

RESISTING THE WEB OF OPPRESSION: AN ECOFEMINIST APPROACH TO ALICE WALKER'S POEMS.

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ABSTRACT

Ecofeminism is based not only on the recognition of connections between the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women across patriarchal societies. It is also based on the recognition that these two forms of domination are bound up with class exploitation, racism, colonialism, and neo-colonialism. Ecofeminist writings underline a sort of resistance to dualisms by fixing spaces for the latent individualities of all classes and species and by unveiling the politics involved in the creation of dualisms. By acknowledging the values of her people who walked lightly on earth and the flowers and environment they cherished, Alice Walker, the Black American writer accedes to the ecofeminist axiom that dualism can be resisted by valuing the biological and cultural diversity that sustains all life. The ecofeminist perspective unveils how the poet gives voice to the silent subjugations suffered by the marginalized beings- the blacks, the Native Americans, the poor, the powerless and women. By way of the critique of the racial, gendered and colonial oppressions in her poems, Walker contributes to the contemporary relevance of ecofeminism.

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Ecofeminism envisions a world free of all kinds of oppressions, where the multitude of diverse species, human and nonhuman, lives with fraternity, equality and co operation. Walker's poems bring out the interconnectedness of forms of oppression and exhorts for a social transformation that erases the hindrances for the preservation of heterogeneity and respect for a democratic approach to diversity.

Key Words: *Ecofeminism, dualism.*

INTRODUCTION

Oppression is the use of power to disempower, marginalize, silence or otherwise subordinate one social group or category, often in order to further empower and/or privilege the oppressor. All movements aiming at social change have to confront the hurdles of power, domination and oppression. Ecofeminism, with the argument that there is a connection between women and nature that comes from their shared history of oppression by a patriarchal society, explores the intersection among sexism, the domination of nature, racism, speciesism and other symptoms of hegemony.

Val Plumwood observes that the interconnectedness of forms of oppression can be viewed as a network which "enables a balance between the requirements of identity politics and the requirements of connected opposition which arises from the connected nature of oppressions" (215). The treatment of nature and woman as inferior has supported and 'naturalized' not only the hierarchy of male over female but the subordination of many other groups of humans seen as more closely identified with nature. Treating women's movement isolated from other struggles is problematic because:

There is no neutral, apolitical concept of the human or of society in which women can struggle for equality, and no pure, unqualified form of domination which is simply male and nothing else which oppresses them. And since most women are oppressed in multiple ways, as particular kinds of women, women's struggle is inevitably interlinked with other struggles. (214-215)

The interwoven dualisms of Western culture, of human/nature, mind/body, male/female, reason/nature create a logic of interwoven oppression consisting of many strands coming together. Oppression can then be perceived as a network or web of multiple, interlocking forms of domination materially, culturally and politically. The global power of this web of domination which places both human



and biological survival itself in the balance can be opposed only by promoting a decentralized global movement that is founded on common interests, yet celebrates diversity, democracy and resists all forms of domination and violence. Ecofeminism aims at creating a world without gender distinctions where the hierarchy of domination is to be replaced by cultural, ethical and mutual interdependency. The celebration of interconnectedness and diversity thus becomes the motto of ecofeminism. If this objective is to be attained, the distinct parts and the whole of the web of all kinds of oppressions, their individuality and commonality are to be confronted, comprehended and solved.

Ecofeminists warn that the idea of resolving the dualism between culture and its oppressed 'others' by returning to some Edenic state where there are no discernible differences between humans, animals, and spirits, is not a feasible one (Armbruster 114). Instead, dualism must be resisted by the conservation of diversities, as ecofeminism does by trying to reweave new stories that acknowledge and value the biological and cultural diversity that sustains all life. Ecofeminist writings profess a resistance to dualisms by fixing spaces for the latent individualities of all classes and species and by unveiling the politics involved in the creation of dualisms.

This paper takes into this context the poems of Alice Walker — one of the leading voices among black American women writers, whose writings portray the struggle of black people throughout history, and are praised for their insightful and riveting portraits of black life, in particular the struggle of black women against a racist, sexist and violent society. The womanist consciousness developed by this writer is an attempt to resist this oppression and to mend the disjointed self of black and the marginalized woman in particular and by extension, of all the marginalized beings.

There is subtle reference to the relationship between the blacks and the Whites in Africa in many poems in the collection *Once*. The tourist in Africa enquiring about Negro as, "But that is a kind of/food-isn't it-/the white man used to eat you???" (30) and another instance where a little African girl runs away at the sight of a white man thinking, "he wants her/For his dinner" (31), though appear as humorous, refers to the spiteful difference between the two races. Critics have opined that the primary objective of this attitude to posit Africans as savages was in order to justify capturing, enslaving and colonizing them. In "First, They Said" Walker depicts the rulers who told her race that it was not their savagery, immorality, racial inferiority, backwardness, obstruction of progress, appetite or infestation of the land that was at fault. "What is at fault/is your existence itself"



(323). This poem starkly portrays how the whites have dehumanized the blacks and ousted them of their land and freedom, self-worth and courage. The rulers offer money to raise army among the people and ask them to exterminate themselves. Even when the blacks are well armed, they wait for the next shower of insults from the masters. Walker diligently ends the poem with a warning note that though the black army are innocent victims of the colonizers now, at the slightest provocation in future they will strike back vigorously. "January 10, 1973" expresses the speaker's enraged mind which waits to seek vengeance upon the judge, who called the blacks chimpanzees, by shooting him and upon the governor by pouring sweet arsenic into his coffee pot. These dark wishes express the intensity of the humiliation endured by the blacks in a white dominated society. The speaker of the poem realises:

*i understand these are the clichéd fantasies
of twenty-five million longings
that spring spontaneously to life
every generation. (302)*

In "Each One, Pull One" the speaker explicitly expresses her contempt for the white rulers as revealed in the line, "We know why the White House is white" (376). She does not expect justice from the rulers but exhorts every one of her race who write, paint, sculpt, dance, sing and share their intelligence and fate to unite and resurrect the martyrs of segregation, "Each one, pull one back into the sun" (377) and declares, "no matter what they do / all of us must live / or none" (377). The poem justifies the need for a strong stand against racism, while the whites were trying to whitewash it as a historical accident. The poet wants her race to be aware of the centuries of unjust domination they have endured at the feet of the whites.

Walker has voiced the gendered, racial, political and economic discrimination existing among people, especially the Americans by bringing out the exploitative underpinning of these relationships. Giving prominence to the sustainable attitudes and outlooks of the Native Americans, she tells the power-crazy, money-amassing ruling class who are driving the nation and the whole world to destruction to learn from them. She draws sharp pen pictures in the poems depicting the sufferings inflicted upon the innocent girls and women, which they helplessly endure. In "The Girl Who Died #1" and "The Girl Who Died # 2," Walker depicts the victimization of a girl by her own brothers, who 'taught' morality to her and brutally killed her. The "Ballad of the Brown Girl" refers to the mysterious death of a brown college



girl who gave birth to a white baby leaving a short note by her side, "Question-/ did ever brown/daughter to black/father a white/baby/take-?" (136). Walker has been stamped unpopular among the Afro Americans for portraying the brutality of the black men, but she was adamant in illustrating the truth through her writing. These poems reveal the sad fact that the males tortured even their female blood relations. In a long prose poem titled "The Right to Life: What Can the White Man Say to the Black Woman?" offered 'in memory and recognition of our common mother. And to my daughter.', Walker sketches the past of black women full of sufferings designed by the white man, victimizing them with centuries' old practices of slave trade, rape, using their children for heavy work in their cotton fields with no food, clothing or shelter. She strongly demands that the white men should acknowledge their faults and ask for forgiveness and learn to love the black children like their own, only then can they respect themselves. She clearly narrates the white man's assault on the planet and the after effects of it and reminds how for four hundred years the white man ruled over the black woman's womb, by killing those babies they didn't want to grow. The children of the black women were auctioned, were given small pox-infested blankets, were sent to fight battles and were treated with absolute hatred. Walker presents the statistics of 30,000,000 African children who died on their way to the Americas due to lack of food, space, friends and relatives. After reminding the world about the ozone depletion, nuclear peril, destruction of rain forests, poisoning of food, water, air and the earth, she presents the imagined confession and the plea for forgiveness of the white man, "I will tell you, black woman, that I wish to be forgiven the sins I commit daily against you and your children. For I know that until I treat your children with love, I can never be trusted by my own. Nor can I respect myself. . ." (448). Presenting her views as a confession of the white man, her words gather a piercing momentum to annihilate all the evil practices that preyed upon the black. In all these poems while portraying the brutal sufferings of the women, Walker never fails to point out the persons or the systems that caused them.

In several poems Walker sketches the bitterness of war and exhorts human kind to desist from all kinds of violence and torture. Also she is particular to bring out the power politics by pointing out how the natives alone are chosen as scapegoats in the experiments done for the sake of war. In "We Have a Map of the World", she quotes the words of Raymond Yowell, Western Shoshone National Council, Las Vegas, Nevada that, "We have a map of the world showing / how all nuclear tests have been conducted / on the territory of Native peoples" (436). She describes this situation as a "deadly seed deep inside the body of the earth" (438) and reveals how the policies of environmental racism have made the native lands



the platform of nuclear tests, a common phenomenon across the world. The poor and the powerless are deceived by the rulers who assert their power. The poet envisions how the natives suffer the trauma accompanying such explosions and urges children and artists to wake up and defend against the destructive powers. "Thousands of Feet below You" discusses how a little boy who was fleeing from the bombs, is shattered to oily, slimy bits. The speaker asks the bombers to set a place of remembrance for this boy in their home island, if they survive and return there. The sarcasm involved in 'if you survive' explicitly hints at the futility of war and the victimization of many innocent people caused by it. "Why War Is Never a Good Idea" warns against the poisonous war seeping into the food and water everywhere, resulting in total annihilation. War causes suffering which shall spread to the inflictors of the suffering as well. This occurs as a warning note to a war loving society and foresees the disturbing and fearsome life it shall give back.

The threat of exploitation pervades everywhere, but there are also struggles to resist it. The African women's ardent cravings for freedom and how the white men suppress them is mentioned in "Ndebele". The natives are looted, women raped but still with an unbeaten will power the women strive to make their life beautiful with their painting, sculpture and other forms of art. The African women that they are, they insist on all the freedoms and don't know what it means to give up. Their untiring effort and graceful spirit are envied by the oppressors. Even when they have stripped from the women whatever they have, the women thrive with their art and live a life of grace, following their traditions. Walker readily recognizes the strength of this black female creativity. In "A Woman Is Not a Potted Plant", she articulates how the society tries to tame a woman and confine her to her house. Against the male centred system which tries to cage a woman, she declares a woman's freedom to follow her own self-will and warns that a woman is not a potted plant. For her, a woman is wilderness unbounded "holding the future between each breath/walking the earth, only because she is free" (455). In "On Stripping Bark from Myself" Walker protests against the silence society demands from women. Dedicated to Jane who said trees die from stripping bark from them, the poem is a realization of how the society strips the bark of the woman and lets her die. The speaker points to the norm that a woman should keep silence about the tortures she endures in her life. But she does not want everybody to certify "how nice she is!" and boldly declares she could not live silent in her own lies. She is finished with having lived the life cherished by her mother, brother, father, sister and lover. Now she wishes to live according to her own self, and as per the wills she understands. For that she is happy to fight all external interventions, and to assert the woman within her who loves nature. She



reveals, "My struggle was always against/ an inner darkness" (271). The woman in the poem is the representative of every woman who has to wage great struggle to establish her own personality and dreams. With the comparison of the woman to the tree, Walker emphasizes on the hidden ways with which the self of the tree as well as the woman is killed by those around them. The poem portrays a woman who realizes this trap and fights back to have a life of her own. Walker takes pride in her ancestors who endured the sufferings but lived a noble life and compares them to the flower Petunia which lies dormant each winter and returns each spring livelier and thus asserting their resistance. "Women" featured in a section of the volume titled "In these Dissenting Times", makes clear the strong feminist traditions possessed by the black women who with their toil gave their children facilities to learn and grow with good personalities. She calls her mama's generation as 'headragged generals' with stout steps and hands, who did heavy labour and gave their children books, desks and a place for themselves.

Walker is not merely sensitive to the suffering endured by her race and her gender but often expresses her fellow feeling in an empathetic manner. In "Lost My Voice? Of Course", addressing her childhood bully Beauie, she offers her vocal cords to that revolutionist who had lost her voice after many a reaction. This friend of hers had risked her life in the revolution by voicing the protest. To this suffering comrade, the speaker wishes to give back her vocal cords and bring to life her fiery spirit. The poem "Telling" says about her soothing a little sister who goes through the anxieties of abortion or of birth with words of comfort. She expresses her wish to be with the girl through her pain and sadness, relief and joy. She asks in this poem, "Is solace anywhere/ more comforting/ than in the arms/ of sisters?" (418) Walker's womanism is unveiled here in the boundless care and comfort she wishes to extend to the suffering sisterhood. Through these poems, she weaves in various strategies of resistance like the assertion of self honour and independence, respectable endurance shown by the ancestors like the petunias and a warm comradeship built among women to support one another in order to safeguard one's individuality under any circumstance. She has also drawn in how her ancestors cherished their tradition, culture and art as complementing them in times of distress. Evelyn C. White notes, "Alice did not believe that black liberation would rise up from hatred. That blacks should demand their rights was understood. However, the greater challenge, she felt, as a writer and a human being, was for blacks to resist emulating the behavior of bigots. They had to find the courage to claim their own souls" (177). The poem "Ancestors to Alice" well expresses the voice of ancestors who tell Alice to record and preserve their songs, deeds and jokes as remembrance of their life and rich culture for the posterity. By



highlighting the black culture, she wants the future generation to emulate them and not the intruding white culture. She also likes them to recognize the ancestors' strength of tolerance and resistance, their readiness to work hard and withstand any circumstance and their promotion of their own art and culture.

Lourdes Torres observes that ecofeminism is about a profound transvaluation, because "the most radical, activist politics develop when one comes to understand the dynamics of how one is oppressed and how one oppresses others . . . When one comes to understand the basis of one's own pain and how it is connected to the pain of others, the possibility of forming coalitions with others emerges" (275). Walker has portrayed Wasichu, which in Sioux means 'he who takes the fat' as a symbol of global hierarchy—a complex cultural identity of the master formed in the context of class, race, species and gender domination in "Who?" where the poet inquires who has been left uninvaded by the Wasichu. The people, the trees, the waters, the rocks and the air alike are victims of his inroads, and the poet earnestly wishes that at least the Moon is safe from him. The intolerable presence of this master is again portrayed in "No One Can Watch the Wasichu". The people and the Earth alike are tortured by him, and one becomes helpless under his penetrating and intruding presence. In "These Days", where Walker remarks that the brutality of the whites was the result of their upbringing with the notion that they were 'superior to everything else God made,' she throws light on the social and cultural causes underlying the existing hierarchies and dualisms. Explaining the white master's track record of atrocities and plunder, Walker shows how dualism and hierarchy go hand in hand. She acknowledges the greatness of her people who walked lightly on earth and the flowers and the land they cherished in her poems, thereby acceding to the ecofeminist axiom that dualism can be resisted by valuing the biological and cultural diversity that sustains all life.

In order to portray the positive recognition of otherness, the ecofeminist writers depict the diverse relationships in a web through their works. Ecofeminist literature illuminates such relationships among humans across a variety of differences, and also the relationships between humans and the rest of the nature. Charlene Spretnak observes that our relation to other people involves two parts: distinction by gender and by other groups. She adds, "our lives are shaped to a great extent not by the differences between the sexes, but by the cultural response to those differences" (302). The democratic ecological ethics of ecofeminism finds equal merit in the diverse cultures around the world and argues for their protection,



thus assuring a world free of hegemonic exploitations.

By focussing on relations and interconnectedness among all beings on earth, the ecofeminist movement prioritizes the necessity for social transformation and moving beyond power politics and introduces an alternative participatory ideology to the current oppositional political discourse. Ecofeminists and social environmentalists share the thesis that the best analysis must articulate lived experience. Ecofeminist literature, in its 'natural' texts and poetic experiences joins hands with ecofeminist movements against environmental racism. It does so by contributing to the theoretical, experiential and epistemologic levels of oppositional consciousness. Ecofeminist literature offers a critique of oppressive contexts like class exploitation, racism, colonialism, and the subjugation of woman and nature, through the lived experiences captured in its canvas to shape a critical consciousness in society. From the ecofeminist perspective these literary and poetic realisations sustain the process of social transformation.

This standpoint is underlined when Walker gives voice to the silent subjugation suffered by the marginalized people— the blacks, the aborigines, the poor, the powerless and women. As a black woman who takes pride in her roots and who rejects the chains of convention, Walker gives equal significance to the life of the Africans and Afro Americans in her poems. Walker's condemnation of the racial, gendered and colonial oppressions in these poems is extremely relevant in the current global scenario.

The strategies for dealing with networks of oppression require cooperation among the victims, which is what the ecofeminists strive to achieve with their democratic ecological ethic. Ecofeminism envisions a world free of all kinds of oppressions, where all species, human and non-human, live in fraternity, equality and cooperation. Ecofeminist literary endeavours emphasize the urgency of political action aimed at dismantling institutions of oppression and building up of egalitarian and ecocentric webs in their place. Walker's poems bring out the interconnectedness of forms of oppression and exhorts for a social transformation that erases the hindrances for the preservation of heterogeneity and respect for a democratic approach to diversity.

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