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Sisters of the Earth: Ecowomanism in Alice Walker's "How Did I Get Away with Killing One of the Biggest Lawyers in the State? It Was Easy" and "Fame"

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Abstract: The foundation of ecowomanism is derived from ecofeminism: a political and philosophical movement that combines ecological issues with feminist concerns. As a part of the womanist tradition, ecowomanism highlights race, gender, and class intersectional analysis to examine environmental injustice around the planet. Ecowomanist theorists compare the violence and oppression suffered during the times of slavery and the continual gender and racial violence in the contemporary scenario to the violence suffered by the Earth, associating Black women's bodies with that of the Earth and nature. This paper attempts an ecowomanist reading of the select short stories from Alice Walker's collection *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down*, namely, "How Did I Get Away with Killing One of the Biggest Lawyers in the State? It Was Easy" and "Fame." The stories explore the complexities of the experiences of the black women protagonists. The stories contain imagery and symbolism from the natural world to highlight the distinct experience of being a black woman doubly marginalised. This intersectional study fosters an understanding of all beings, human or non-human, dismantling all hierarchies.

Keywords: Ecowomanism, intersectionality, environment, Black feminism.

Introduction

The term "womanist" (Walker 34) was first brought into usage by Alice Walker in her short story "Coming Apart" from the 1971 collection *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down*. Within the story, it is depicted how the protagonist makes the husband realise the extent to which the pornographic industry exploits the female body. By fighting against the idea of pornography, the story highlights that the protagonist is not only aware of herself but also makes her man understand that women, both Black and White, are not stereotypes. Hence, the concept of womanism differs from that of feminism, the idea of which it incorporates within itself. Many Black women observe that the mainstream feminist movement which began with the first wave in 1848 tends to relegate the experiences of Black women to the background, failing to include the issues of women of color because it is "markedly white" (Ward and Herndl 259) participating in

marginalizing Black women, third world women and working-class women. Alice Walker's interest in Black women, their heritage, and sense of self from the beginning of her career has proved her to be one of the powerful advocates of Black feminism. Her collection of essays, named *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, depicts the difference between Black feminism and mainstream White feminism, where Black feminism is womanism, a word embedded in the Black folk culture where the concept is formed by the trials and tribulations of being a Black woman.

The intersectional idea of ecowomanism was not named vividly by early womanist writers or scholars. However, ecological sensitivity is present within their works even before Alice Walker's usage of the word "womanist." In Walker's 1973 poetry collection called *Revolutionary Petunias*, she deliberately named one of her verses "The Nature of This Flower is to Bloom," bringing forth the interconnectivity of race, gender, and nature. The focus of such a connection continues to underline her later works like *Meridian* (1976), *Now is the Time to Open Your Heart* (2004), and others.

Ecomemory Within Ecowomanism

Ecomemory refers to the collective and individual memory of the earth and relationship to and with the earth, as Melanie L Harris states (28). It may be a collective set of values that guide the earth commitments of an entire community, which may be through the memory of slave songs and hymns that were spiritual, through the recollection of which one derives a sense of community. It is stated that "songs were used in everyday life by African slaves" (Pillich). It was a tradition extended from Africa by the first slaves that helped to project feelings of solidarity within the community.

Individual memory, on the other hand, depicts a recollection of specific events and experiences from one's own life, depicting a self-understanding. For instance, one's memory of feeling at ease with nature or one's personal experience of racism. Both individual and collective ecomemory are intertwined with each other and provides to one's understanding of ecowomanism which is the addressing of the intersectionality of race, gender and nature noting the relationship that African American women have had with the earth, "being named as property the same as the earth" (Harris 20) amidst surviving a white supremacist society.

Ecomemory acts as countermemory for the reconstruction of history, which ignores Black women's voices. It assists in disrupting the status quo and challenges "false generalisations" (Harris 31). Ecomemory is paradoxical, where the Black women's relationship with the earth is burdensome as well as comforting, which is evident in Alice Walker's mother's experience or ecomemory. Walker writes in her essay "The Only Reason I Want to Go to Heaven" that she remembers her mother telling her about the restorative effect of nature, which was her site of exploitation as well, for it is where she picked cotton when hugely pregnant (19). Ecomemory, hence, is the "source" (Harris 27) of ecowomanism where the "unique herstory" (Harris 27) of African American women is revealed. In the two short stories of Walker, "How Did I Get Away with Killing One of the Biggest Lawyers in the State? It Was Easy" and "Fame," the exploration of ecomemory is considered. In the first story, the ecomemory of the nameless African American protagonist is depicted, while in the second narrative, that of Andrea Clement White, a fictional authoress, is projected.

Ecomemory As Countermemory in "How Did I Get Away with Killing One of The Biggest Lawyers in The State? It Was Easy"

"How did I get away with killing one of the biggest lawyers in the state? It Was Easy" is set against the background of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, which becomes evident when the narrator states to the reader about the social milieu as she informs about the racism that White supremacists inculcate within the society amidst the fight of the Black Americans to integrate themselves within the mainstream. She quotes the lawyer Bubba's father as being one such supremacist who states that folks like the narrator "ain't even human" (17) and that "integration was a communist plot" (17). The ecomemory of the author is hence brought to the limelight within this state of affairs. Womanist scholar Emilie M. Townes explains in *Womanist Ethics and Cultural Production of Evils* that "countermemory has the potential to challenge the false generalisations" (47) regarding what passes as history in the United States that champions White supremacy. The awareness of this Ecomemory as countermemory helps break through the racial prejudices that state that the "environmental justice movement is just as White people's movement" (Harris 32). The protagonist, whose name is not known, is depicted as an emblem and inspiration for all Black women, for there is inculcated within her this countermemory.

The counter-memory is evident as the first-person limited narrative opens, where it provides hope amidst “environmental degradation” (31). The Georgia state capitol acts as a significant symbol as the narrative opens. The building was built in 1889, during the late 19th-century industrialisation and urbanisation, and provides an undertone of the building’s energy consumption, use of oak and marble contributing to greenhouse gas emissions and environmental decline. It also highlights the sense of ignorance of the Capitol towards the Black rights movement. This sense of injustice is evident from the building’s stature, which was “so high” (15) that the narrator could not see the “top of the building” (15). Amidst such anthropocentrism, the narrator projects the restorative power of nature and the sense of comfort that she derives from it. As she is unable to view the top of the building, she reaches down to run her hand “over the grass” which is described as a rug that is “springy and silky and deep” (15) Such a sense of comfort that the narrator derives from nature is comparable to Maya Angelou’s poem “Woman Work” where Angelou projects the connection that the Black woman derives from nature’s rejuvenative sense.

Like the third stanza where nature’s calm rhythm is projected with the usage of rhyming lines as she states “Rain on me, rain/...’til I can rest again” (Woman Work) the usage of rhymes in the narrative to depict the benevolence of nature is projected in the words “springy and silky” (Walker 15). The narrator’s deep understanding of and connection to nature is further exemplified as she admires the Magnolia trees, stating them to be “beautiful” (15), and she gets for herself one of their blooms that becomes a symbol of perseverance amidst a racist society. However, the moment she arrives home, she becomes detached from the sense of succour the nature provides for the bloom turns “brown” (15) the moment she brings it home. The home hence becomes a symbol of the prevailing inequality that pervades, reminding her of her Mama, who “worked in private homes,” pointing at the severe exploitation that the African Americans had to undergo amidst the Civil Rights Movement. In 1968, African Americans were “three times more likely to live in poverty than whites” (Wilson). The exploitation of the Blacks was only slavery under disguise.

The narrator gradually becomes more aware of the tense atmosphere, and the exploitation the nature and the Black feminine self ensues. The blighting of the bloom of the petal foreshadows her rape by Bubba, the White lawyer which highlights the unchanged state of affairs since the slavery where Black women became the receptacle of the White man’s rage who controlled nature and the body of the woman. Initially,

she is unable to understand the sense of exploitation into which she has been thrust, for she was only sixteen and, like every girl, desired somebody who would tell her she was “pretty” (17), validating her girlhood. However, her epiphany arrives when she is confronted by the stark reality of the trauma of her rape the moment Bubba restricts her to rescue her mother from the Carthage Insane Asylum. The narrator states that it was a sudden moment of realisation when she “woke up” (18) from her dream of girlhood, the luxury of which Black women are denied. Her act of murdering Bubba becomes a subversive stance where she uses his gun to murder him, taking all his money from the safe with which he lured her into college education. This act of murder may be interpreted as manipulating the racist system to gain authority. Her act of murder is not investigated, even though she did not have time to “wipe off” (18) her fingerprints.

Instead, the murder is reported to be caused by burglary. This does not point to the White community’s silence to protect the narrator but to maintain their status quo which might have been disrupted if the murder would have been investigated leading to the exposition of Bubba as a rapist. Hence, Bubba’s exploitation remains a subdued affair. Despite the nuanced nature of racism and power dynamics in the story, the personal victory of the narrator becomes a stepping stone towards the reclamation of justice for Black women, where she achieves a sense of rejuvenation that she craved for at the beginning of the narrative amidst nature. The narrative becomes a counter-memory that sparks “new configurations of meaning” (48), as Emilie M. Towers states. The narrator’s self-worth is similar to that of Celie from Walker’s *The Colour Purple*, where she is oppressed by the patriarchy that her husband represents. She, like Celie, also finds strength from nature. It is with Shug’s assistance that Celie can leave Mr _____. She compares her strength with that of the trees as she states: “I give it to him straight, just like it comes to me. And it seems to come to me from the trees”(102). She embraces the holistic aspect of faith and discards the traditional stereotype of the white god as Shug tells her that “it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don’t notice it” (98). She introduces Celie not only with a new sexuality but with a new religion of nature.

Ecomemory in “Fame”: A Paradox

Alice Walker’s short story “Fame” does not provide a particular timeframe within which the narrative is set. However, taking into consideration Alice Walker’s authorial fame that may resemble Andrea’s fame, the narrative may be set during the 1970s, after the Civil Rights Movement, during which the volume *You*

Can't Keep a Good Woman Down was published. The conversational narration in which Walker's fictional author Andrea Clement White is engaged in a television interview projects the notion that to be truly creative, one can't be famous. Such an idea kindles in her mind, especially because of her African American roots, which she feels are compromised because of the "fame" she has attained. Andrea Clement White's fame may act as a parallel to that of the status of Alice Walker herself. Jill Terry reports in "The Same River Twice: Signifying *the Colour Purple*" that Alice Walker felt betrayed, both personally and as a representation of the African American people. Even though she did not identify her betrayer specifically, she implicitly blamed Steven Spielberg's adaptation of *The Colour Purple* invites generalisations depicting stereotypes based on a one-sided view where Celie and Shug's portrayal is a sanitised version of the lesbian relationship presented in the book (66).

These projects show how the White patriarchal industry has made use of Walker's art for commercialisation. Andrea Clement White hence, despite being famous is doubtful of the fame that commercialisation provides her as she states that she had made money but such wealth only contributed to an inherent sense of "emptiness" (41) This realization during the interview connects her to her collective ecomemory where she becomes aware of the prolonged systemic oppression of the White supremacists throughout the ages which becomes vivid as she imagines about the plantation landscape as she finds herself amidst a banquet where she is honoured with an award. Her mind continually shifts to an "automatic" (40) state as she detaches from outward, superficial interactions and merges with her inner, more authentic connection to history amidst nature. In her memories that act as a dream sequence, she is widely aware of the injustice incurred by the earth and the Black people, especially the Black women. This is evident as she appears to be imagining herself as a child, standing and watching Ben, likely an enslaved craftsman, making canes. She thinks of herself as his daughter, who would not have been required to be a boy to dig his grave. "As a girl" (43) involved in the strenuous labour on the plantations, she had enough strength.

Ecomemory is filled with "ecological paradox" (Ruffin 2), which is the beauty-to-burden paradox, where ecomemory is filled with images of beauty as well as terror. The image of terror is one where there is the picturization of the experience within the plantation, while the memory of beauty is the instance where

Andrea Clement White switches to automatic to escape the sense of ignorance of the young Black woman regarding the ancestral heritage of the Black women creators.

Walker, through Clement White, criticises the voice of the young Black interviewer who seems to be detached from her heritage as she states Andrea to be the “first” (Walker 42) to bring forth her womanist ideas to the forefront. The influence of the White liberals to brainwash young Black women, making her ahistorical, is evident, and Andrea states that she never expects the White washed people to be aware of her “history, ... evolution” (42). There has been a train of women of colour excluded from publishing due to lack of financial means, poor literacy, racism, and prejudice (Finding Black Female). Hence, Andrea derives comfort from nature and its refreshing beauty, which is evident in the symbolism of the Lilacs that trigger her ecomemory where she sees herself “drenched in the smell of lilacs on her college campus in upstate New York,” (43) depicting a direct connection of Andrea with the rejuvenative essence of the beauty of the natural environment.

Andrea Clement White’s sense of fulfilment is only achieved towards the end of the narrative as she becomes rejuvenated in totality to “stand up and endure” (46) with dignity the one hundred and eleventh award she is presented with as the small girl within the gathering presents an anonymous “slave song” (46). The slave song acts as an emblem of the African American ancestral song that acknowledges the spiritual significance of the land and its inhabitants, the Black people. Kirsty Folan states in her article “Themes and Characteristics of Afro-American Slave Songs” that in slave songs, there is “often a lot of nature imagery” (11) because the slaves often worshipped deep in the forests instead of churches. Hence, the natural surroundings became central to the song. Her sense of discomfort throughout the day, beginning with the ignorance of the interviewer, extending to the patronising attitude of the president, “Tedious Taylor”, (Walker 45) to objectify Andrea kissing her despite her “batting him with her eyes” (45) finally finds a receptacle of comfort through the slave song that represents raw nature and its connectivity to African American women.

Conclusion

This analysis offers a detailed study of how the intersectional idea of Ecowomanism is applied to the selected short stories of Alice Walker. The African American women in Walker’s stories are doubly marginalised, firstly based on gender, which is accounted as insignificant from the male-centred perspective,

both Black and White, and secondly, based on their race, which is not given proper attention even within the mainstream feminist movements. The condition of African American women, hence, comes closer to the condition of nature. Both the Black female body and nature suffer subjugation in the hands of the Anthropocene and the patriarchy.

The cultural heritage of the African American women, which consists of a paradoxical relationship with the earth, is considered within the stories of Walker. For Black women acts as a site of exploitation but also as a zone for comfort where nothing seems to be as rejuvenative as that of the natural environment. Hence, the myth propounded by White supremacy that African Americans are too involved in fighting for their rights, they forget about environmental justice, is debunked, where environmental rights and social rights work hand in hand.

Through the idea of ecomemory within ecowomanism, the collective and individual memory that African American women have with the earth is brought forth. In the first two stories, “How Did I Get Away with Killing One of the Biggest Lawyers in the State? It Was Easy” and “Fame,” both individual and collective ecomemory is brought forward as the connection is made between the individual experiences of the protagonists relating to nature and the ancestral roots existing within the nature.

The stories hence act as a counter-memory where the knowledge of the environmental and social issues that the African American women inculcate within themselves assists them to seek justice for themselves and the environment simultaneously. This nuanced perspective is highlighted in their unique ways through close textual analysis in each of the narratives.

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