

RESEARCH ARTICLE



ECOSPRITUALITY AND HEALING IN ALICE WALKER'S NOVEL *NOW IS THE TIME TO OPEN YOUR HEART*

PRASHANT PAWAR, TRUPTI PATIL

Assistant Professor in English, Department of English, Viva Institute Of Technology, Virar(E), Thane, Maharashtra



PRASHANT PAWAR

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ABSTRACT

With increasing public awareness of global problems, most of the people attempt to develop new ways of relating to the planet that entail not an ethic of domination, but one of partnership with nature. With growing interest in Ecology, Ecofeminism, Ecospirituality, more and more writers have adopted these concepts in their writing. Alice Walker's fiction is suffused with a concern for the environment. Her works make excellent sites for the present study as they reflect ecological, spiritual and Womanist outlook. The present paper attempts to study Alice Walker's vision of ecospirituality and healing in *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart (2005)*, which deals with the spiritual journey of women mainly the protagonist to find out the meaning of her existence and the world. It also discusses on how Walker through her novel forces reader to think about existence of mother earth and her healing power. The character of Kate Talking-tree is a lifelong seeker after enlightenment and how she yearns to find a way to save planet earth from human who are killing it. The present paper focuses on the relation between women and nature which is consider an intimate one.

KEYWORDS- Ecology, Ecospirituality, Ecofeminism, Healing Power, Mother Earth.

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INTRODUCTION

People relate to the environment in various ways. In years past, human beings viewed the environment as the ultimate source of life, a necessary factor in their continued existence on earth. Reverence for the environment and its fruits was common and ties to the earth were strong. Those human relationships with the environment, but many simply ignored their responsibility for it. The devastating effects of human life on the environment become more

apparent these days. Nuclear disasters, tropical rainforest destruction; pesticides in food, toxicity in water indicate that the earth and all its life are in trouble. The dimensions of a global ecological crisis are clearly visible. More people are beginning to notice the need to repair the damage humans have inflicted. They express a concern for the earth's well being in different ways, donating money to an environmental fund, reading articles on the green movement or, perhaps, arguing for the benefits of

eco-friendly vehicles. For some, it remains a mere concern while others make a deeper commitment by integrating care for the earth in their daily lives. Most of the people attempt to develop new ways of relating to the planet that entail not an ethic of domination, but one of partnership with nature. With growing interest in Ecology, more and more writers have adopted this new concept in their writings. The confluence of an environmentally conscious upbringing and a heightened public ecological awareness has evidently prompted a strong thematic examination of 'green ideas' in the writings of Carolyn Merchant, Greta Gaard, Stacy Alaimo, Noel Sturgeon and Vandana Shiva. Thus, in literature, ecology becomes an important parameter.

Ecofeminism emerged as the myriad forms in which feminist and environmental theories intersected activism. Ecofeminism or Ecological Feminism emerged in the 1970's with increasing consciousness of connections between women and nature. It is a new movement born out of the high interest in the last few decades, to both feminism and ecological/environmental movements. Feminist are interested in why women are treated as inferior to men, and why they have only been partially included in the sphere of culture. Environmentalists are interested in why nature is treated as inferior to culture and why humanity has not commonly been included within the definitions of nature. Both movements seek liberation and so ecofeminists, by connecting them together are aiming to construct new practices based on a model of non-domination. Ecofeminists do not seek equality with men as such, but aim for the liberation of women as women. Ecofeminists are proud of women's unique physiology, and feel that equality with men should not come at the expense of disavowing or understanding their biological differences. Western patriarchal thinking is based on 'dualism'. Karen J. Warren, in her book *'Introduction to Ecofeminism'* (1996) describes value dualisms as 'disjunctive pairs'. According to her, the relationship between 'each side' of the pair is 'oppositional and exclusive' rather than 'complementary and inclusive'. (Pg- xi) Moreover, according to Warren, a 'value hierarchy' has been established in each value dualism, in opposition to the other aspect, which is associated

with lower status. (xi) Some examples highlighted by Warren of these 'Value dualisms' are:

Culture/ Nature, Reason/ Emotion,
Man/ Woman Mind/ Body Human/
Animal, (Ibid: xii)

This structural theory of value dualism argues that in Western history, nature, emotion, woman, body, and animal have been regarded as oppositional and inferior to their respective disjunctive pair, culture, reason, man, mind, and history that western societies can tell is one of the domination and oppression. (Ibid: xii)

Alice Walker's novels can be read from the vantage points of the theories discussed so far. Walker's works reflect her ecological, spiritual and Womanist outlooks. With the publication of *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989), her closing acknowledgements increase to include an even larger entity: the "Universe": "I thank the universe for my participation in existence." As this acknowledgements suggests not only her attempt to embrace the multiplicity of life in the universe, but also for its effort to coalesce the themes found in her earlier works: namely, the African-American women's search for identity and spiritual redemption through connection with the natural world and through empathy for animals, concerns that can found in many texts by African-American woman writers and that place her within ecofeminist camp. Alice Walker, by placing human beings and nature on the same moral plane, strongly suggests an Ecocentric world view which can be regarded as a precondition for an aesthetic and ethical appreciation and love of the environment.

Walker's complex and multilayered concept of spirituality developed in the mid- 1980s. Walker's concern is no longer only with the survival of her people, but also, perhaps more importantly, with the survival of the whole planet. Prominent among her themes are Eros, Activism and Pantheism. These three themes clearly describe Walker's spirituality, a Womanist spirituality. Walker's selected novel *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart* (2005) mainly reflect her vision of ecological self and ecospirituality. Attempt is made to see how her protagonist while discovering her identity, their primal ecological self, get involved in environmental issues. *Now Is the*

Time to Open Your Heart, is a work that ranks among her finest achievements: the story of woman's spiritual adventure that becomes a passage through time, a quest for self, and a collision with love. Kate Talking-tree has always been a wanderer. A well published author, married many times, she has lived a life rich with explorations of the natural world and the human soul. Now, at fifty-seven, she leaves her lover, Yolo, to embark on a new excursion, one that begins Colorado River, proceed through the past, and flows, inexorably, into the future.

The novel is an evidence of the Walker's commitment to Womanism. When we first meet the fictional Kate Nelson, she is 57 years old, "compact, muscular woman with good skin and creamy white teeth" (NTOH, 9) but unsettled by newly creaky knees as well as spirit that's never been content to follow a well-trod path. Always a seeker (meditation and appreciation of the natural world are a part of her life) sets off on a spiritual journey, on which she discovers the medicinal and aesthetic quality of nature, the significance of human bonds and the power of ancestral connectedness. Kate rejects not only religion, materialism but also the evils of violence and "uncivilized" civilization. The self discovery of Kate is within the paradigm of Womanist ethics. As suggested by Barbara Christian:

The initial stage of black Womanist self-development that Empowers black woman spiritually and renders them courageous enough to resist injustice is the positive assertion of their humanity against the onslaught of hostile forces. Black women's struggle emanates from a deepening of self knowledge and love.

Fittingly, the main character in the novel, Kate undergoes self-discovery before discerning the paradoxes and dilemmas in the lives of others. First of all, Kate Talking-tree needs a change in her life, although she is widely published writer. She maintains an over orderly house, being particularly fastidious about its unkeep. She has gone through several unsuccessful marriages. Discomfort and pain draw Kate's attention to herself. She notices the aging of her body. As mentioned in the novel, "One

day she hears her knees creaking like unoiled door hinges" (NTOH,11) and she finds a "wrenching pain in her hip" (NTOH, 12) almost unbearable. Aging initiates a need for transformation. The external hindrances that Kate confronts are not only material goods and her immediate surroundings, but institutionalized religion as well. Kate ceases to attend organized Buddhist meditation sessions. Although she respects her teacher and his non-violent revolution, she doubts that he, well-educated prominent professor possesses an activist spirit, that would motivate him to struggle for the advancement of the poor. She reflects:

Easy enough for him to dismiss the brown and black and yellow and poor white people all over the globe who worried constantly where their next meal was coming from. (NTOH, 4-5)

Kate also discerns the peculiarity of gathered mediators with their "well-fed look," who "were overwhelmingly white and middle- to upper-middle-class and had the money and leisure time to be at retreat" (NTOH, 5). She feels uneasy, as she is the only black person in the group. Feeling discomfort, Kate chooses to sit outside under a big tree instead of returning to the meditation hall. She sees the tree as an embodiment of profound spirituality that offers equilibrium. Moreover, she questions Christianity. She recollects that even as a child she could never concentrate on praying in church and looked out of the window at trees. The spiritual closeness with nature constitutes one of the predominant themes in the novel. The character Kate is embraced by a welcoming tree spirit, which influences her to change her name from Nelson to Talkingtree. Moreover, in order to escape the burden of her husband's oppressive presence, she dreams of "being high on a hillside in the sun" (NTOH, 28). She even dreams of Anaconda, which symbolizes the insecurity in the human life. She feels:

We are all on the back of a giant anaconda. It is slithering and sliding, darting and diving like anacondas do. This is the reality of the world. (NTOH, 7)

She remembers that at an art exhibition her “bird nature became activated” (NTOH, 20) and she felt as if she could fly. Lastly, she begins to dream about a dry river, emptiness about life and about her creativity as a writer. Here again the concept of Ecofeminism is used by Walker where a woman symbolizes her emptiness with a dry river in her unconscious mind. The dreams were nothing but the reflection of this thought. The dry river signifies the decaying essence of life. She takes her dreams as a spiritual quest. She feels,

Her journey now was to be with woman only women, because she had seemed to feel, and to wonder aloud, about the possibility that only women these days, dreamed of rivers and were alarmed that they were dry. (NTOH, 16)

Therefore, her friends encourage her to journey to the Colorado River, on a spiritual pilgrimage. The rockiness of the boat journey induces motion sickness, and Kate’s body begins to purify itself. This act is a precondition for her spiritual advancement, allowing an investigation of her inner self. Kate, in this journey, feels a deeper connectedness with nature. Instinctively, she ingests an unknown yellow flower which soothes her stomach. Walker realizes that plants, too, are a part of the natural world and have an equal right to existence-until we realize that for Walker, the issue is the acknowledgement of the healing that the plants provide: they are the source of our health, both body and soul. Kate’s trip to Colorado does not complete her spiritual journey. It continues with a further sojourn to the Amazon River, on which ritual participant drinks “a frothy liquid that tastes like soapsuds” (NTOH, 51-52), as preparation before swallowing a sacred medicinal plant Yage, known as “Grandmother”. The herb is believed to stimulate spiritual transformation and healing. According to them, this medicine from Grandmother Earth helps them to connect with their interior worlds, their own deepest fears; and to see with clarity what they have been lacking in their lives and/or the place where they have been damaged. Through the process that involves deep cleansing caused by plant-based-liquid stimulating vomiting and diarrhea, for, as they are told, “you could never put a sacred medicine into a polluted

body” (NTOH, 52), and vivid visions of Grandmother Earth, revealing her secrets and wisdom, the seekers are able to find their place in the complex design of creation to find their riverbank and root themselves in it and, more importantly, to heal themselves and become more whole. In the novel, Walker uses the word “river” as a metaphor for life. When Kate dreams of dry rivers, she understands that her life has become devoid of meaning.

Towards the end of Kate’s session of grandmother, it feels like through Kate’s journey, the Mother Nature has sent her a message and because she could send her message and has reached to her children, she feels at peace. In one of the ending chapters she says,

I am peace, said grandmother, and nothing has die for me to exist. Not tobacco, not grapes of sugarcane. Not human beings and not me! She added laughing. When you circle, paint your faces with yage to remember this. (NTOH, 118)

At the end of the voyage with river, Kate encounters celibates and lovers, shamans and snakes, memories of family disaster and marital discord, and emerges at a place where nothing remains but love. She remembers,

Armando’s voice as he sang ‘icaros’, healing songs that had come down to him through countless generations... ‘Now is the time to open your heart.’(NTOH, 210)

Thus after returning from the forest, she has got the peace of mind by opening heart for ‘pure love’ for all the people, the nature, and the past where her forefathers have lived. Throughout the novel, Walker firmly holds the belief that, human beings are the flesh of Earth. Walker maintains that Nature/Earth creates our bodies, both male and female, whose rhythms parallel its cycles. For Walker we are coconspirators with the Earth, inseparable from her both in life and death, returning to her arms at the end of our lives. Consistent with the belief of many indigenous peoples, Walker understand the Earth as nurturing and ever-green mother of all, for “it was meant to be appreciated for its wonderfulness.” (NTOH, 176)

While some indigenous peoples have honored the Earth by singing to it- as Yolo learns in the novel, the native Hawaiian people “mapped the land by singing it... no place did not have its proper song.” (NTOH, 135) In conclusion, Walker through this novel forces reader to think about the relation between and nature which is considered an intimate one and also about the existence of Mother Earth and her healing power

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