

<p><i>Celie, The Black Thunder: An Ecofeministic Study of Alice Walker’s The Color Purple</i></p>		<p><b>Literature</b></p> <p><b>Keywords:</b> androcentric decisions, environmental justice, emancipation, holistic anthropological society.</p>
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**Abstract**

Ecological feminism or Ecofeminism is comparatively a novel approach towards nature, politics and spirituality. When a section of the society is disproportionately affected by certain androcentric decisions and practices, the planet as a whole is confronted with problems pertaining to environmental justice. Environmental reports state that the worst victims are women of color and therefore it is natural that women of colour are forced to become activists to safeguard the environment. Alice Walker is an extremely unique and committed writer who opts for a wider dimension in terms of environmental justice. The Color Purple, Walker’s third novel 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. This research paper focuses on the exploitation of nature by the androcentric dominance and the course opted by the Celie, the central character towards the establishment of a holistic anthropological society where there exists an equilibrium between nature and humans as well as between both the genders of mankind.

**1.1 Introduction**

The focus on ecological fiasco and its interlink with exploitation of feminine gender is gaining momentum in the contemporary literature. Ecological feminism or Ecofeminism is comparatively a novel approach towards nature, politics and spirituality. With the publication of *Feminism or Death* by the French feminist Francoise d’Eaubonne in 1974, the term “ecofeminism” was introduced and later widened as a separate school of thought. Noël Sturgeon offers a comprehensive definition for Ecofeminist criticism: “Ecofeminism is a movement that makes connections between environmentalisms and feminisms; more precisely, it articulates the theory that the ideologies that authorize injustices based on gender, race and class are related to the ideologies that sanction the exploitation and degradation of the environment.” (42)

**1.2. Fight for Environmental Justice**

When a section of the society is disproportionately affected by certain androcentric decisions and practices, the planet as a whole is confronted with problems pertaining to environmental justice. Environmental reports state that the worst victims are women of color and therefore it is natural that women of colour are forced to become activists to safeguard the environment. Alice Walker is an extremely unique and committed writer who opts for a wider dimension in terms of environmental justice. She has an integral perception towards environmental justice as she addresses the adversities faced by women of color through an ecological vision. Obsessed with an urge to revamp the existing system, she tells O’Brien, “I believe in change: change personal, and change in society.” (Interviews 194). Conscientiously committed to the cause, she stresses that, “only justice to every living thing (and everything alive) will save humankind.” (Interviews 132).

**1.3. Alice Walker’s Black Women**

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. This research paper intends to throw light on Alice Walker’s commitment to environmental justice by way of juxtaposing the exploitation of

nature by the androcentric dominance and the course opted by Celie, the central character towards the establishment of a holistic anthropological society where there exists an equilibrium between both nature and humans as well as men and women.

#### 1.4. Celie's Silent Endurance

Celie during adolescence was repeatedly beaten up and raped by her step father. Forcing himself on her, Celie's step father threatened her stating: "You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy".(3) 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. 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 Celie cannot stand uttering his name. She refers him as Mr.----- and her position in the androcentric society is depicted 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) Her mute submission leads to her sterility at an early age of twenty. Even when Nettie insists Celie to voice against the atrocities, she 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) Marriage perpetuates Celie's plight who is beleaguered and victimized by the scheme of patriarchy. 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)

#### 1.5. Celie – The Personification of Nature

Celie is the representation of a true spirit of womanhood and incarnation of nature. Mr. Alphonso is merciless and looks at her for a slave in the name of wife. But Celie had never echoed the agony and torment she had undergone on anybody in her household. Victimization leads to inner strength which provides the impetus to fight 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)

#### 1.6. Mutilation of Nature & Women

The exploitation of nature in the name of modernization and industrialization exterminates the forests and the livelihood of Olinka tribes in Africa at an alarming rate. A vehement criticism is directed against the Whites by Alice Walker through the eyes of Nettie, who lives the life of a true ecofeminist. Through Nettie's letter to Celie, Walker depicts the brutal mutilation of the fertile land by converting them into rubber plantations. The harmony of nature is completely lost when they fell the trees and dig out the yam field to build tarmac road. "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." (153) The goodwill of the innocent natives is exploited and they realize their folly quite late. The village is gutted and leads to large-scale biopiracy and theft. The sacred root-leaves are mercilessly cut down and the natives remain helpless. "We know a roofleaf is not Jesus Christ, but in its own humble way, is it not God?" (139) The destruction of yam fields which offered resistance to malaria leave the Olinka to sickness and death at an alarming rate.

Yam is substituted by powdered goods and roof-leaves are replaced by corrugated iron sheets. This leads to a severe sense of loss and dispossession among the Olinka tribe who were intricately bound to their land and culture. The White man's pursuit for power and wealth ruptures their ecological and cultural bond and Vandana Shiva rightly points out that "the culturally rooted tribal is made physically homeless by being uprooted from the soil of her or his ancestors." (Ecofeminism 98) Most development projects tear apart the soil and sever the bonds between people and the soil. Kelly warns: "The ultimate result of unchecked, terminal patriarchy will be ecological catastrophe or nuclear holocaust." (Ecofeminism, Women 113)

The letters written by Nettie, the ecofeminist from Africa never reaches the hands of Celie. So transition towards maturity in Celie is quite slow and she grows by observing the other black women in her microcosmic world down South who range from being meek, passive, childish and docile to being outspoken, sturdy smart and liberated. Sofia, the outspoken wife of Celie's step-son Harpo dares to return the insult she faced in the hands of the Mayor and his wife. But she almost loses her life when she is sent to jail, tortured and muted. Sofia encounters extreme adversity at the jail. So in order to rescue her from the peril, Squeak, the black girl who is in love with Harpo is sent to convince the warden to depute her as a maid at the Mayor's home, only to be raped by the warden. Sofia returns home after completing twelve years term as a slave in the name of maid at the Mayor's residence and to her dismay finds that her own children call her "Miss". The arrival of the blues-singer Shug Avery, the former mistress of Alphonso initiates the emancipation of Celie. Alice Walker draws attention to the sisterhood of women in her fiction and this bond aids them in discovering their latent talents.

### **1.7. Celie's Initiation into Emancipation**

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. Sofia becomes the first model of resistance. When Harpo tried to have an upper hand over Sofia, he is (wo)manhandled by Sofia. Later, Celie along with Sofia takes refuge in quilting initially and rightly name their creation as "Sister's Choice". The suffering in silence leads to the discovery of hidden talents and 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. Even death is considered a quite giving in, a resignation rather than an assertive departure as in case of Celie's mother.

### **1.8. Evolution of the Black Thunder**

The real evolution and liberation of Celie is initiated with the arrival of Celie's talisman Shug Avery. Both the women meet each other at the lowest points in their lives – Celie entrapped in a loveless marriage and Shug infected with a "nasty woman disease". Shug helps Celie to gain her true black womanhood, physical beauty, womanly ego and creativity. Also Shug manages to get the hidden letters of Nettie which infuriates her so much that she writes "I stutter. I mutter to myself. I stumble bout the house crazy for Mr ----- blood." (110) 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. Through the agency of Shug Avery, she understands that "God ain't a he or a she, but a It." (176) 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)

### 1.9. Conclusion

Walker characterizes Celie as a personification of nature. Celie abandons her submissiveness, passivity and dumbness and becomes an enterprising black woman. The world is under the sway of masculine institutions and ideologies. All sites of catastrophe and aggressive violence are dominated by technology and patriarchal values. Mies explains that "unlimited progress" is a dangerous myth as it implies rape and destruction of the living nature. She says: "As White Man has for centuries treaded nature like an enemy it seems that now nature is hostile to us" (Ecofeminism 93). Thus Celie is the true representation of how nature over the passage of time reorients itself towards harmony and synchronization of the Earth. 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.

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