sons and male friends who were exceptionally sympathetic and understanding. Hence for Walker, to visualize an exclusive women's world without men is impractical and impossible. Instead, she emphasizes on reforming the existing world by changing the attitude of people on the planet to create world for the future.

This research paper analyses the patriarchs in the Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, their initial domineering position in the fiction, the further progress made by the characters and the course of events which lead them to take an ecofeminist stance and thereby lead a life of harmony and gratification. The men portrayed by Alice Walker can be broadly classified as degenerative men, who shall have no sense of remorse or guilt for their beastly behaviour. They exercise authority and control over both the mind and body of the women around them. The other faction is the regenerative men, who though initially infested with an androcentric authority over the "Other" that includes both nature and women, slowly with age and experience turn into ecofeminists themselves. They understand that life is absolute only by including women and nature as equal stakeholders and this realization brings in a harmony in the lives of both men and women.

Helene Cixous in "The Laugh of the Medusa" asserts, "writing is precisely the very possibility of change, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures" (879). Walker precisely propagates ecofeminism through her writing, where she every time ends up depicting a world of harmony, happiness, wholeness and oneness. This idealistic state shall be achieved not just through the liberated spirits among the

'Other', but through the realization of the oppressor class, be it men in general or racists, colonists in particular and nurture ecofeminist sensitivity in the society.

The ill-fated female protagonist in *The Color Purple*, Celie is deprived of love, affection, care and happiness since her childhood and leads a sub-human life at home. She is physically and psychologically mutilated through incest, loss of children and separation from her sister Nettie. Alphonso, addressed as 'Pa' by Celie and Nettie is a beast in disguise of man. He doesn't show even an iota of penitence for raping his step-daughter, seizing the two children born out of incest at birth from Celie and sealing the marriage contract of Celie with Albert, a misogynist widower with handful of children. Indeed, her sister Nettie remains unscathed because Celie has been subjected to mute sexual abuse and thereby shielding Nettie from the advances of Pa.

Alphonso spurts his misogynist attitude in every possible situation. When Albert proposes to marry Nettie, Alphonso decides to get rid of Celie and therefore offers Celie with interesting incentives and information. His opening remarks about Celie that she is ugly and that she has borne children twice clearly depicts Alphonso's conviction to tarnish Celie's image. He refers to Celie more like a livestock reared in his manger rather than a human being. He further adds that she is no stranger to hard work and hence shall be the right choice to run a house full of spoiled children. "And God done fixed her. You can do everything just like you want to and she ain't gonna make you feed it or clothe it . . . She can take that cow . . . But she can work like a man . . . And another thing—She tell lies" (TCP 10).

Alphonso has the audacity to state that Celie has become sterile and therefore Albert need not worry about having children with Celie. But even before Albert could speculate on Alphonso's intimate knowledge about Celie's sterility, he deviously adds the last comment that Celie tells lies so that even in future, Albert would not listen to Celie's perception about the past. Alphonso is the representative of the black men, who themselves are racist victims and hence try to exercise their supremacy over the doubly oppressed black women. Calvin Hemton referring to the oppressive nature of the black men states that "Similar to other people who have been colonized and oppressed at one time or another, the oppressive experiences of black men have not deterred them from being oppressors themselves" (8).

After several years of separation from Nettie, Celie gains access to the letters written by Nettie through Shug. Nettie, in one of letters, writes their own life story very poignantly and on reading it, Celie is finally relieved of the guilt of incest. "Pa is not our Pa!" (TCP 159). To know more Celie and Shug go down to meet Alphonso only to find him settled with yet another child bride who is barely fifteen years old. On Celie stating that Nettie had written from Africa that Alphonso was not their real dad, he was not bewildered even for a second and said, "So now you know . . . Any man would have done what I done" (TCP 164). Celie wasn't even aware that Pa was holding her property and all she wanted to know as the daughter of her parents was their grave yard. But Alphonso snappily replied that both their graves were never marked and both Celie and Shug return exhausted. Only when the child bride breaks the news of Alphonso passing away, she also informs Celie that the house and the store belong to the sisters and not Alphonso. Thus Alphonso, till his death had always been a brute and tormented women to such an extent that it maimed them physically, mentally and psychologically. He is a hard core degenerative man who exhibits no scope to realize that woman and man are equals.

The society with a patriarchal perspective looks at a man and a woman from two different standpoints though both are found guilty of similar felony. Men are convinced that the degree or the intensity of the offence is always more when women are involved in it. Therefore stringent punishments are pronounced on women who are found guilty by the patriarchs. When the Church preacher digs at Shug for her loose morals, the other black women in the church acknowledge it by pronouncing 'Amen' against her whereas, Albert, culpable of the same liability behaves as though he is not aware of who Shug is and the other black women peevishly smile at him whenever they get a chance. Celie is taken aback by Albert's indifference towards Shug. Celie expected him to stand up for Shug, but he only managed to gazed out of the church window.

Albert always had an undying love for Shug Avery though his father was against him marrying Shug. Even after the death of his wife and his marriage with Celie, he still has an irresistible longing for Shug's love. It is this love, the humaneness in Albert, which later surfaces up and sets in a transformation in his self. Walker has always believed that people who have the sensitivity towards love shall contribute to save earth from all perils. In "No One Can Watch the Wasichu", Walker writes

Surely the world can be saved  
by all the people  
who insist  
on love. (52)

The hatred and anger against Albert rises to its heights when Celie comes to know that he has been holding her life-line out of her reach—the letters written by Nettie from Africa. She schemes to murder Albert, but Shug intervenes and stops her. "I watch him so close, I begin to feel a lightening in the head. Fore I know anything I'm standing hind his chair with his razor open" (TCP 125). But Albert does not feel guilty even when his betrayal comes to the lime light. Celie learns from Shug about the past life of Albert and his undying love for Shug. He was then a cheerful, loving person that Shug desired to be in company with. She had complete authority on him and kept him away from his former wife and children for weeks together. Shug also confronts that she doesn't love Albert, a wife-beater, who can hardly feel the love nor dance with her. "Cause I don't know the Albert that don't dance, can't hardly laugh, never talk bout nothing, beat you and hid your sister Nettie's letters. Who he?" (TCP 112).

Walker by contrasting Albert's characteristics as a brutal, indifferent husband of Celie and a loving, sensitive lover of Shug, depicts him as both the oppressed and the oppressor in the fiction. He remains helpless in not executing his right to marry his then lover Shug and bring her into the family against his father and brother. But he also plays the role of oppressor with the two siblings. From the hidden letters from Nettie, Celie understands the scheming against the sisters. When Albert followed

Nettie and tried to force himself on her, she hurt him so badly that he let her go. But he vouched with vengeance that he would never let the two sisters to communicate with each other. "He got down from his horse and started to try to kiss me, and drag me back in the woods . . . I hurt him bad enough to make him let me alone. But he so mad. He said because of what I'd done. I'd never hear from you again, and you would never hear from me" (TCP 131). Also he continued to be unsympathetic and detached from Celie till the arrival of Shug. Though he was hard-hearted towards Celie, he expected her to execute her responsibilities to perfection while he sat on the porch as a sedentary observer.

When Celie knew that Alphonso was not her biological father, the biggest impediment in her spiritual escalation was removed. Her approach towards life underwent a tremendous transformation through Shug's influence and she became assertive enough to free herself not only from the influence of the white bearded God but also Alphonso and Albert. Celie is mentored by Shug to realize that every creation of God is equal and none is superior to the other. "Whenever you trying to pray, and man plop himself on the other end of it, tell him to git lost, say Shug. Conjure up flowers, wind, water, a big rock" (TCP 204). Celie accepts Shug's invitation to come to Tennessee much to the annoyance of Albert. Furious with the news of Celie's plan to depart from him, he frets "Over my dead body, Mr \_\_\_ say" (TCP 180). Celie gives back in the same coin by stating that, ". . . And your dead body just the welcome mat I need" (TCP 180). Unable to contain his frustration and anger against Celie leaving him, he abuses her calling her ". . . You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman" (TCP 187). Albert, in spite of his indifference towards Celie, is not able to stomach the fact that Celie, the slave wife of his has the audacity to forsake him and leave for better.

Later, when Celie and Shug came down for Sofia's mother's funeral, Celie was pleasantly surprised when she observed that Mr \_\_\_ was not only clean in presence, but had also mellowed down to enquire Celie about her life at Memphis. Later he tried to patch up with Celie by stating that their marriage is still working. But Celie curtly replied that it didn't. "We still man and wife, you know, he say. Naw, I say, we never was" (TCP 229). The absence of Celie makes Mr \_\_\_ realise his recklessness and this is the first step towards his redemption. Albert sends all the remaining letters of Nettie to Celie as the transformation takes a full turn. Celie, upset with Shug being pleasantly distracted with her new lover Germaine, writes to Nettie that it was only Mr \_\_\_ who seemed to understand her feelings. Also in her letter, she states that she still doesn't hate Mr \_\_\_ for two reasons; he loves Shug and Shug used to love him. The realization and repentance is evident in Mr \_\_\_ when he confides in Celie that only after shedding away his male conscious egoistic self, he feels like a natural man. "I mean when you talk to him he really listen, and one time, out of nowhere in the conversation us was having, he said Celie, I'm satisfied this the first time I ever lived on Earth as a natural man. It feel like a new experience" (TCP 236). Further, Albert comes to her rescue when a salesman tries to flirt with Celie and such episodes slowly leads to comradeship between them which aids to put their past behind and look forward for building better relationship.

Shug helps Celie to step out of the violent world of men by focusing on the traditional feminine art of sewing. Adrienne Rich in *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institutions* states that "Sewing or weaving emphasizes woman's transformative power" (101). By stitching pants, Celie narrows or rather bridges the gap between the two sexes and tries to establish a cordial link that existed during the pre-historic times. Albert, though had a liking for the art of sewing, was never let to indulge in it as the patriarchal society closeted it a women's prerogative to use needle and thread. But now as womanist votary, he willingly comes forward to help Celie in her stitching pants. "When I was growing up, he said, I use to try to sew along with mama cause that's what she was always doing. But everybody laughed at me. But you know, I liked it. Well, nobody gon laugh at you now, I said. Here, help me stitch in these pockets" (TCP 279).

Albert takes lead from the growing bond between Celie and him and proposes to Celie to get married again both in "the spirit as well as in the flesh" (TCP 280) which is not well-received by Celie. Though she refuses to enter into a marital bond, she is open to maintaining a strong bond of friendship with him. Thus Albert turns a new leaf and truly becomes a regenerative man, who shall live and let live the 'Others' with respect and dignity which shall lead to harmony and contentment in everyone's life.

Another important character which undergoes the process of realization and transformation is Harpo, Celie's step-son. Though by nature, a delicate and soft person, Harpo tries to emulate his domineering father by replicating his misogynistic attitude. When his aunt Kate asks him to fetch water for Celie, he spitefully replies that "Women work. I'm a man" (TCP 22). After entering into an unconventional wedlock with boisterous Sofia, he couldn't stand a free-spirited woman for a wife. Advised by his father and Celie, he tries to get Sofia under his fold by beating her, only to be severely battered by Sofia and leads to the destruction of the genuine love that she had for Harpo. Michael Zimmerman states that, "It is the socially constructed victimized status of women that better enables them to see how patriarchy exploits other living beings" (239). But, when Sofia was behind the bars, Harpo and Mary Agnes took care of the children. Also of all children he had with Sofia and Mary Agnes, Harpo is extremely affectionate with Henrietta, Sofia's child with Buster the prizefighter. This is a sign of Harpo trying to pay penance for his remorseful behavior in the past that not only distanced Sofia from him but also indirectly led Sofia to land in the jail. Harpo and Sofia once again get closer after Mary Agnes leaves Harpo to pursue her singing career. They together build their home towards the end of the fiction which is a sign of redemption. Thus Harpo is yet another regenerative man, similar to his father, who learns that peace and happiness can be restored only when the spirit of womanhood is nurtured and respected.

Similar to Alphonso, the men in the Olinkan tribe in Africa are strong patriarchs who had total control over their women. Nettie writes to Celie that the Olinkan men are no worse than Alphonso, their Pa. "There is a way that men speak to women that reminds me too much of Pa . . . To 'look in a man's face' is a brazen thing to do. They [women] look instead at his feet or his knees . . . Again, it is our own behavior around Pa" (TCP 146-147). Tashi, little tribal girl gets closer with the missionaries which is seen as a drift from their indigenous ways of life and therefore her father states that "There is always someone to look after the Olinka woman. A father. An uncle. A brother or nephew" (TCP 167). According to the Olinkan men, control over their women is called respect and when a woman deviates from the roles assigned by the patriarchs, then she is got ridden off from the community. The role of woman is primarily to surrender herself totally to the men in the community. Tashi's father refers to an

aunt of Tashi who was sold to the slave traders as she defied the roles assigned. "This aunt refused to marry the man chosen for her. Refused to bow to the chief. Did nothing but lay up, crack cola nuts between her teeth and giggle" (TCP 145).

Tashi is heartbroken when her father passes away, not because he is no more, but because she could never please her father. "All her young life she has tried to please her father, never quite realizing that, as a girl, she never could" (TCP 150). Olinkan men were considered to be omnipotent when it came to clouting their power on the meek women. ". . . among the Olinka, the husband has life and death power over the wife. If he accuses one of his wives of witchcraft or infidelity, she can be killed" (TCP 125). Thus most of the Olinkan men are degenerative by nature. On the whole, while the inherent strength within women has made them stronger to encounter the challenges in the androcentric world, it is the regenerative class of men who have greatly aided them to realize their role and move in a progressive path.

Walker has contrived a realistic portrayal of men in the society who either shall remain as domineering patriarchs and subjugate women and nature or return to the ancient forms of inclusive living, by demolishing the hierarchal pyramid outside and their egoistic attitude within in order to establish a non-dualistic, biotic-egalitarian planet. Ecofeminism voices against dualism that degenerates one over the other. But when one complements the other, then such a dualistic concept leads to heterogeneity which later evolves as wholeness and fullness. The redemptive grace of Alice Walker is omnipresent in her fictions that most of her men, take a full turn during the course of life leading to the recreation of the world where humans and nature strike the right balance of harmony and contentment.

### References

- [1] Walker, Alice. *The Color Purple*. London: Phoenix Paperback, 1992. Print.
- [2] *Womanist Prose: In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers, 1983. Print.
- [3] Rich, Adrienne. "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence." *The Female Form: Women Writers and the Conquest of the Novel*. New York: Routledge, 1991. Print.
- [4] *Of Woman Born: Motherhood As Experience and Institution*. New York: Norton, 1976. Print.
- [5] Merchant, Carolyn. "Ecofeminism and Feminist Theory." *Reweaving the World: the Emergence of Ecofeminism*. Ed. Irene Diamond and Gloria Orenstein. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1990. Print.
- [6] King, Ynestra. "Engendering a Peaceful Planet: Ecology, Economy, and Ecofeminism in Contemporary Context." *Women's Studies Quarterly*. (1995). 15-25. Print.
- [7] Helene Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa." Trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen. *Signs*. Vol.1, no. 4 (1976): 875-93. Print.
- [8] Hemton, Calvin C. *Sexual Mountain and Black Women Writers: Adventures in Sex, Literature, and Real Life*. New York: Anchor Press, 1987. Print.
- [9] Zimmerman, Michael E. "Ecofeminism's Critique of the Patriarchal Domination of Women and Nature." *Contesting Earth's Future Radical Ecology and Postmodernity*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994. Print.