

Analysis of Alienation and Interconnection in *The Color Purple* from the Perspective of Ecofeminism

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Abstract

Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* in 1982 earned Alice a great reputation and an award as the Pulitzer Prize for literature. Since its publication, it became a masterpiece and attracted many critics' attention, and then it was analyzed from various points of view. In this paper, I would like to apply ecofeminism to illustrate that only by overthrowing dualistic ideology can alienation dissolve, the world get reconnected and the whole ecosystem is healthy and sustainable. Through the protagonists' fight and growth in the novel, the readers see hope in promoting new social systems based on equality, non-violence, cultural diversity, and non-hierarchical forms and hope in enhancing interconnection and cooperation in all.

Keywords: alienation, patriarchy, dualism, interconnection, ecofeminism

1. Introduction

Alice Walker, born in 1944, Georgia, United States, is one of the leading writers and the first African-American woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for fiction. During all of her life, she worked to "address problems of injustice, inequality and poverty" (Walker, 1985). Her third novel, *The Color Purple* in 1982, earned her a reputation and an award as the Pulitzer Prize for literature. After the publication of the novel, Walker became one of America's premier authors and started her prolific decade.

The Color Purple, composed of a series of letters, was not written in the usual style of most novels. Thus, it is not easy to read because the protagonist, Celie's letters were written in a nonstandard dialect. The uneducated black girl wrote her letters very naturally as she spoke and thought. When we read them, we need to be careful and try to find clues about the plot, the social attitudes, and other details. All her letters were written to God, whom she regarded as her only trusted friend to share her painful secrets and seek guidance and strength to go on with her life.

Walker is a writer who is a worshipper of Nature and who believes that "no one is exempt from the possibility of a conscious connection to all" (Walker, 1985). She wants to express her strong feelings of Oneness from her experience. Combing Walker's intention, the paper tends to analyze the novel from the perspective of ecofeminism, which aims at getting rid of all kinds of exploitation and achieving oneness.

2. Literature Review and the Methodology in the Thesis

Since the publication of the novel, it became a heated subject for critics to study and they interpreted it in myriad ways: the identity and selfhood of the protagonists; the racism and sexism in the novel; the distinctive language and structure; having all remained objects of debate and scrutiny. For example, Harold Bloom edited a book containing a series of articles of review about the novel. The articles in his book interpreted the novel in various ways. Daniel W. Ross explored Shug's inspiration for Celie to understand her own body and sexual experience, making it possible for Celie's discovery of speech and freedom from masculine brutality. Priscilla L. Walton maintained that the novel incorporated elements of comedy as it posited a new order as ideal. Charles L. Proudfoot analyzed the novel from the perspective of psychoanalytic development. He argued that a good enough mother who provided the infant over time with enough positive reflections of self would help the infant develop a "true self". Luckily, Celie in her first two years is the only child in a loving family (Bloom ed., 2008). Besides Bloom's collection book, there is still a great number of critics studying the novel in different ways. Trudier Harris studied the novel in his article *On the Color Purple, Stereotypes, and Silence*; he explored the damage

aspect the novel could have as the novel reinforced racist stereotypes they might have been heir to (1984, p. 155). Cynthia Hamilton put forward in her article *Alice Walker's Politics or the Politics of the Color Purple* that in the novel, the answer to the problem of exploitation was the successful embracing of middle-class ethics that allowed for the fulfillment of the American dream: home ownership and entrepreneurship (1988, p. 386).

Certainly, some critics try to analyze the novel from sexism and racism. As in Bloom's collection book, Om P. Juneja demonstrated the point in his article *The Purple Colour of Walker Women: Their Journey from Slavery to Liberation*, and Linda Selzer analyzed racism in her article *Race and Domesticity in The Color Purple* (Bloom ed., 2008). However, I still want to explore the novel concerning its sexism and racism, but in my way, which is more comprehensive and deeper. I would like to apply dualism in ecofeminism to illustrate my point that only by overthrowing dualism in various forms can the world be reconnected and the win-win style be realized.

3. Alienation in *The Color Purple*

Ecofeminism is the combination of ecology and feminism. As landscapes, climate, weather, plants, animals, and children are threatened, the ways we are reading historic and literary texts change (Garrard, 2012, p. 13). Readers start new ways to look at and analyze literature and try to "seek for interconnection, and also for barriers that keep things apart" (Garrard, 2012, p. 12). As ecology depends on people's thinking about themselves by things around them, man's anthropocentric vision and his desire to conquer, domesticate, violate and exploit natural things become the barrier towards inter-relatedness. Ecofeminism was coined by Françoise d' Eaubonne in 1974 to "raise people's awareness about interconnection between women's oppression and nature's domination in an attempt to liberate women and nature from unjust subordinations" (Yan, Vakoch, & Mickey eds., 2017, p. 3). Eco-feminism "is a way of understanding and responding to the complex interactions between genders, bodies and the natural environment" (Vakoch & Mickey eds., 2017) and it plans to destabilize hierarchical dualism.

Ecofeminism aims to eradicate domination and patriarchy in various ways. The root of domination lies in dualism. Dualism reduces diversity to two categories: A or not A. They convey the impression that everything can then be appropriately categorized: either it is A or Not A. These forms of dualism represent dichotomy rather than continuity, enacting exclusion rather than inclusion (Adams, 1993, p. 2). Certain people may think that ecofeminism is only about women and nature connections. However, it is not true. Ecofeminism covers a wide range of connections, which include gender, race, class, religion, etc. The application of dualism in women and nature can also be used by race, class, and religion. It is the dualism that causes oppression and alienation of people, and ecofeminism calls for an end to all.

The concept of alienation has different meanings in different situations. In literature, it mainly means powerlessness, isolation, and a sense of self-estrangement. In the dualistic ideology, men cast women and nature; white people cast black people as others to their one, as objects to their subjects. The ruling parts treat the other parts as objects, thus, alienation arises.

3.1 Alienation Between Celie and Her Parents

The book started with a series of letters Celie wrote to God as her father told her that "You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy" (Walker, 1985). From those letters, readers learned that though at that time Celie was only 14, she was already burdened with all of the housework because of her mother's illness and she was raped by her father. As a young girl, she couldn't understand why these things happened to her and she felt unloved and of little worth, which caused her not to sign her name to her letters for a long time.

Besides rape, her father treated her badly. He always acted like he couldn't stand her anymore and said Celie was evil. He even beat her just because he thought Celie winked at a boy in church. Feeling bored, Celie's father, Fonso wanted to get rid of her and married her to a widower. He said evil things about Celie: "She ugly. He say. But she ain't no stranger to hard work... You can do everything just like you want to and she ain't gonna make you feed it or clothe it."... "Fact is, he say, I got to git rid of her. She too old to be living here at home. And she a bad influence on my other girls" (Walker, 1985). To persuade Albert to take Celie away, Fonso even planned to send a cow with her as a bonus for marrying her. Celie's sick mother also regarded Celie as an enemy as she doubted the real father of Celie's two babies. Even before her death, she screamed and cursed Celie. "She die screaming and cussing" (Walker, 1985).

According to an ecofeminist researcher Greta Gaard, ecofeminism describes the framework that authorizes these forms of oppression as patriarchy, an ideology whose fundamental self/other distinction is based on a sense of self that is separate (1993, p. 2). Patriarchy means male domination of social relations and values. In the patriarchal society, women would be complimented for quietness. The nature of women should be passive and

she needs to be a vessel waiting to be filled. Another ecofeminist scholar Susan Griffin illustrates that “We were told that when he tried to rape her, she said, ‘no, it is against God’s wishes.’ That although she was stabbed fourteen times, she did not raise her hands to stop him, but only to prevent her defilement. That she forgave him afterward. That her mother forgave him. We were told that because of these acts she was blessed, that we were to look on her as a saint” (1980, p. 96). It is under this patriarchal oppression, Celie chose to keep silent and be obedient to the system, only turning to God for help. Lack of healthy love from her parents, she became alienated and timid.

3.2 Alienation between Celie and Mr. ___

Mr. ___ wanted to marry Celie’s sister, Nettie. However, Fonso was fed up with Celie and wanted to get rid of her. Thus, he urged Mr. ___ to marry Celie instead and promised a cow as a gift. Mr. ___ decided to come to Celie as though the cow made the difference. In Celie’s letter to God, Celie left him nameless, which indicated that a man’s name is not worth knowing for Celie—because men looked pretty much alike to her (Rose, 1986, p. 13). Since the wedding day, Celie began to look after Mr. ___’s naughty children and accepted the chaos and violence in his family. Even after Celie took the burden, Mr. ___ still beat her “cause she my wife. Plus, She stubborn” (Walker, 1985). In Mr. ___’s eyes, women were good for beating, especially wives. Black women were black men’s property and she was also the target of his inner frustration and depression by feeling worthless in white men’s world. Women should stay at home all day to take care of children and do housework and she was invisible.

Celie didn’t fight or cry, on the contrary, she lived in her imagination that she was wood, and she was a tree. From the analysis of an ecofeminist, Marti Kheel, we learn that the voice of women and the voice of nature have been muted under patriarchy. Women and nature under patriarchy are simply objects who do not speak, feel and have needs. They only serve the needs of others (Gaard ed., p. 260). Celie imagined herself as wood or a tree, which can root deeply, absorb violence, and not break.

In the later scene, with the growth of Celie under the help of Shug, Celie eventually gained strength and courage to fight against the inequality from men and the meanness of Mr. ___, who intentionally blocked Nettie’s letters and served Celie from the one whom she loved most. Celie was filled with anger and wanted to act violently. She said powerful words to Mr. ___: “You a lockdown dog...your dead body...I curse you...until you do right by me, I say, everything you even dream about will fail” (Walker, 1985). Confrontation gave hope for adjustment and reconnection.

3.3 Alienation Between Sofia and Harpo

Different from Celie, Sofia was strong, disobedient, and willing to fight. She and Harpo, Mr. ___’s son, truly fell in love with each other. Their marriage should have been happy, however, influenced by the patriarchal system, Harpo felt dissatisfied with Sofia’s strong personality. Harpo’s role model was his violent father and submissive stepmother. Compared with them, Harpo thought himself a failure because he could not beat Sofia as Mr. ___ beat Celie. Albert (Mr. ___’s real name) told him, “Wives is like children. You have to let’em know who got the upper hand. Nothing can do better than a good sound of beating” (Walker, 1985). However, when Harpo tried his father’s way, he was beaten back. “He say, oh, me and the mule. She fractious, you know. She went crazy in the field the other day. By time I got her to head home I was all banged up. Hit my eye and scratch my chin” (Walker, 1985).

In a patriarchal society, the foundation of all socioeconomic hierarchies is the male domination of women. Women’s role is associated with child care, clean up and waste disposal. Goodwives are redeemed as those who are completely obedient to their fathers, husbands, and ministers. From this point, Sofia was not a good wife in Harpo’s eyes despite the deep love between them. In Harpo’s eyes, a rebellious woman was just like a mule. Here, he tried to animalize women because both women and animals were marginalized groups under the domination of men, and they belonged to Others. Gaard once stated, “One task of ecofeminists has been to expose these dualisms and the ways in which feminizing nature and naturalizing or animalizing women has served as justification for the domination of women, animals, and the earth” (1993, p. 5).

Still, Harpo didn’t give up his desire to tame Sofia and he wanted to be dominant and exhibit his power and authority. But apparently, Sofia was not the traditional woman, she did what she wanted and she fought back against injustice. Finally, she realized that “life with Harpo is a dead-end situation” (Rose, 1986, p. 20) and left her home.

3.4 Alienation Between Sofia and the Mayor’s Family

In the dualistic society, just as black men used violence to keep their wives in their place, white men also used

physical power to keep black people in their place. Sofia had the personality to use physical violence to fight back to solve problems and that was her only weapon.

When the white mayor's wife saw Sofia's children are clean, she wanted Sofia to be her maid and was declined. The mayor slapped Sofia, and in turn, Sofia knocked him down. Then the police came and put Sofia in prison. "When I see Sofia I don't know why she still alive. They crack her ribs. They tear her nose loose on one side. They blind her in one eye. She swole from head to foot." (Walker, 1985) The cruel society finally transformed Sofia into an obedient woman. The only way she could survive was to act like Celie: to do what her master said.

Sofia, the strong black woman in the novel was completely broken because she was an "alien" in that society for her strong spirit. "Her destruction is achieved through the collective efforts of whites and blacks, women and men" (Hamilton, 1988, p. 385). Dualism in ecofeminism is not only about human/nature, man/woman; dualism of whiteness/color and rich/poor are also profound concerns for ecofeminists. Western dualistic thinking always creates a hierarchy in the world. In their concept, one side is deemed superior to the other. In the 19th century, slave owners regarded black people as belonging to a lower order of nature than white people and black people were to be controlled and tamed like the rest of the natural environments. Black women were viewed as beasts, cattle, or articles for sale. The taming of them would assure the well-being of both master and slave.

Ecofeminism believes that all oppressions are interconnected and in a particular society, people are either oppressors or oppressed. In the patriarchal society, women are second-class citizens. They are pieces and not whole people. Furthermore, black people are inferior to white people. Sofia is black and a woman, so no wonder however strong-willed she is, she couldn't escape from her doomed fate.

3.5 Other Alienation Forms

When Harpo found it hard to domesticate Sofia, he came to Celie for help. As Celie felt a little jealous of Sofia's spirit, she said, "beat her". When Harpo's new girlfriend Squeak saw Harpo dance with Sofia, the timid girl started a fight with Sofia and slapped Sofia up across the head.

In some situations, women regard women as dangerous. They put each other at distance, complain about each other, and do not trust each other, and even, "women who have experienced violence use violence" (Gorney, Vakoch, & Mickey eds., p. 85). In this case, women got alienated from the patriarchal society, from men, and even cut off the basic feeling which is at the core of self. They are left with the experience of an internal void, an experience of being no one.

In the novel, there is a special paragraph that describes the exploitation of nature and nature's revenge in Nettie's letter to Celie. Once, there was a chief in the village who took a great amount of common land and dispatched more and more wives to work on it. Then his greed increased and he wanted to cultivate the land on which the roof leaf grew. Even his wives became upset and complained, but they are regarded as lazy women and got no attention. The roof leaf disappeared. Then the great storm came and destroyed all the roofs. People's houses were damaged and the children got ill first, then the parents. Soon the village began to die (Walker, 1985).

In a patriarchal society, women and nature have been devalued and exploited as they belong to marginalized others. The way western culture understands and treats women is similar to and reinforces the way it understands and treats nature. According to an ecofeminist critic, Janis Birkeland, humans should not attempt to manage or control nonhumans, including nature and animals. Humans should work with the land. The use of agricultural land should be guided by an ethic of reciprocity (Gaard ed., p. 20). Human beings need to understand that all forms of life on earth are interrelated and interdependent. If one chain is destroyed, the whole would be damaged.

All forms of alienation in the novel were caused by dualistic thinking in the patriarchal society and led to traumatic effects both on human beings and the natural environment.

4. Growth and Interconnection in the Novel—the Way out of Predicament

Ecofeminism insists that the whole world is interdependent. People should see themselves as part of a web in the natural system and they need to produce a new, complex, and complete model of human relationships. Dualistic thinking should be overthrown and holistic thinking needs to be applied. In the novel, the author Alice Walker arranged the plot by interconnection to lead her characters out of the dilemma.

4.1 Interconnection Among Women in *The Color Purple*

Gloria Rose, a scholar of *The Color Purple*, indicates that "everyone needs intimacy, and when men are incapable of fulfilling a woman's emotional needs, there is nothing wrong in a woman turning to another woman for love and friendship" (1986, p. 32).

Throughout the novel, Celie and Nettie's consistent love became each other's firm emotional support. Celie put Nettie in the first place and she cared about Nettie more than herself. She didn't encourage the relationship between Nettie and the widower and she didn't want Nettie to end up dead like her mother. Instead, she urged Nettie to focus on studying. After their separation, both of them kept on missing and loving each other even though they didn't know the other's whereabouts. The love gave each other hope and faith.

An economist researcher, Valerie Padilla Carroll says, "The female-to-female relationship was promoted as a feminist practice whether manifesting as life partners, lovers, or as friends" (Vakoch & Mickey eds., p. 120). In the novel, Celie's love for Shug, the mother-like figure and role model of Celie, motivated her to gain her identity, self-confidence, and strength. Shug Avery, Mr. __'s lover, who represented fancy style and spiritual freedom, belonged to the outside world. At the sight of her photo, Celie felt she was the most beautiful woman Celie had ever seen and Celie began to dream of something rich and beautiful. When Shug got ill, Mr. __ took Shug home and Celie got a chance to tend Shug and developed an intimate relationship with her. After recovering, Shug sang "Miss Celie's song" to Celie, bringing Celie's heart come to life again. The song gave Celie worth and Celie began to discover her value and awaken a sense of self. When Shug knew Albert abused Celie, she stayed and tried to help Celie. Having several deep conversations, the two understand each other better. The intimate conversations had peculiar warmth, and gradually dissolved alienation. The two hearts became closer and Shug helped Celie to find Nettie's letters. Later, Shug took Celie to come to Memphis to start her own business. With the help of Shug, Celie continued her growth as an independent woman.

When Sofia learned that Celie had told Harpo to beat her, she confronted Celie. Sofia was so sad because she trusted Celie and felt worse for the betrayal of another woman. In the adverse environment, girls weren't safe in a family of men. Women's bond was especially important. The two women finally reconciled after having an honest exchange of viewpoints between them and they decided to make a quilt together, which symbolizes the new union.

After Sofia was put into prison, all her women friends: Celie, Shug, Odessa, and even Squeak, her former "enemy", united together to make plans to try to save her. The power of racism was strong enough to unite Squeak and Sofia, who fought each other not long ago for a man (Rose, 1986, p. 23). During the process, Squeak even got raped because according to the unwritten law in the American South at that time, the person in black was a non-person.

When Sofia became the maid of the Mayor's family, Miss Eleanor Jane, Mayor's daughter, felt Sofia was the only person in her family who truly loved her. Out of her daddy's house, Sofia showed her some human kindness. Thus, the black maid and the white girl formed a special bond.

Through all the suffering, the women in the novel got interconnected and formed a special bond of sisterhood. During their cooperation, they gradually got to know and care about each other. Women helped women develop a community and they fought sexism, and racism together and developed strategies of change, from the outsider, marginalized group into the insider, powerful group.

Ecofeminism calls for an end to all oppressions in the hierarchical and dualistic society and only by interconnection can they eliminate violence and a sense of alienation.

4.2 The Symbol of Quilting and Sewing

The image of quilting and sewing repeatedly appeared throughout the novel. When Sofia and Celie made a reconciliation; they decided to make a quilt together. Sewing by a single thread, a quilt, the collection of various colors and fabrics, is the new union between the two. The quilt Celie gave to Sofia was the sister choice quilt and it was the symbol of love and sisterhood. When Sofia was in prison, her friends must unite to fight against the whites to save Sofia. They stayed together to sew the quilt. "Just as pieces of separate garments are joined together and used to make a warm and enduring patchwork quilt, a sense of strong patchwork unity can strengthen the women as they attempt to try and save Sofia" (Rose, 1986, p. 24). A quilt, taking various scraps together to transform into a single, colorful and unified blanket, always represents a source of interconnection, cooperation, and sisterhood.

Sewing, the key to communication and friendship, can also help individuals to create a community and it is also a kind of language that can replace patriarchal discourse. Through sewing, women who work together learn to care, love and cherish one another, and strengthen bonds by seeing each other's hardship. Once the bonds are established, the women in it all gain confidence and power.

4.3 Interconnection Between Women, Land, and Men

An ecofeminist Stephanie Kaza puts forward that the marginalized or oppressed women need to be encouraged

to find their voice, their dreams, their capabilities, and their inner strength (Adams ed., p. 63). Women must first know themselves and become conscious of their beliefs and desires, then it can be possible for them to know and understand what they love.

Celie transformed from a meek, timid girl into a woman filled with fury. She gained a brand new feeling of power when she learned about Albert's theft and concealment of Nettie's letters. She left home bravely for Memphis to pursue her freedom and dream, successfully started her own business, and gained independence and dignity. Squeak earned the right to be called by her real name, Mary Agnes, and began to compose her blue songs instead of singing Shug's songs. Women's friendship and love for each other and the mutual growth process challenged traditional ethics and caused threatening and confusing feelings to the dominant groups.

Ecofeminism is different from other feminism in history. Anthropocentric feminism denies the connection between women and nature. Radical feminism devalues men instead of devaluing women, animals, and nature. Ecofeminism aims at ending all systems of oppression, including sexism, racism, classism, speciesism, and naturalism. They provide an inclusive framework for liberation struggles and "rest on the notion that the liberation of all oppressed groups must be addressed simultaneously" (Gaard, 1993, p. 5). Based on human interconnection and responsibility to all life, ecofeminism provides the most comprehensive and incisive literature analysis.

The Color Purple provides us with a perfect literary text to observe the rebalance of the masculine and feminine relationship and the overthrowing of dualism in various aspects. After Celie left, Albert suffered a kind of depression and he was ready to change. When Shug found a new lover, both Celie and Albert shared the same feeling of sadness and a sense of loss and they stayed in an unplanned union. Albert began to express his feelings honestly and without meanness. For the first time, Albert listened and he felt "satisfied the first time I ever lived on Earth as a natural man. It feels like a new experience" (Walker, 1985). Finally, Celie bent her stiff neck onto Albert's shoulder, keeping each other company under the stars and Albert began to become someone Celie can talk to. Harpo changed too: He no longer minded Sofia's work and voluntarily took care of anything at home when Sofia was away.

For the roof leaf on African land, after many villagers' death during the five years, it became plentiful again. The chief who destroyed them was forced to leave the village forever and his wives were given to other men due to the punishment of the ecosystem. "On the day when all the huts had roofs again from the roof leaf, the villagers celebrated by singing and dancing and telling the story the roof leaf. The roof leaf became the thing they worship" (Walker, 1985).

It is under holistic thinking, every living being deserves the same ethical respect since it occupies the same position within the system. Only through interconnection and cooperation, alienation can be dissolved and the whole system, including human beings, can find the meaning of existence and thrive.

5. Conclusion

Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* provides the right material for readers to understand the terrible effects brought by dualism and the suffering of the marginalized group. Only by mutual understanding, cooperation, and true love can we do away with hierarchical separations within the whole ecosystem. Ecofeminism provides a way to replace the dualistic relationship of all forms with reciprocal respect and interconnection to all. In the current society, in which various crises spring up, we still need great efforts to help with promoting new social forms based on equality, nonviolence, cultural diversity, noncompetitive and nonhierarchical forms.

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