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Ecofeminism in Alice Walker's *The temple of my familiar*

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Abstract

This paper adopts the critical theory of ecofeminism to examine how women and the environment are exploited and dominated in Alice Walker's Temple of My Familiar. The objectives of the paper are to investigate and decipher the nexus between the exploitation of women and the environment under male dominance in society as well as to raise ecological consciousness and conservation. The paper reveals that the exploitation and maltreatment of women and the environment are linked as both are under man's dominance and control, and this has a far reaching negative impact on the overall human, natural, socio-political, and economic well-being of the society. Ecofeminist ideas centre on nature as the primary factor to be preserved and protected; necessitating efficient use of natural resources; since both the dominance of women and environmental degradation are products of patriarchy and capitalist exploitation, any strategy aimed at addressing one must consider how the other will be affected. This means that neither environmental improvements nor women's equality should be pursued at the expense of the other. In conclusion, Ecofeminism interwieves the tapestry of interdependence of man and nature as well as promotes the well-being of women and men in society.

Key Words: Ecofeminism, Ecology, Nature, Environment, Activism

Introduction

Ecofeminist writers, scholars, and activists in their works, advocacy, and activism have thematised and linked the exploitation and oppression of women as well as the ecology or environment and have drawn attention to the consequences of these in society. Some of these writers and scholars whose works have addressed women and environmental issues include Toni Morrison's *Bluest Eye,* Isidore Okpewho's *Tides,* Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist,* Alice Walker's *Colour Purple* and *The Temple of My Familiar*, among others. The aforementioned works have graphically shown in many ways how women and environment have grater ties and are dominated and exploited by men in society.

The global environmental crises such as the ozone layer depletion, the ice caps melting, industrial activities including mining, oil explorative activities, gas flaring, carbon emissions, among others resulting to climate change and global warming with attendant consequences on the environment are the foundations of the growing interest in ecological research, particularly at this time. Even as

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scientists have come up with many approaches such as cleaner energy sources and other methods of addressing the environmental crises, literature equally lends its credence in awareness and consciousness raising about the dangerous human activities and the effects on the environment since literature is mimetic in society. In this regard, literary scholars and critics link women and the environment to the ecological debate as equally exploited and degraded. They contend that, like nature and environment, human oppression and suppression of women has existed since the beginning of time, with women being subjugated and silenced by men. Bell hooks accentuates that Black women's bodies have been seen by western societies as nonhuman things to be subdued and controlled since the 1500s. From slavery to the present day, the Black female body has been seen in the western eyes as the quintessential symbol of a "natural" female presence that is organic, close to nature, animalistic, primitive (hooks 153). On her part, Patricia Hill Collins asserts that white exploitation of Black women as breeders during slave era "objectified [Black women] as less than human because only animals can be bred against their will" (167). Even when conditions in America and Europe altered, black women were still denied all rights. Unfortunately, women in Africa still lack voice; this is a problem that is only beginning to improve. Religions and customs are utilised to further obstruct and even silence women the more.

Women and their male supporters understand the multitude of issues they confront in society, but they also understand the need to jealously preserve environment because its repercussions affect everyone. Therefore, one tool that may be used to preserve nature is literature, which will aid in women's regaining their significance and relevance in society. To this end, Walker's *The Temple of My Familiar* brings to the fore the issues that affect ecology and women in society. The text explores the ideology of interdependence of all life, which is rarely considered in patriarchal societies, and holds that there is no hierarchy and that everything is a part of a larger interconnected web. A dualistic perspective that categorises women and nature as illogical, helpless, introverted, manipulable, and controllable; and man as rational, powerful, and extroverted.

Theoretical framework

Ecofeminism

Ecological and feminist issues are linked in terms of perspectivisation and conceptualisation. The biological science of natural environmental systems is where the name ecology originates. Ecology studies how these natural ecosystems support a robust web of life and how disruptions to it result in the extinction of plant and animal life (Reuther 33-45). Feminism on the other hand is a historically diverse and culturally varied international theory that probes the question of women. As Maggie Hunn asserts; while most writers agree that feminism as a group of political and social movement probably dates from the seventeenth century, feminism as a body of answers to the 'question' of woman has a more diffuse and considerably long-standing existence (1). According to Robin Barrow and Geoffrey Milburn, feminism is a label for a commitment or movement to achieve equality for women (128). Essentially, feminism is a theory which seeks that women and men be equal politically, economically, and socially. Though ecology and feminism are two distinct

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concepts, they are conceptualised as ecofeminist theory, which advocates the protection of both nature and women.

Ecofeminism emerged in different geographies through political activism and scholarship around two conjoined categories of "ecology" and "gender." One of the central tenets of early ecofeminist thinking is that women's oppression under patriarchy is closely linked to the oppression and domination of nature under capitalist, colonial, and modernist forces including those of Development and Science. Ynestra King asserts that the domination of women by men is the model for other forms of oppression, whether social or ecological (150-159). Thus, the model has been developed over the years using an intersectional lens that takes into consideration the connections among nationhood, gender, racism, class, ecology, and animality.

Historically, black women in particular have been objectified to maintain ideas of racial purity because they were seen as animalistic. The propounder of ecofeminism, theologian Rosemary Ruether, insists that all women must acknowledge and work to end the domination of nature if they are to work toward their own liberation. She urges women and environmentalists to work together to end patriarchal systems that privilege hierarchies, control, and unequal socioeconomic relations (33-45). Work on ecofeminism consists largely of first documenting historical connections between women and the environment and then looking for ways to examine those connections. Ecofeminism critiques not only ecological theories that overlook the effect of patriarchal systems on women and nature, but also feminist theories that do not interrogate the relationship between women and nature as well.

As a critical sub-field within feminist theory and environmental theory, ecofeminism rose to prominence in the 1980s through the publication of various key texts such as Carolyn Merchant's *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* (1980), and Susan Griffin's *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her (*2016) in the United States, and Vandana Shiva's *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development (*2010) in India. Merchant, Griffin and Shiva propelled the field forward in the global sphere through their critical contributions to highlighting the deleterious impacts of patriarchal, colonial, and modernist forces such as development and science, on both women and nature. According to Carolyn Merchant, Death and nature move back and forth, between material and social conditions and ideas about nature and science (68). Thus, the ecological and material changes are seen as fundamental to understanding the rise of mechanism and the argument for the nexus between environmental history and the history of science (Merchant 68). This argument is heavily based on the change in human value system from an organic to a mechanistic view of nature.

The earth is understood as having female traits and qualities. Within these formulations, both Development and Science are revealed to be dominant social orders with foundational ties to patriarchy and colonialism. Working together, they facilitate the ongoing extraction of knowledge and resources from the Global South to the North, while imposing "masculine" scientific knowledge that displaces indigenous, and women's ecological and scientific knowledge in the South. Vandana Shiva particularly articulates how rural Indian women experience and perceive ecological destruction and its causes, and how they

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have conceived and initiated processes to arrest the destruction of nature and begin its regeneration (12). According to her (among others), it is necessary to return to the feminine in terms of practices and knowledge, to overcome the conjoined domination of the masculine/man over nature and the feminine/woman (12). The politics of domination "refers to the ideological ground that (the axes) share, which is a belief in domination, and the belief in the notions of superiority, and inferiority, which are components of all those systems"(hooks 175). An overall link unites all of these socially created characteristics, even though groups confront different dimensions of this matrix depending on variables such as sexual orientation or species.

Ecofeminism is perhaps the most geographically diversified subfield under "gender and nature" as a body of study and as a basis for activism. It has grown in popularity within environmental movements in both the Global North and South. Indeed, ecofeminism is still used today in many parts of the world. For example, it is used to trace how European conquest of indigenous land and women's bodies occurred through violent acts in Australia, and it is used to create environmentally appropriate management strategies for rural India, among other places. Nonetheless, ecofeminism has been criticised for being essentialist and for advocating for a power inversion rather than a structural critique of gender, despite its continued relevance. This criticism has led to significant epistemological disputes over a number of fundamental terms, including gender. By recognising continuities and fluidities in place of rigidity and social constructions in place of "natural" characteristics, Val Plumwood expands the scope of ecofeminist theory and practice by challenging the dualistic thinking that underlies essentialist, Cartesian framing of nature, culture, mind, body, man, woman, and so forth ( ). Plumwood notes further that men were usually portrayed as rational, organised, and thus capable of managing the usage and development of women and nature, whereas women and nature were generally portrayed as chaotic, irrational, and in need of control. According to ecofeminists, this arrangement creates a hierarchical framework that gives control to men and permits the exploitation of both women and the environment, especially when the two are connected. In the light of this, the standpoint of the early ecofeminists is that solving the predicament of either constituency would require undoing the social status of both.

Thus, ecofeminist thought has transcended predominantly academic milieu and gained traction as a public movement by the late 1980s. Ynestra King asks all Americans to think about how their religious beliefs support the continued oppression of women and the exploitation of the environment in an article titled "What is Ecofeminism"? King's paper has contributed to the expansion of ecofeminism's philosophical reach and base of support (www.britannica.com). King highlights the special bonds that women have with nature, arguing that women are the biological functions' embodiments and the representations of nature (www.britannica.com). Ecofeminism reflects an affinity between the domination of nature and subjugation of women in history, experience, religion, literature, ethics and epistemology. Krishna Kalaamani and Ravi Kumar define ecofeminism as a: two-edged sword which deals with the suppression and oppression of women and nature. Both have been dominated and exploited by the patriarchal society (1). This means that ecofeminism advocates for the liberation of women and nature. In his opinion, Greta Gaard avers that;

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"ecofeminism is a theory that has evolved from various fields of feminist enquiry and activism: peace movements, labour movements, women's health care, and the anti-nuclear, environmental, and animal liberation movements" (1). Because women are the sources of new life and the land is the producer of all resources, ecofeminism contends that environmental issues are women's issues. In addition, women depend on nature to assist them in carrying out the tasks that society has assigned them. The difficulties faced by women are exacerbated by the loss of natural resources such as water, arable land, and trees. Arguing further, Gaard observes that; "Drawing on the insights of ecology, feminism, and socialism, ecofeminism's basic premise is that ideology which authorities oppressions such as those based on race, class, gender, sexuality, physical abilities, and species is the same ideology which sanctions the oppression of nature" (3). This indicates that the idea that all forms of oppression have similar origins is central to ecofeminist philosophy. These origins are found in hierarchical and patriarchal systems that emphasise duality or the superiority of one over the other. According to Karen Warren, "important connections exist between how one treats women, people of colour, and the underclass on one hand, and how one treats the nonhuman natural environment on the other" (4). A person lacks respect for nature if he does not value women's reproductive capacities and the responsibilities they play in society. She contends that defining the nature of these social ties and figuring out which ones have the potential to be liberating for both women and non-human nature is a key task for ecofeminist philosophy.

Vandana Shiva describes ecofeminism as the "medicalisation of childbirth and industrialization of plant production"(45). Thus, ecocriticism builds on the long-standing bond between women and the natural world to support feminism and ecological movements that aim to eradicate the subjugation of both. According to ecofeminism, women's historical oppression by the patriarchal western culture is what connects them to nature. Another famous critic, Mary Mellor maintains that; "ecofeminism brings together elements of the feminist and green movements, while at the same time offering a challenge to bear both. It takes from the green movement a concern about the impact of human activities for non-human world and from feminism the view of humanity as gendered in ways that subordinate, exploit and oppress women"(1). The instruments that promote these forms of oppression are the same as they pave the way for the oppression of nature. Catriona Sandilands sees ecofeminism as an avenue to "understand the ways in which nature and gender are wielded as discursive constructs, to investigate the ways in which the oppression of women and the domination of nature are imbricate in a whole host of destructive relations and practices, and to create an oppositional framework capable of addressing their interrelations"(16). Ynestra King aggregates the concerns of ecofeminism saying that "we believe in the philosophy of nonviolence that no person or entity should be made into another to despise, dehumanise, and exploit. As women, we have been 'the other' but we are refusing to be the other any longer and we will not make anyone else into another. Sexism, racism, class divisions, homophobia and the rape of nature depend on this process objectification"(12). These aforementioned perspectives highlight the essential parallels between the enslavement of women and the natural world. It is predicated on the claim that the emancipation of nature is a prerequisite for the complete liberation of women.

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Ecofeminism in Alice Walker's *The Temple of My Familiar*

Alice Walker's *The Temple of My Familiar* is a novel that lends itself appropriately to ecofeminism. Through the stories and experiences of the characters in the novel, Walker explores multifarious themes of interconnectedness, spirituality, and the relationship between women and the natural environment as well as the significance of living in harmony with the environment and appreciating the inherent value of all living things on earth. She depicts strong and resilient female characters who are deeply connected to nature, and how the exploitation of women and the environment are linked, and how both are rooted in the patriarchal structures of power, conquer, and domination. Through Miss Lissie's many lives, the novel's concern for the multiple oppression of women and nature is embodied. It explores the history and the manner in which women and nature are viewed and handled as tools of male subjugation. The novel also brings to the fore how role reversal leads women to being absolved of the duties assigned to them: "The men had decided to sell women and children for whom they no longer wished to assume responsibility… became a new tradition, an unexpected way of life"(64). A culture of male supremacy and a scenario where men start avoiding their obligations replace the egalitarian norms that once defined the community.

The subject of the physical horror of being a female slave and the exploitation of women's bodies during slavery is also graphically depicted in *The Temple of My Familiar.* Lissie informs Suwelo that a great number of people perished as a result of motherworship during the 100 years of the slave trade in Africa that; "there were, in the earliest days, raids on the mother's temple, which existed in sacred groves of trees, with the women and children dragged out by the hair and forced to marry into male-dominated tribes. The ones who were not forced to do this were either executed or sold into a tribe whose language was different. The men had decided that they would be creator, and they went about dethroning women systematically"(63-64). This reveals men's innate urge to rule women, and it also reveals that their cohabitation is never without discomfort for a while. Carlotta, for instance, dresses in a different outfit in an attempt to attract males. She admits to Arveyda that even though the shoes hurt her legs, she still wears them:

I wore the kind of shoes you'd asked me to wear, though they hurt and you'd left me for my mother, who always wore flats… It didn't make any sense, wearing the shoes. They were killers. But even if they destroyed my feet and crippled my legs, I knew I wasn't giving them up. I liked the way men looked at me in the high heels. The look into their eyes made me forget how lonely I was. How discarded (294).

This is a representation of the unbreakable bond that exists in society between men and women. The lady tries so hard to win over the male, often to the point of discomfort. According to Simone de Beauvoir, women are recognised and distinguished in their lives according to men. Man is always viewed as the subject and women as the other in this sense. It is expected of the women to be lovely and obedient, incapable of thinking for themselves (21).

The novel also highlights how black women's bodies were racially exploited throughout the American enslavement system. During the slave era, women's hair was hacked off, their bodies were branded with hot iron fragments and

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displayed, and they endured physical punishment that caused uncontrollable bleeding until they died (66-70). Even though slavery has been outlawed in the majority of countries around the world, the novel highlights the persistence of numerous forms of physical abuse and servitude of women. The most prevalent one, which is supported by religious or cultural customs, is the patriarchal system's requirement that women submit to men and the exploitation of women's capacity for childbearing, both of which have been shown to be harmful to women's health. One of the key characters, Miss Lissie, reminds every one of her previous lifetimes, illustrating how terrible treatment of women has not only been practiced by Black people in the modern era. It has been found that women have been oppressed and tortured from ancient times in numerous societies, particularly the Mediterranean culture. Lessie, for instance, receives public criticism and abuse because she was born without a hymen and there are no blood-stained sheets to prove to the villagers that their marriage was complete. She finally faces forced prostitution as a punishment from others who believed she had lost her virginity through extramarital affairs. She eventually passes away at the early age of eighteen from exposure and sickness. This incident exposes the harshness and foolishness of men, even in antiquity, something that ecofeminism strongly disapproves of.

However, Fanny, the matriarchal goddess figure in *The Temple of My Familiar,* believes that her husband's insistence that she wears underwear akin to Frederick of Hollywood has invaded not just her body but also her freedom and creative abilities. When Lissie states that throughout her lifetime, humans and animals were a part of the same community, the story encourages readers to become closer to animals. In the days of which I am speaking, people met other animals in much the same way people meet each other today, she claims. After all, you were living in the same community. You occasionally found yourself staring out of the same cave, waiting for a downpour to stop, and you used the same water and food (393).

Culture as a Vehicle of oppression

In spite of the division of work, black women in the text are not only treated as second-class citizens but are also made to perform tasks that are intended for both men and women. In the meantime, there is no expectation placed on white women to participate in any form of field work. This is because they could rear and care for their masters' offspring, female slaves in southern America were both cherished and despised for this ability. This exposes men's carelessness and makes it clear that black men and their culture is shown as not only oppressive of women, but also the cause of their predicament. In the story, women are compelled by enforced cultural and societal pressures to hold inferior positions in a male-dominated society, not because they lack ability. Women are robbed of their individuality and dignity by this misrepresented and discriminatory portrayal. According to Beauvoir, politicians, priests, philosophers, writers, and scientists have all attempted to prove that women's subservient roles are beneficial on earth and desired in heaven (190).

Conclusion

The paper examines generally the relationships between gender, nature, power, and in particular, how African-American men dominate, oppress, and exploit their women and nature in *The Temple of My Familiar,* using ecofeminism as a

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theoretical standpoint. The author shows that although there are connections between women, animals, and the natural world in the American society, the African-American patriarchal society wields power and domination as well as control over the others. With the assistance of other characters, victims of sexual, domestic, and cultural violence are able to assuage their pains. This signifies the value of female camaraderie, friendship, and sisterhood bonds as virtues crucial to women's freedom from domestic abuse. Other themes explored in the text include racism, sexism, female oppression, and the value of nature. From the ecofeminist viewpoint, the novel deals with issues of both men and women and nature as well as advocate for a more just and sustainable environment where all living things are appreciated and treated as God's creation with dignity and respect.

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