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ALICE WALKER'S APPROACH TOWARDS ECOFEMINISM AND
SUSTAINABILITY IN *THE COLOR PURPLE*

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Abstract:

*Sustainability in a society is directly linked to the role and status of women in society. Ecofeminists theorize that women have a positive impact on preservation and sustainability of natural resources. The present paper explores the interconnection between position of women in society, empowerment of women, and the importance of women in bringing out major changes in the environment. The novel, *The Color Purple*, written by Alice Walker, highlights the importance of empowering women in order to make the society a developed and sustainable one. Weak women are incapable of bringing out any positive change and their subjugation only leads to a deficient society. The novel emphasizes upon the growth of any society in which there are entrepreneur women, earning women, and women confident enough to take their own decisions. For a sustainable environment, man woman equation needs to be balanced. Instead of androcentric or anthropocentric thinking, the novel highlights egalitarian approach for a peaceful and sustainable future.*

Keywords: *Sustainability, Ecofeminism, Egalitarianism, Women Empowerment, etc.*

Introduction:

In the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the United Nations General Assembly adopted goals like gender equality and empowerment of girls and women. In an article on "Women and Sustainable Development Goals" in this agenda, there is an emphasis on ending poverty by eliminating gender based discrimination. The message conveyed in the article is that progress is not possible if women are deprived of basic rights and opportunities. It is written in the agenda that, "Women have a right to equal access to all avenues to end poverty, from social protection safety nets to use of the latest technology" (United Nations, 5). The focus of this agenda is on organizing programmes to provide training and practical skills to poor women so that they can become independent economically. They should be aware of their rights and they should be able to raise their voice against injustice. The United Nations Women Initiatives programme includes empowering women economically in order to strengthen sustainable development.

Research on the overall health of women reveals that poor women remain malnourished and suffer from fatal consequences due to pregnancy after child marriage. It becomes utmost important to provide education to girls and to protect their rights. Child marriage and domestic violence are the issues which must be addressed on priority basis. Women empowerment also includes participation of women in policy making organizations. In the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the United Nations highlights that "Women must have equal access to work, productive resources and financial services, as well as an equal voice in economic



decisions” (United Nations, 17). There is an emphasis on promoting entrepreneurship among women to make them independent.

Ecofeminists believe that women must be involved in nature preservation policies because women have an inherent connection with nature. The environment can be saved from destruction at a much larger scale if women have an equal participation as men in decision making process. The caring and nurturing ability of women can be a tool in preserving environment and hence, promoting sustainable development. In the present time, the greedy practices of consumerism and capitalism are destroying the environment and are leading to climate changes. Overconsumption of natural resources is making the planet inhabitable. A conscious effort to save environment demands an end to malpractices related to consumerism. The 2030 Agenda makes this issue relevant in relation to women’s involvement, “Women, and indigenous women in particular, need to be included in decision-making on ecosystem use at all levels, as essential players in preserving our planet” (United Nations, 28).

Analysis and Interpretation:

The Color Purple (1982) is an epistolary novel written by American author Alice Walker. The novel highlights the issues related to sustainable development such as gender inequality, racism, and exploitation of nature. Celie, a poor African American girl, is mistreated by her stepfather and she is forcibly subjected to child marriage. Celie is also abused, physically and mentally, by her husband who is much older than her and who already has children from previous marriage. Alice Walker conveys the message that disempowered women can never contribute towards sustainable development. Celie is told by her well wishers to fight for her rights. She says that she doesn't know how to fight; she only knows how to suffer. “I say to myself, Celie, you a tree. That’s how come I know trees fear man” (Walker, 18).

Ecofeminists believe that men abuse nature as well as women. The androcentric and anthropocentric behaviours of man lead to exploitation, oppression, and degradation of environment as well as women. Celie thinks that trees are also fearful of men, just like women fear men. Alice Walker emphasizes on sisterhood in her novel, indicating that women can support each other during the ups and downs of life. The supportive association of women can be a big tool in women empowerment. The novel throws light on the patriarchal mindset of men which is responsible for gender inequality and women’s oppression. Harpo wants his wife Sofia to become a submissive wife. He even beats her to make her obey him but she fights back as she doesn't believe in an oppressive relationship between husband and wife. For the progress and growth of society, the relationships should be based on mutual respect, love, and care.

In the novel, the villagers living in Olinka village of Africa, narrate a story of roof leaf. Long time back, a man from this village became very greedy and started accumulating more and more land. He also married many women to work on that land. The roof leaf crop was sacred for villagers to build the roofs of their houses. The greedy man stopped growing roof leaf crop and replaced it with commercial crops so that he could trade with white men. The wives complained about not growing roof leaf but he didn't listen to them. When a devastating storm destroyed the village with rain, there was no roof leaf to build the roofs of houses again. The story indicates that sustainable crops should be grown, instead of growing only commercial crops.

Vandana Shiva, an Indian environmental activist, has published around twenty books with major thematic concerns of ecofeminism, traditional crop growing practices, biodiversity, and bioethics. She actively participated in grassroots organizations of Green Movement. Shiva also



founded the Research Foundation for Science, Technology and Ecology in 1982. An initiative is taken by her established over 40 seed banks across India for promoting diversity in agriculture. Vandana Shiva played a major role in global ecofeminist movement. In her article “Empowering Women” (2004), she emphasized upon sustainable approach towards agriculture by engaging more women in decision making process related to agriculture.

In 1974, 27 women of Reni in northern India initiated Chipko movement to stop tree felling. They hugged the trees when the lumberjacks were ready to tell them. This protest saved 12000 square kilometres of land. The women raised their voice to protect indigenous forests. The Chipko movement gave worldwide publicity to the women of Garhwal Himalayas. Lavanaya Suresh writes in her research paper on “Understanding the Relationship between Sustainability and Ecofeminism in an Indian Context” (2021) that “... without the inclusion of feminist concerns for gender equality, most environment policy approaches will be incomplete and may even threaten to intensify women's subordination” (Suresh, 116). Ecofeminism is a political movement that attempts to link feminist struggles with ecological struggles. The book *Ecofeminism* (1993), written by Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva, deals with feminist and ecological struggles, in their combined approach, against global capitalist domination.

In the novel *The Color Purple*, the unsustainable practices adopted by Olinka village in Africa have been highlighted. Girls in the village are not allowed to go to schools and their only purpose is to marry and make their husbands happy. Due to ignorance in the village practices, Whites are able to interfere in their life by building roads in their villages and destroying their houses. Their crops are destroyed in order to grow beneficial crops so that Whites can gain profit. Alice Walker shows her concern towards black women, and the oppressive thinking of men that makes them vulnerable to torture. According to Walker, sexism, racism, and exploitation of nature are all interlinked. Any kind of domination or exploitation should have no place in an emancipated society.

Celie realizes in the end of the novel that God is present in trees, nature, air, birds and human beings. The real spirituality lies in cultivating reverence towards nature and other human beings. For a sustainable future, abuse of nature must be put to an end. Only when nature is considered as essential for the survival of human beings, people can stop the capitalist practices of felling trees in large number, polluting air, soil, and water through industries and technological advancements. Nature also takes revenge if human beings exploit it and make it their slave. A special bond with nature is required to bring back balance with nature. Only the feelings of love, care, and nurturing can build a society that is on the road to progress. Celie realizes that God becomes happy when human beings appreciate the beauty of nature. Corrupting nature only leads to disasters. Shug Avery, a character in the novel, says that man has started thinking as if he is God and he has started interfering with all the ways of nature. Men need to give up the greed of making profit by abusing and destroying natural resources.

Another aspect of sustainability highlighted in the novel is that of women’s ability to earn money and become independent. The work that they do to earn money makes them confident and is also important for their self esteem. Celie leaves her abusive husband and with the support of Shug Avery, she begins her own business of stitching pants for women. The pants here also symbolize freedom of women which they deserve. Celie's job as an entrepreneur completely changes her life and she becomes confident about herself and her life. Alice Walker gives a hint in the novel that women can extend help to other women in raising their standard of life. In the end of novel, Celie becomes a successful entrepreneur and realizes that God can be experienced in the



midst of nature, the stars, trees, sky, and other good people. The title 'The Color Purple' signifies the beauty of nature that must be revered and enjoyed, rather than abusing it for personal gains.

Arne Naess, who introduced the concept of Deep Ecology, opined that deep ecology's core principle is that the living and non living environment should be respected as a whole. The deep relation between human beings and nature repudiates anthropocentrism. Deep Ecology advocates environmental ethics like wilderness preservation and green movements. The principles of egalitarianism bring the primary importance to the equality that needs to be practiced in connection to nature and human beings. The ecological consciousness includes the spiritual awareness in relation to nature.

Cheryl Glotfelty writes in her essay on "Literary Studies in an Age of Environmental Crisis" (1986) that it is very important to develop consciousness related to environment among people. This can be done very effectively though including environmental concerns in literature. The environmental concerns like "... oil spills, lead and asbestos poisoning, toxic waste contamination, extinction of species at an unprecedented rate, battles over public land use, protests over nuclear waste dumps, a growing hole in the ozone layer, prediction of global warming, acid rain, loss of topsoil, destruction of the tropical rain forest" (Glotfelty, xvi). Glotfelty highlights the ecofeminism theory as a discourse that establishes the link between the oppression of women and the domination of nature.

James P. Sterba, an ecofeminist, writes about some important aspects of society that need to be restructured in order to plan a sustainable future. The first fundamental change needed is to spread awareness regarding gender equality and the same kind of upbringing for boys and girls in a family. Secondly, strict laws should be implemented to put an end to violence against women. Ecofeminists are trying to find the ways that would structure society on equality based paradigms so that a sustainable future can be envisioned. Nature, men, women, and all forms of existence need to be treated with equal respect. Science and technology need to revise their goals and find a space for balanced approach so that its overuse doesn't destroy the rhythm of nature. Karen J. Warren, an ecofeminist, writes in her ecofeminist peace agenda that patriarchal practices need to be uprooted to eliminate violence of any kind. She makes a central place for love, care, friendship, and trust so that human relationships can be improved.

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