

Study of Alice Walker's The Temple of My Familiar: An Ecofeminist approach.

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Abstract:

Ecofeminism is a social and political movement which evolved from various feminist movements. It is a combination of Ecocriticism and Feminism. It Equates women and Nature because both have been dominated and exploited by others. One of the prominent African American writers Alice Walker's The Temple of My Familiar contains ecofeminist elements. The main characters Miss. Lissie, Zede and Fanny pay much attention towards relieving women from patriarchal society. They are also concerned with eco-preservation. This paper is an exploration of the ecofeminist elements in the novel. Walker manipulates plot and character to weave in her ecofeminist concerns. She has recourse to racial memory, the memories of an egalitarian society characterised by respect for all forms of life and co-existence of apes and man and even memories of previous births to drive home her ecofeminist ideas.

This article offers an analysis of Alice Walker's novel The Temple of My Familiar. It critiques the claim that humans' ability to use language, regarded in this article as equivalent to one sense of the word representation, marks the essential difference of humans from ecofeminism.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Ecocriticism, Feminism and Patriarchy **Introduction:**

Ecofeminism is a two-edged sword which deals with the suppression and oppression of women and Nature. Both have been dominated and exploited by patriarchal society - women by men and nature by culture. To liberate nature from culture and women from men some nondominant groups seek to fight against male-dominant society. Ecofeminism evolved from feminist movements as an end to all the oppression and suppression of women and nature.

Ecofeminism is a theory that has evolved from various fields of feminist inquiry and activism: peace movements, labour movements, women's health care, and the anti-nuclear, environmental, and animal liberation movements. Drawing the insights of ecology, feminism, and socialism, ecofeminism's basic premise is that the ideology which authorises oppressions such as those based on race, class, gender, sexuality, physical abilities, and species is the same ideology which sanctions the oppression of nature.(Gaard 01)

Ecofeminism was first introduced by the French writer Françoise d'Eaubonne in her book *Le Feminisme ou la Mort*(1974). It started as a social and political movement in the twentieth century against environmental destruction and suppression and oppression of women. Since the origin of the Earth, Man started exploiting the fertile earth trying to make her barren. Thus man sapped the ultimate source of our life. In the name of civilization. Man has almost 'deserted' her. Ecofeminists equate nature with women who are the producers of life. They urge us to protect nature as we face natural hazards everyday like earthquakes, tsunamis, floods, shortage of rainfall, draught, famine,

imbalances of climate etc. Man has taken everything he wanted from the earth to enjoy a luxurious life and left her barren. Man thinks that he is the ultimate power in the universe who can control the other genus and species. Because of man's lustful desires he butchers beautiful nature, he devastates the massive life sources and finally he struggles to do something for the future generation to exist on earth.

Ecocriticism erupted as an option to find solutions to the problems of exploitation of the Earth. Ecocriticism is a study of the relationship between literature and nature. It was introduced in 1970 by William Rueckert in the World Literary Association in the USA and later it was strengthened by Cheryl Glotfelty. Glotfelty relates Nature with everything. She has beautifully illuminated this in her work (edited with Harold Fromm) *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmark in Literary Ecology*, "Everything is connected with everything else"(xix).

Ecocritics have organised so many organisations for strengthening a new awareness among the people about Nature. They started protecting Nature from the so-called cultured people. Their use of Nature exceeds all control and finally Nature gets denuded. Felling trees, deforestation, constructing massive buildings, overuse of chemical fertilisers and pesticides - all cause problems of soil erosion, scarcity of water, landslides, imbalance of earth, scarcity of food resources, global warming etc. Science and technology occupies the next place in exploiting nature through nuclear power stations, international companies, machineries, and use of plastics and chemicals.

From the very origin of human beings women too have been suppressed and oppressed by men. Men have treated their women as slaves. They were not even allowed to sit and eat with men. Women were simply considered slaves and as 'the other sex' to meet sexual needs. Even nowadays, women are being treated as men's subordinate sex and they do not enjoy the same freedom as men. Men have also veiled their women with religious customs and religion is being used as a tool to make them ignorant. They are imprisoned within the four walls of the home. To oppose all these prejudices, feminism emerged in nineteenth century. Feminism started when women started fighting for their rights. Susila Singh throws light on it in her book *Feminism: Theory, Criticism and Analysis*, "Ever since antiquity, there have been women fighting to free their half of the total population of the world from male oppression. Feminism is neither a fad nor a logical extension of the civil rights movement"(13).

Both ecocriticism and feminism gave birth to ecofeminism as a combined theory which argues to protect nature and women. Ecofeminists argue that environmental issues are the issues of women because they feel land is the producer of all resources as women are the sources of new life. Women are aware of the problems which they face in society. They are also aware of the need for protecting nature. Literature is one of the tools to protect nature. It will help women regain their importance in society. Many authors have discussed issues of nature and women in their works. All literatures have focused on women liberation and ecological conservation. African American Literature is no exception. The Pulitzer Prize winner, Alice Walker, is one of the most prominent writers in African American Literature who is known for her ecofeministic leanings.

Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) gave her world-wide recognition as a fiction writer. All her works are on women's issues. Her childhood life gave her the insights necessary to become an author. She had to struggle a lot when she was young. She clubs her personal experiences with her writings. Most of her works deal with ecofeminist issues because she has given importance to both women and nature in them. One of her

prominent works is *The Temple of My h'amihar* (1989) in which she has portrayed the difference between the understanding of nature and women by women and men. This story has multiple themes in it. It deals with racism, sexism, violence, female oppression and nature's importance. The novel contains three pairs of lovers including two couples who want to reconcile their relationships. Suwelo and Fanny, and Arveyda and Carlotta have contradictory opinions in their relationships. Mr. Hal and Miss. Lissie are inseparable for many years but not married. Zede is another important character who unlocks the truth of the past in revealing it to her son-in-law, Arveyda. The novel contains a large number of voices that narrate the interconnectedness between the ancient and the present situations of the people and atmosphere. The stories of the past incarnations of Lissie and the past stories of Zede unfold the depth of human character, history, myths, legends to uncover truth and beauty. The past is recollected through memory.

Suwelo is an African American History professor who marries Fanny (who is Celie's grand daughter and Olivia's daughter from *Color Purple*). Suwelo is a passive partner in the attempt to bring back the African American culture. He says to Mr. Hal about his marital life, "I blew it. Right now I don't know what's happening between us. I'm drifting" (39). He has a higher understanding of the needs of his wife and also the other women. Suwelo once happened to meet Carlotta and they fell in love with each other almost unconsciously.

Fanny, Suwelo's ex-wife wanted to lead a liberal life without her husband. She has her own womanist ideologies which lead her to think about divorce, that too not because of her husband. Fanny said to Suwelo, "Listen, Suwelo, I love you too much to divorce you without your consent. You have been wonderful to me. Without you, how would I have grown? But I am going far away for a while, with my mother. We are going back to Africa to visit the Olinka" (Walker 157). She doesn't want to depend on a man. So she starts learning meditation and masturbation to be free from the clutches of patriarchal society. Her memories take her to the African life style in which she achieves an elevated consciousness and becomes one with the cosmos.

The scene that stages the concept of representation involves two of the novel's central characters: Suwelo, a middle-aged African-American professor of history is listening to the voice of Lissie, a remarkable old woman of the same ethnicity whom Suwelo comes to view as a wise mentor and guide. Lissie describes from memory one of her many past lives that have taken place from prehistory to recent centuries and in which her race, gender, and even species are not fixed. She has been variously white, male and, in one instance, a lion. These past lives can be seen as Walker's rewritings of the stories and creation-myths, particularly the book of Genesis, through which Judeo-Christian culture came to understand its own origins. Lissie describes a particularly distant past life as a white boy approaching adulthood and living with his mother and the other women in a sexually segregated black tribe. Importantly Lissie notes that in this lifetime humans and animals formed part of the same community:

In the days of which I am speaking, people met other animals in much the same way people today meet each other. You were sharing the same neighbourhood after all. You used the same water, you ate the same foods, you sometimes found yourself peering out of the same cave waiting for a downpour to stop. (Walker, 1990, p. 393)

Furthermore, the women of the tribe were accompanied by "familiar": companion animals of a special kind - reminiscent of the oft-described witch's familiar and contrasted specifically with contemporary "pets" (Walker, 1990, p. 138). They live entirely

independently from, yet enjoy a relationship of reciprocal physical and emotional care with their human companions. Lissie's mother in this past life had an adult lion named Husa as her familiar, yet animals in this life constituted no aggression or danger to humans, as Lissie explains: "[t]his perhaps sounds strange to you, Suwelo. About the lions, I mean. But it is true. This was long ago, before the animals had any reason to fear us and none whatever to try to eat us" (Walker, 1990, p. 393).

Arveyda is a musician who is an admirer of womanhood and his mind is ready to receive new knowledge. He loved and married Carlotta but his incestuous relationship with his mother-in-law led him into trouble in his married life, when he revealed his love to Zede, he said, "Zede. I love Carlotta; don't worry. I also love you"(22). He and Fanny share an intimate moment, merging in such a way that they become one with the universe.

Carlotta is a South American refugee born in prison when her mother was imprisoned for being a communist. Later both escaped to San Francisco where she worked in an import store. While she was delivering feather capes made by her mother, she met Arveyda, a musician, who becomes her husband. The relationship between her husband and her mother Zede makes her suspicious and lonely and finally she reunites with her husband.

Hal is a gentleman, who is a friend of Suwelo's diseased uncle. He provides background information about Lissie. He and Lissie are companions for many years but unmarried. Once he explains his relationship with Lissie to Suwelo, "It wasn't even love, as such, it was more like what these young people today have when they go off to fight against nuclear war together; more like affinity. We just gravitated to each other"(42). After Lissie's death he marries a girl called Miss. Rose so that they can be companions for the rest of his life.

Lissie is an old woman who has multiple memories of her previous births. She is an ancient goddess incarnated as a woman, man, lion and white male. She reveals to the next generation, the African spiritual and physical survival - lessons drawn from her past incarnations. Miss. Lissie has been so many different women and full of experiences that Mr. Hal can easily share with his friend Rafe who is Suwelo's uncle.

Zede is the mother of Carlotta and a widowed South American refugee. She was imprisoned when she was teaching in the hills for being a communist. She escaped with her daughter Carlotta to San Francisco. She was keen about her daughter's life. So she didn't marry again. She made capes out of peacock feathers for their survival which she learned from her mother. She is interested in telling her past stories. This attracts her receptive son-in-law. This leads to an illicit relationship between them.

Walker attempts to restore the balance and ensure peaceful coexistence between the human and the natural world. The novel *The Temple of My Familiar* reveals how matriarchal society in which the beings are respected and treated equally existed before patriarchal society. Lissie's vision of her previous incarnations show the reality of Nature, of beings among whom there was no domination or exploitation by the other sex or by other beings. She visioned of three different incarnations which are of a pygmy woman, a lion and a white male.

Being a pygmy woman, Lissie and her clan lived in the forest. At that time men and women lived separately from each other. As she recalls,

the children live the mothers and the aunts; our fathers and uncles nearby, and we visit and our visited by them, but we live with the women. We are in a forest, for all we know, covers the whole earth. There is no concept of finiteness, in sense. The trees then were cathedrals, and each one was and apartment building at night. During the day we played under the trees as urban children today play on the streets and our aunts and mothers foraged food, sometimes taking us with them and sometimes leaving us in the care of the big trees.(83)

There was mutual coexistence between nature and men. Nature provided them with food and shelter. Both Nature and the humans enjoyed freedom and peace. That was the time when men lived in co-existence with animals, especially with ape-cousins who lived in the nearby forest. Miss. Lissie was very much attracted by the family setup of the ape-cousins. The apes lived in a perfect family institution, namely, father, mother and child as a family. Life was peaceful until the tribal people drove away the clan and killed the apes. Lissie and her mate didn't forget what they learned from the ape cousins and they brought up their children to be as much like them as possible and they stayed together until their death. The same way all the clans in the forest followed them. That was the moment when patriarchy began to creep in. Men thought that women were weak from child-bearing and they took over power to protect women and children. Later it turned into patriarchy. The Ape cousins' relationships illustrate that it is possible for us to live as a family without any domination. This memory suggests how nature and women were exploited because of their desire for coexistence.

Lissie's next memory-incarnation is as a Lion. When women owned their familiars(pets), they were always together and shared their food and shelter but men did not have any such familiars. Women alone had such companions. So men were jealous of women. Later, men started living with women. Then they drove away the animals. The familiars were left in search of peace. Patriarchy took over the freedom of women and also obstructed the peaceful coexistence between animals and women.

The third memory is her life as a white male during a period in which people lived in perfect oneness with the Earth. Among the black people, she was the only white man. So she felt ashamed of her difference and wanted to hide her true nature from her own people which led to the interruption of peaceful coexistence. When she was aware of her 'differentness', she tried to hide her body with a dead animal's skin but other animals began to be afraid of her and ran away. In Maria Meis and Vandana Shiva's *Staying Alive*, Maria Meis says, "the patriarchal paradigm has made man-the-hunter an exemplar of human productivity, he is basically a parasite - not a producer"(51). Because of Miss. Lissie's own decision and her awareness of difference from others Miss. Lissie felt lonely and desperate, she became violent. Thus, the white male disturbed the universal pattern that supports everyone and everything equally.

Fanny, the grand daughter of Celie and the wife of Suwelo, doesn't like white people and she accuses them for their destructive actions against nature. On her trip to her native place, she meets her father Ola. On their conversation Ola says :

The whites had done terrible things to us; many of them would claim later that they'd done nothing about it. But beyond what they were doing to us, as adults they were destroying our children, who were starving to death - their bodies, their minds, their dreams - - right before our eyes. We fought the white man as we fought pestilence. (307)

Fanny's mother Olivia had an opinion that the whites were unaware that they are destroying nature as well as themselves. She believed that the white people would realize their mistakes soon. She further questions :

Do you think they know what they are doing when they suck oil out of the earth on one side of the world and complain about earthquakes on the other? . .

. Do you think they know what they are doing when they invent the things they have invented and forced on the world, especially on our worlds, things that make us sick? Things that kill us? No darling. They do not know what they are doing. But you are lucky, you live in an age hen even they are finding this out. (309)

Conclusion:

Thus the important female characters understand the value of nature and their female quality and productivity. The male characters Suwelo, Hal, and Arveyda are much more concerned with their patriarchal domination, eventhough, Arveyda is different from the others and observes the suppression of African women and their surroundings through the stories told by Zede. He is impressed by the stories of Zede and he has an illicit relationship with her. Noel Sturgeon says in his essay, "The Nature of Race: Discourses and Racial Difference in Ecofeminism" in the book *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture and Nature* edited by Karen J. Warren,

patriarchy equates women and nature, so that a feminist analysis is required to fully understand the genesis of environmental problems. In other words, where women are degraded, nature will be degraded, and where women are thought to be eternally giving and nurturing, nature will be thought of as endlessly fertile and exploitable. (263)

Walker attempts to show how broken relationships and the destruction of nature lead to patriarchal domination over women and nature in her *The Temple of My Familiar*.

Ecofeminist concerns are very much evident in the novel.

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