Nature, the Cathedral of the Future: An Eco-Womanist Reading of Alice Walker

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Abstract: Alice Walker’s perception of divinity in living and non-living beings underpins her ideology of eco-spirituality, which poses faith in the existence of a Universal Spirit that protects, sustains and nourishes all the animate and inanimate beings on earth. She extends the range of her celebrated notion of ‘womanism’ to encompass an all-inclusive balance of living as well as non-living beings, which is precisely what makes womanism different from other theoretical and ideological viewpoints. This paper expatiates on the theme of ecowomanism in Alice Walker’s writings to substantiate that the destiny of the woman of colour as well as the Earth has been the same, both neglected and degraded by the patriarchal values of society.

Keywords: Womanism, Ecofeminism, Ecowomanism, Universal Spirit

Certainly, I don't believe there is a God beyond nature. The world is God,
Man is God. So is a leaf or a snake
-Alice Walker

Alice Walker positions herself as a writer who deeply reveres nature and all its manifestations. Her belief in the ideology of eco-spirituality is evident in her perception of divinity in living and non-living beings. Walker trusts in the existence of a Universal Spirit which protects, sustains and nourishes all the animate and inanimate beings in the earth. For her, there is no religion beyond Nature. Walker stresses her belief in the immanent spirit in these words:

If there is one thing African Americans and Native Americans have retained of their African and Ancient American heritage, it is probably the belief that everything is inhabited
by spirit. This belief encourages knowledge perceived intuitively. It does not surprise me, personally, that scientists are now discovering that trees, plants, flowers have feelings...emotions, that they shrink when yelled at; that they faint when an evil person is about to hurt them. (cited in Lauret 11)

Walker who has coined the word, ‘womanism,’ defines womanist as “A black feminist or feminist of color.... Appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women’s strength...” In the next part of the definition, Walker explains that a womanist “…Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. Regardless” (In Search xi-xii). In the four-part-definition of womanism Walker attempts to extend the range of womanism to include all those who strive for the well-being of humanity. Though she makes reference to Black women at the beginning of the definition, the range is expanded as to include many who work for the welfare of humankind.

According to Layli Phillips, Walker’s concept of community covers not only humanity but also all the living and non-living beings inhabiting the earth. The blanket term community covers the ‘inanimate’ components of Earth, the universe(s) beyond Earth, the spiritual world(s) and transcendental realm(s) encompassing the universe(s), and, ultimately, all of creation (xxvi). Womanism seeks to have a balance with all living as well as non-living things on earth. It recognizes the existence of a spiritual/transcendental realm. In Layli Phillips’ words, “it is spiritualized” (xxv). Though the spiritual/transcendental world is perceived by different people in different ways, womanism concedes this diversity of perceptions. It is the acknowledgement of the interrelation between the human and spiritual world that makes womanism different from other theoretical and ideological viewpoints.

It was Pamela A. Smith who described Walker as an eco-womanist writer: “Just as the term ‘ecofeminist’ expresses the perception that the degradation of the Earth is of a piece with the subordinating and bullying of women, racial minorities, the poor, and the marginalized, the term ‘ecowomanist’ expresses the burden of his perception on a woman of colour (476). By addressing Walker as an ecowomanist, Smith maintains that she is a writer who is concerned about the devastation of environment in the same manner as she is worried of the degradation of women of colour. Ecofeminism and ecowomanism are almost the same, but ecowomanism has an additional dimension, the issue of colour.
It was in the 1970s that Ecofeminism, described as feminist environmental philosophy, materialized. The influential movements that were responsible for the birth of Ecofeminism were Second Wave Feminism and the Green Movement. The term ‘ecofeminism’ gained currency with the publication of ‘Feminism or Death’ in 1974 by Francoise d’Eaubonne, the French feminist writer. Eaubonne accuses androcentrism as the core cause for the destruction of ecological balance. Ecofeminism addresses the apprehensions taken up by feminists as well as ecologists. Maria Mies explains the ecofeminist perspective thus: “An ecofeminist perspective propounds the need for a new cosmology and a new anthropology which recognizes that life in nature (which includes human beings) is maintained by means of co-operation and mutual care and love. Only in this way can we be enabled to respect and preserve the diversity of all life forms, including their cultural expressions as true sources of our wellbeing and happiness” (Ecofeminism 6).

Ecofeminists view that the oppression of woman and environment are interrelated. They criticize the androcentric values perpetuated by the patriarchal society to be the root cause of degradation of both women and the Earth. Janis Birkeland in “Ecofeminism: Linking Theory and Practice” defines ecofeminism as “a value system, a social movement and a practice, but it also offers a political analysis that explores the links between androcentrism and the environmental destruction” (19). Ecofeminists strive to end the discrimination based on patriarchal norms so that earth becomes a better place to live in. Man treated nature as his servant that ought to obey his commands. He plundered the resources of nature with a vengeance so as to satisfy his greed and lust for material comforts. Maria Mies warns that now nature retaliates against the transgressions of man: “As White Man has for centuries treded nature like an enemy it seems that now nature is hostile to us” (Ecofeminism 93).

Some ecologists are of the view that earth and its inhabitants are interconnected. Fritjof Capra observes that the whole universe is interrelated as within a web, “a complex interweaving of living and non-living systems within a single web” (The Web of Life 209). A curious fact is that there are no hierarchies in nature. Nature follows a nonlinear pattern of organization as it has the ability to normalize itself and establish itself. Capra is of the view that the pattern of the organization among all creatures of nature evolves from nonlinear or cyclical progresses in ecology (290). Capra advises humans to follow the principles of ecology – “interdependence, recycling, partnership, flexibility and diversity” (295) – for a better life on earth. For a peaceful co-existence in this universe, there should be a better liaison between humans and nature. People must recognize the importance of
harmonious existence among humans, nature and earth. This viewpoint is eco-centric rather than anthropocentric, which stresses the importance of spirituality.

Spretnak points out that “ecofeminism will address not only the interlinked dynamics in patriarchal culture of terror of nature and the terror of elemental power of the female, but also the ways of the mesmerizing conditioning that keeps women and men so cut off from our grounding in the natural world, so alienated from our larger sense of self” (6). But ecofeminists have never thought about relating environmental issues along with that of gender. But ecowomanists attempt to find out a correlating factor that connects ecological issues with gender. Melanie L. Harris comments that “ecowomanist approaches can be described as the reflective and contemplative study of the ecowisdom that is theorized, constructed, and practised by women of African descent. The discourse validates their lives, spiritual values and activism as important epistemologies in eco-womanism” (14).

Walker’s novel *Now is the Time to Open Your Heart* focuses on the healing aspect of Nature, which is the guiding philosophy of eco-spirituality. Kate Nelson, the protagonist, renounces all material comforts and embarks on a journey to apprehend the connection between Nature and spirituality. She changes her name to Kate Talkingtree as an acknowledgement of her feeling of oneness with nature. The commencement of Kate’s spiritual journey is because of a recurring dream in which she finds a dry river in the middle of an ancient forest. The dream of the river—that-is-no-more alarms Kate and this leads to a decision to find out a real river. Walker comments that “…only women, these days, dreamed of rivers, and were alarmed that they were dry” (*Now is the Time* 16).

In addition to the discriminations faced by the Black Americans in the US, it has been noted that Black Americans have been victims of environmental racism as well. The study made by the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice reveals that “race is a major factor in the location of hazardous waste in the United States” (Warren 11). The study by Karen J. Warren shows that the greatest concentration of hazardous waste sites in the United States is on the African American and Hispanic south side of Chicago. Another report reveals that two million tons of radioactive uranium has been dumped on Native American lands. The site for the municipal furnaces and waste yards are situated near Black American localities. As a result, majority of the Black population is facing health hazards. Serious diseases like cancer affect a lot of people living in this area. Children become victims of congenital defects as their mothers live in poisoned surroundings. This situation forces Black women to struggle against the calamitous injustice meted out to them. Black
women fight for environmental justice which cannot be negated because they belong to a marginalized group. Dorceta E. Taylor notes in “Women of Color, Environmental Justice, and Ecofeminism” that these are the reasons that prompted the Black American woman to be “at the forefront of the struggle to draw attention to hazardous waste disposal, exposure to toxins, pollution and environmental contamination” (cited in Warren 39).

Walker, in her collection of essays, *Living by the Word*, points out how race, gender and environment are indissolubly related. She states, “Some of us have been used to thinking that woman is the nigger of the world, that a person of colour is the nigger of world, that a poor person is the nigger of the world, but in truth, Earth itself has become the nigger of the world” (*Living* 147). Her words reveal the ecowomanist stand of the writer that the destiny of the woman of colour as well as the Earth has been the same - both neglected and degraded by the patriarchal values of society. Walker thinks that the only way to heal the earth is through love. In one of her famous poems “These Days” in the collection, *Horses Make a Landscape Look More Beautiful*, Walker states that love should not be limited to loving human beings only, but it should be fluid enough to include the animate and the inanimate nonhuman world. The message that love can transform the earth and lead to a balanced ecosystem is evident in these lines:

Surely the world can be saved by all the people who insist on love. (*Collected Poems* 406)

In *Now is the Time to Open Your Heart*, Walker through the character Kate, criticizes the attitude of countries like America that involve in violence rather than love. Kate censures the American action of bombing eight different places in the world. Kate views this as an act of cowardice: “It did not seem possible people would bomb one another rather than talk. What fear was this, that kept silent until announced by the loudest sound on earth, the sound of worlds being destroyed? Was it the fear that one’s own terror would be glimpsed, one’s own childhood of terror guessed?” (*Now is the Time* 182). Kate muses of the things she and her friends would drop instead of bombs: “Food, blankets, matches, tents, music. And she felt certain if enough of this were dropped, and all of it was cheap compared to the price of bombs, that people who received the goods would, in response sell them, at a reasonable price, all the oil or whatever they required” (182). Kate’s indictment of the government which has lost all human values is evident in these lines. The government is oblivious of the common lot who strive for their basic necessities of life, in their rat-race to reach echelons of power. She pronounces that the pleasure of sharing and helping one
another is almost on the verge of extinction. Her concept is that, a better world is possible only if people join together and share everything. Kate’s words vindicate this concept: “The world was almost at the point of forgetting what a fine time people can have helping one another. That people like to work together and to kick back after work and share their expansiveness. What would happen if our foreign policy centered on the cultivation of joy rather than pain? she thought” (Now is the Time 183).

Walker’s concept is that in order to improve our life, we must recognize the presence of a Universal Spirit that pervades everything. In her essays in Anything We Love Can be Saved, Walker states that her concept of God is not restricted to any particular form or figure. Her spirituality made her recognize God in “ocean or drifting clouds,” or within “melons, mangoes, or any other kind of attractive, seductive fruit” (xii). This concept is similar to the Indian concept of Spirituality expounded in The Bhagavad Gita. In the seventh chapter of The Bhagavad Gita, Lord Krishna explains to Arjuna about the immanence of God. God can be found in different manifestations on earth “…I am the sweetness flavor in water and the radiant lustre of sun and moon, (Sreemad Bhagavad Gita 7.8)…I am the original fragrance in the Earth, the heat in the fire and vitality in all beings…(Sreemad Bhagavad Gita 7. 9).

Kate in Now is the Time to Open Your Heart, after consuming Grandmother Medicine, undergoes a physical as well as spiritual cleansing. She experiences a kind of feeling of oneness with the Universal Spirit. The ecowomanist ideology of Walker is reflected through Kate’s musings. The feeling of communion with the Spirit leads Kate to hear the voice of Mother Earth:

FIRST OF ALL, ABANDON ALL NOTION THAT ANYTHING you humans do will ultimately destroy me. That is because I am your mother. It is impossible to kill one’s mother. You may shoot her a hundred times, but alas, she has already given birth to you. She is yours forever. What you are destroying is your own happiness. Your comfort, which I put so much playful effort into creating. Your peace of mind. Your joy. (77)

The words indicate the voice of Mother Earth who is ever-forgiving and ever-consoling. The life of man will improve only if he extends his care and concern towards Earth. Rosemary Radford Ruether, in Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing states that “a healed relation to each other and to the earth then calls for a new consciousness, a new symbolic culture and spirituality”(40). Walker articulates her reverence for her pagan-ancestors who understood the importance of respecting Mother Earth: “I maintain that we are empty, lonely, without our pagan-heathen ancestors; that we
must live them up within ourselves, and begin to see them as whole and necessary and correct: their Earth-centered, female-reverencing religions, like their architecture, agriculture, and music, suited perfectly to the lives they led” (Anything 25).

Walker’s pagan outlook made her empathize with animals as well. She recognizes that animals are not separate from the humans, but she maintains a dialectical relation with animals and other entities in nature. In Living by the Word, she talks about the sad expression in the eyes of a horse named Blue. Walker indulges in self-criticism because she has failed to see the monotony and loneliness in the face of the horse. Even if Walker and her companion give apples to Blue, his eyes reflect sadness. When a mare, Brown is brought as a companion, Walker discerns the look of happiness and peace in Blue’s eyes. When she gives apples to both the horses, Walker happily detects the expression of contentment in Blue’s eyes. But this contentment does not last long as Brown is taken away from Blue. Walker empathizes with Blue’s sorrow and draws an outstanding comparison: “If I had been born into slavery, and my partner had been sold or killed, my eyes would have looked like that” (7). Walker nurtures a feeling of kinship with the mute animals, as she feels they are also helpless as the slaves were during the time of slavery. She expresses her love for animals in the following words:

We are connected to them [animals] at least as intimately as we are connected to trees. Without plant life human beings could not breathe…. Without free animal life I believe we will lose the spiritual equivalent of oxygen. ‘Magic,’ intuition, sheer astonishment at the forms the Universe devises in which to express life itself—will no longer be able to breathe in us. (Living 191-192)

In The Temple of My Familiar, in a sequence of dream memory, Lissie narrates how she lived a life of harmony with nature, trees and animals during her life as a pygmy. She lived a much peaceful life with her mother and aunts in forest; whereas her father and uncles were only occasional visitors. She describes:

The trees were like cathedrals, and each one was an apartment building at night. During the day we played under the trees as urban children today play on the streets. Our aunts and mothers foraged for food, sometimes taking us with them and sometimes leaving us in care of the big trees. When you know every branch, every hollow and every crevice of a tree there was nothing safer; you could quickly hide from whatever might be pursuing you. Besides, we shared the tree with other creatures, who, in a raucous or stealthy fashion—there was a python, for instance looked out for us. (The Temple 83)
She explains how the children were sometimes sent to their cousins’ place when their mothers and aunts were engaged in their work. The cousins she refer to are none other than the apes, who are “black and hairy, with big teeth, flat black faces and piercingly intelligent and gentle eyes” (83). The mutual love and concern of the animal cousins are expressed in these words: “They seemed nearly unable to comprehend separateness; they lived and breathed as a family, then as a clan, then as a forest and, so on. If I hurt myself and cried, they cried with me, as if my pain was magically transposed to their bodies” (85). Lissie draws an analogy from her present life to describe the happiness she experienced while being with her cousins. The joy and contentment she felt while being with the animals was comparable to that of little children who were sent to their Grandmother’s house during summer (83). Walker here envisages the joy and satisfaction humans would have if they lived a harmonious life with nature and animals.

This ideology is expressed in Walker’s essays as well. To her, the Universe is a big family consisting of animals, birds, reptiles and fishes. “Our primary connection is to the earth, our mother and father regardless of who ‘owns’ pieces and parts, we are sister and brother beings to 'four-leggeds (and the fishes) and the wings of the air' share the whole” (Living148).

Peter J. Paris opines that African cosmology shapes the moral, ethical worldview of many African people and communities. In a symbiotic web of life in African cosmology Spirit, nature and humanity are interconnected:
… any ethical or unethical behaviour conducted by human impacts the other aspects of cosmological order positively or negatively. According to this framework, one could argue that since ancestors are believed to reside in many aspects of nature, any human behaviour that diminishes and dishonours nature or the world can have a devastating impact on the relationship between the human and the ancestor. In the case of water pollution, for example, the act of humans misusing, damaging, wasting, or abusing water is understood to be an immoral act against nature which disrupts the ancestors. (15)

Walker’s eco-spirituality is best expressed in the poem, We have a Beautiful Mother. For her, Mother Earth is a place of solace and security. Just as a child yearns for its mother’s lap, Walker yearns for the green lap of Mother Earth.
We have a beautiful/ mother/ Her hills/are buffaloes
Her buffaloes / hills. We have a beautiful/mother/
Her oceans/are wombs
Her wombs/ oceans.
We have a beautiful/mother/Her teeth/the white stones
at the edge/of the water/the summer grasses/her plentiful hair.
We have a beautiful/mother/Her green lap/immense/
Her brown embrace/eternal/Her blue body/Everything
We know. (Collected Poems 459-60)

Walker, in her poem, Torture, talks about the healing power of Nature. The poem suggests that instead of retribution, communion with nature eradicates pain and humiliation:
When they torture your mother/plant a tree
When they torture your father/plant a tree
When they torture your brother/and your sister
plant a tree/When they assassinate/your leaders
and lovers/plant a tree/When they torture you/
too bad/to talk/plant a tree. (Collected Poems 389)

In this poem, planting a tree becomes symbolic of attaining redemption through communion with nature. In the opinion of noted critic Ikenna Dieke, this poem is one example of Walker’s “earthling consciousness,” which reflects “the sympathetic symbiosis between her creative intellect and the natural environment” (200). Dieke recognizes that “the natural environment is not perceived as ‘other,’ but instead as an essential part in the expression of one’s individuality” (200). The older generations of Black Americans, who were subjected to all kinds of violence, had realized the fact that the link with nature alleviated their troubles and miseries. This wisdom of having a harmonious relationship with Nature was carried over to writers like Walker.

Walker explains in The Color Purple, how the roof leaf that the native African tribal group, the Olinkans, worshipped as God was wiped off from the Olinkan habitat by the White colonizers. According to the Olinkan belief, the roof leaf symbolized God. One of the Olinkan legends states that when a greedy Olinkan chief destroyed the land on which the roof leaf grew, the heavens punished the whole tribe by creating storms and flood. It was only when the people prayed to God for appeasement, the wrath of the Gods stopped. Then onwards the Olinkans worshipped the roof leaf as God. The Whites annihilated “every last stalk of roof leaf” (205) from the Olinkan village which was a tactic to forcefully obliterate their tradition and culture. As Ngugi WaThiong’ O suggests “To control a people’s culture is to control their tools of self-definition in relationship to others” (153). The sabotage of native culture was the scheme chosen by the imperialists to dethrone the Olinkan culture.
Ecomemory, that refers to the collective as well as individual memory related with the earth, of the Olinkans was strategically destroyed by the colonizers.

In *The Color Purple*, the spiritual transformation of Celie is complete towards the end of the novel where we find Celie, a confidant, capitalist entrepreneur addressing the final letter thus:


(259)”. Celie has internalized the principles of Shug and is able to view the spirit of animism in all human and non-human beings. Daniel. E. Ross comments on the transformation of Celie that “Shug’s version of God deconstructs the fountainhead of patriarchy, the Lacanian Name-of-the-Father who is the source of law and power. (82)

Eco womanists give emphasis to a spirituality that stresses the interrelation between women and nature. They emphasize on the Goddess worship, which once prevailed, but became redundant when patriarchal norms dominated the society. Mother Goddess was worshipped as nurturer, healer and the one capable of fighting against all the evils. In Europe, Africa, Asia there were evidences of Goddess worship in the past. Female worship was connected with the mystery of the womb. The capability of the female to conceive and give birth was looked upon with awe and admiration. Many of the ancient religions that worshipped Mother Goddess were destroyed as time progressed. The divinity once given to women folk was erased forever. Rosemary Ruether analyses how matriarchy was systematically replaced by the circulation of stories that assert male-domination. Even the Hebrew Creation story, according to Ruether, stresses the authority of a male-God. While the text leaves open the equality of male and female ‘in the image of God,’ the maleness of the pronouns for God and for Adam already suggests that males are the appropriate collective representatives of this God, females sharing in the benefits of corporate “human” sovereignty, but also falling under the rule of the male head of family. (*Gaia and God* 21)

Women are excluded from the divine-human relationship. Women are not addressed directly by God; but only through men, who are the mediators. Leonard Shlain points out the difference between masculine outlook and feminine outlook in the perception of religious outlook. In his work, *The Alphabet Versus the Goddess: The Conflict between Word and Image*, Shlain considers that there is a gendered difference in the religious experience of women. Holistic, simultaneous, synthetic, and concrete views of the world are the essential characteristics of a feminine outlook. Whereas the masculine outlook is linear, sequential, reductionist, and more abstract (Shlain 43). Worshipping Goddess will
be a measure towards recognizing the female power, female reproductive capacity, the ability to nurture and heal.

In a dialogue between Fanny and Nzingha in the novel, *The Temple of My Familiar*, Walker presents how Westerners destroyed the African Goddess concept. The tendency of the Whites to annihilate everything which is found more powerful than them is criticized by Walker. Nzingha who was sent to Paris for her higher studies found it difficult to continue there; as she found even the academic intelligentsia talk degradingly of Africans. In the History classroom, the slide showing the picture of Perseus with the severed head of Medusa, leads Nzingha compare the severed head of Medusa to the head of Africa (270). She compares Medusa to Isis, Goddess of Egypt. “The Goddess, who, long before she became Isis, was known all over Africa as simply the Great Mother, Creator of All, Protector of All, the Keeper of the Earth, The Goddess”(268). Medusa, the African Goddess is described as an ugly figure with locks of snakes instead of hair, and who possesses the capacity to turn men to stone. The killing of Medusa by Perseus, is metaphorical of the White man’s strategy of conquering everything that hinders his way to accomplishment. Nzingha opines that “. . . if you are from Africa, you recognize Medusa's wings as the wings of Egypt, and you recognize the head of Medusa as the head of Africa” (270). Her stringent criticism of the Whites continues “… and what you realize you are seeing is the Western world’s memorialization of that period in prehistory when the White male world of Greece decapitated and destroyed the black female Goddess/Mother tradition and culture of Africa” (270).

The witch burnings that took place in Europe during the Middle Ages were also a strategy to demolish Mother Worship. Women with exceptional healing power and those who exhibited extraordinary talents were labelled as witches and were annihilated. Lissie, in one of her dream memories, narrates how she was burned alive by the Europeans in the novel, *The Temple of My Familiar.*

We were witches; our word for healers. We brought their children into the world; we cured their sick; we washed and laid out the bodies of their dead. We were far from evil. We helped life and they did not like this at all. Whenever they saw our power it made them feel they had none. They themselves felt moon to our sun. And yet as every woman knows, the moon also has great power. We are connected to all three planes-present, past and future-of life, so is man, but he will not let himself see it. He has let himself be taught that his own mother is evil and has joined religions in which her only role, after nurturing and rearing him with her blood, is to shut up. (*The Temple* 196)
Carolyn Merchant comments that witchcraft was a natural religion, grounded on fertility and sexuality. The Christians were against witches because, for them, witches “symbolized wild and uncontrolled nature and witch trials persecuted women as the causes of natural disasters and of evil” (105). At the present day, some feminists try to revive witchcraft as an independent religion with its foundation on rituals, Goddess worship and folk wisdom. Wicca, the religion of witchcraft, believes that everything in nature possesses a spirit which must be worshipped. Wicca promotes Goddess worship as well as Earth worship which is lacking in the religions built on patriarchy. Many feminists and eco feminists find Wicca as a refuge as it is against prescriptive rules of the conventional religion which tend to suppress individuality of thought and action.

Walker stresses that everything in Nature is interconnected. Walker’s spirituality includes not only Mother Earth, Nature and its manifestations, but also her ancestors as well. She declares in Anything We Love Can be Saved:

A year or so after being there I reconnected with the world of animals and spirits- in trees, old abandoned orchards, undisturbed riverbanks- I had known and loved as a child. I became aware that there is a very thin membrane, human-adult-made, that separates us from this seemingly vanished world, where plants and animals still speak a language, we humans understand, and I began to write about the exhilarating experience of regaining my childhood empathy. I discovered that not only is there an adult-made membrane separating us from animals, rocks, rivers and trees, ocean and sky, there is one separating us from our remote ancestors, who are actually so near that they are us. (128)

In Now is the Time to Open Your Heart, after consuming the Grandmother Medicine, Kate experiences a sequence of dreams. In one of the dreams, Kate dreams of Remus, a Black slave, one of her ancestors who teaches her the importance of exoneration and healing in one’s lives. In the dream, Remus gives an account of his death by the White master. The Whites took pleasure in torturing and killing the Black slaves which provided them much of an entertainment. When one among the Whites shot him, the other man started to fight because killing the slave instantly robbed him off the opportunity to torture him. But Remus’ message to Kate is not to take revenge on the Whites as he says: “Our job is to remind you of the ways you do not want to be...Sometimes I think this message is the hardest to get across because it flies in the face of our need to revenge”(97). Remus also makes a suggestion to Kate that “We feel the need to avenge, to make right. To heal by settling a score. Healing cannot be done by settling a score” (97).
Remus teaches the need for ecological conservation as well. Kate feels depressed to see the northern region of California, once lush with trees, is now bare as a result of clear-cutting. The young trees that were growing up lacked the shade and protection of their parent and grandparent trees. Walker here cautions that just like these young unprotected, brittle plants, those who have severed the ties with their ancestors will suffer an insecure, unshielded life. Ancestors serve as a huge refuge that provides security and strength to future generations. Remus educates Kate about the importance of conservation of trees:

Do you think when a tree dies all its work is finished? Of course not. It then has the work of decomposing, of becoming soil in which other trees grow. It is very careful to do this, left to itself, and hauled off to a lumberyard. If is hauled off to a lumberyard and if nothing is left to decompose and nurture the young trees coming up…Disaster. (96)

Walker’s own principle of ecological conservation is reflected in the words of her ancestor, Remus. For Walker, there is no separation between her self and Mother Earth. The influence of Native American spirituality upon Walker is notable; as she acknowledges the reciprocity of Nature and Earth with human beings.

Walker addresses through her narratives, a spirituality which is eco centric; to be more specific, eco womanistic. Her spirituality envisions a future where oppression and subjugation of Black women and Nature would be wiped out. Walker believes that people would shed their greed for material possessions and would find comfort in Nature’s green lap. This optimism is reflected in these words: “The cathedral of the future will be nature….In the end people will be driven back to trees. To streams. To rocks that do not have anything built on them” (By the Light 193).

Works Cited


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