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## **Ecofeminism: A Study of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple***

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### **Abstract**

Ecofeminism is a social and political movement claiming a considerable common ground between environmentalism and feminism. Ecofeminism is relatively a new part of the feminist movement. Ecofeminism embraces the idea that the oppression of women and destruction of nature are closely connected. Oppression based on gender, class and races are directly connected to the destruction of environment. Women are seen as being domestic, pure, gentle, kind, graceful and beautiful. Therefore nature is seen as the embodiment of all the characteristics that women possess. When nature is discussed in literature there are usually feminine references to the issues of the life cycle such as fertility and reproduction. The references to reproduction and fertility may symbolize the continuity of nature. Women are responsible for the continuity of the human-life so they are often associated with seasons. This paper tries to interpret Alice Walker's Pulitzer Prize winning novel *The Color Purple* from the point of view of Ecofeminism. Walker, an Afro-American feminist writer,

contributes to the idea of ecofeminism in this novel. The novelist talks about the prejudices against the black women and the abuse of nature by the male characters. Throughout the novel women are seen as sexual objects but they overcome the oppression. At the same time the nature also gives a warning to the oppressor.

### **Keywords**

Ecofeminism; Alice Walker; *The Color Purple*.

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Ecofeminism emerged in 1970's and 80's and the word 'Ecofeminism'

was first introduced by Françoise D'Eaubonne in her book *Feminism or Death* published in 1974. Writers like Vandana Shiva, Marti Kheel, Karan Warren and Alice Walker speak from the point of view of Ecofeminism. Ecofeminists say that there is a need for an ecological revolution led by women that would establish equality of gender and bring an end to the power of one group over another including the domination of humans over nature.

Walker's *The Color Purple*, published in 1982, is a Pulitzer Prize winning novel, which tells the story of Celie, a black woman in the South. The narrative is spun through the eyes of Celie, with her diary entries and letters from her sister, Nettie. Celie lives in a world of racism, sexism and abuse in deep southern America. She, as a black woman of her time, is poor and uneducated. After being raped, abused and impregnated by the man who is believed to be her father (whose identity is never revealed and is simply known to Celie as Mr \_\_\_\_\_) at the tender age of 14, Celie is forced into marriage. Her children were taken away to 'be with God', her sister escaped from the pain and torment and ran away to the home of a pastor, and her husband is violent and abusive to her. Poor Celie has no one to turn to. No one except God. She writes her diary confessing and letting out the anger and emotion which she is not allowed to express in normal everyday life. But Celie is soon fascinated by Shug (short for Sugar) Avery, who comes to stay with her, due to her poor health. Shug is the only person to show any affection to Celie, and stays in their house a little longer, to protect her from her violent husband. After decades of never hearing or receiving letters from her sister, Celie assumes Nettie is dead. But with the aid of Shug, she soon discovers that Mr \_\_\_\_ had hidden the letters that Nettie had sent to Celie. The letters explain how Nettie had travelled to Africa with another family as their maid, and she soon finds out that the 2 children that she takes care of are Celie's children and finds out that the man, who she believes to be her father, is not. Celie, now an independent woman starts a sewing business and finds out that Nettie plans to return back to America with

the children, and her new husband. Once reunited at old age, Celie and Nettie are truly happy and live in harmony with the other they love around them.

The central philosophy of ecofeminism is related to the body of the female and nature. The nature is attacked in the same way as the body of women and this philosophy is clear in this novel. Celie's condition is deplorable. She is abused physically, sexually and emotionally. She becomes pregnant at a young age. The novel begins with the threat "You better not never tell nobody but GOD. It would kill your Mummy". This implies that the God knows everything and understands. He compromises with male wickedness and accepts woman's silence. Throughout the novel she has been subjected to a cruel form of male dominance, left alone to share her feelings. She turns to write letters to God. The female body becomes the target of male aggression and so woman like Celie begins to view their bodies with animosity. Thus Celie hates her feminine self. The black women lives in a society where men are aggressive and women are silent.

Celie addresses her letters to God because she has no one else to write and because she is so afraid to tell anyone. To survive beating, Celie destroys her emotions. She says "It is all I can do not to cry. I make myself wood. I say to myself Celie you are a Tree" (23). It is just like a tree which gives way to a man's exploitation. Celie remains quite and silenced. Celie recognizes that trees must also despise men for their attempts at deforestation.

Celie gets to know the beauty of her body only by the arrival of Shug her husband's lover. Shug makes it possible for Celie to discover her speech that is the freedom of speech and liberation from masculine brutality. It is Shug who changed the perspective of Celie. Before her Celie viewed God as a man in whom she can confide and seek protection. When she meets Shug she now perceives God as a man who acts like other men trifling and forgetting. Celie's life rejuvenates when she breaks the shackles of male supremacy. It is through Shug that Walker shows her Eco-feminist view. Shug describes to Celie that

her image of nature is “feeling of being a part of everything not separate at all. I knew that if I cut a tree my arm would bleed. I knew just what it was...everything needs to be loved”. The protagonist shifts her attention from male God to an eco-centric God; a God of trees, a God of birds, a God of air and this perspective leads us to view the novel through an ecofeminist point. God is not confined to shrine but God is in nature and within us.

Though Celie is the center of community of women but the one who knows how to survive, to be independent, and to be free from the patriarchal norms is Nettie her sister. She joins the missionary family of Samuel and Corrine and leaves for Africa. They are welcomed by the tribal people and in the welcome ceremony one of the tribal people tell them the story of a greedy leader. He wanted more than his share of land to plant more. His greed increased and he began to cultivate cassava, millet and groundnuts. Nothing can withstand nature's fury soon there came a storm to teach them a lesson and destroyed everything-the houses and the land also. They rushed to the roof leaf beds and that became the worshipping object.

The last letter shows how the human beings turn to the contours of sustainable earth community, dear God, dear stars, dear trees, dear sky and dear people. This is the right disposition to be taken towards configuring society and nature together as our immediate world.

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