

Exploring Alice Walker's Idea of Nature, Self and the Spirit: Teaching The Color Purple in Indian Classrooms

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Abstract: This paper has emerged from the teaching of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* to the undergraduate class of English Honors in India. In the democratic space of the classroom, Walker has helped several stories to emerge from our own lives--stories which connect us to each other, across differences and with the Black women's experiences. This paper is an outcome of our classroom experience and is especially relevant in the difficult and dismal times of the pandemic as it realigns us with hope and healing. We align ourselves with Walker to take a step towards respecting our own language and the belief system that comes along with it. This is an important step, as, besides other things, this paper also deals with the responsibility of recognizing and respecting one's own systems of belief that we often ignore or take for granted. *The Color Purple* expresses deep philosophical and spiritual concerns which align themselves with Pantheism and other belief systems largely pagan, premodern and indigenous ones that do not conform to Judeo-Christian religious beliefs. Walker has examined history and society from her mother's and grandmothers' perspective and has especially examined religion, with them in mind. She is drawn towards a reverence of Mother Earth as found in pagan belief systems. This belief system is easy to relate to in the Indian context. The paper explores the relevance of Walker's spiritual quest as it leads to a search for the self and metaphors of togetherness that impact our lives and of those around us.

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CLASSROOM ENGAGEMENT: INTRODUCING ALICE WALKER

Teaching Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* [1] in an Indian classroom as a part of the *Women's Writing* paper has been the most liberating and empowering experience for me as a teacher and for my students. In the democratic space of the classroom Walker has helped several stories to emerge from our own lives-- stories which connect us to each other -- across differences and with Black women's experiences.

The Color Purple is an epistolary novel about Celie, a poor, Black woman living in the rural Southern State of Georgia in the early 1930s. The novel starts with an address to "Dear God" as Celie shares her personal experiences with God. Having been raped by her stepfather at the age of fourteen years, she feels she cannot share her trauma with anyone around her-- especially as she has been threatened by her stepfather to tell nobody but God as it would kill her mother.

The novel is written in non-standard English with 'incorrect' grammar and spellings--the language Walker had grown up with and had heard her mother and grandmother speak. Initially, the students faced a problem understanding this version of English with its distinct grammar and spellings but soon they start engaging with the honesty and power of Walker's prose. My first job as a teacher has been to make them understand that Walker refuses to be defined by a language that has never recognized her people.

In this context, one of the exercises I involve the students in, is to find out from their family, especially their mothers and grandmothers, which was the first story, song, rhyme or lullaby they heard in their own language. Since they are pursuing an Honors course in English, it has become an official, master language of sorts. I teach in an all girls' college for undergraduates and we have a mixed linguistic group speaking different languages and also variations of the same language. As against the standard academic English language, as they recite or sing out a song in their mother tongue, in the public yet intimate space of the classroom it changes them in a strange way. They not only recognize the vast linguistic pool of languages and cultures we have in the class, but also learn to feel that their mother tongue matters-- that it has a claim to be heard, acknowledged and respected. We align ourselves with Walker to take a step towards respecting our own language and the belief system that comes along with it. This is an important step, as, besides other things, this paper also deals with the responsibility of recognizing and respecting one's own systems of belief that we often ignore or take for

granted. This paper is an outcome of our classroom experience and is especially relevant in the difficult and dismal times of the pandemic as it realigns us with hope and healing.

As an introduction to Walker's life, I always start by reading aloud in class her short autobiographical piece titled, "Beauty: When the Other Dancer Is the Self"[2] wherein she focuses on her eye injury which blinded her in one eye at the age of eight years, and its deep impact on her life. Being blind in one eye was of course traumatic for the little girl. However what bothered her most was that there was a visible indication of this disability in the form of a white scar in her eye, and this affected her looks and self-esteem.

The anguish of never being comfortable in looking up confidently gets intensified when her daughter Rebecca is growing older. Walker is worried about her reaction when she finds out that her mother's eye is different from other people's-- will her daughter be embarrassed? Contrary to her apprehension, her daughter looks at her scar and exclaims "Mommy, there is a world in your eye" [in response to which Walker writes] "Yes indeed ... There was a world in my eye. And it was possible to love it" [4]

Quite appropriately Walker has dedicated her collection, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* to her daughter Rebecca

"Who saw in me
what I considered
a scar
And redefined it
as
a world." [5]

The second voice of resistance is Walker's own...as she comes to terms with her scar and disability, helped by her daughter. Walker continues, "That night I dream I am dancing to Stevie Wonder's song...as I dance whirling and joyous, happier than I've ever been in my life, another bright -faced dancer joins me...she is beautiful, whole and free. And she is also me". [6] This same exuberance is also expressed by Walker as she dedicates *The Color Purple* to "the Spirit".

SPIRITUAL AWARENESS: VIGOUR AND AGENCY

This thought continues in the Preface to the tenth anniversary edition of the novel, as Walker writes, "This is the book in which I was able to express a new spiritual awareness, a rebirth into strong feelings of Oneness I realized I had experienced and taken for granted as a child...to encounter That Which Is Beyond Understanding But Not Beyond Loving..." [7] Besides other things, *The Color Purple* is a journey "from the religious back to the spiritual" [8] that this paper is also engaging with. There is a strong affinity we felt in our classroom in the Indian context with this journey, especially as experienced by Celie in the novel, and through her, by Walker herself. We could sense the vigour and agency of this creative energy translated into in our *Women's Writing* paper.

In letter 73 of the novel, Celie and Shug Avery-- the Blues singer who befriends Celie's and becomes her strongest support, discuss God and the meaning of religion. I take this chapter as the centring of what Walker writes about in the Preface. Celie regrets that the white, male, blue-eyed god has never cared about her or about women like her--"If he ever listened to poor colored women the world would be a different place, I can tell you" [9]. Shug teaches an important lesson to Celie about God being present not in the white man's church, but in natural creation and in feelings like love: "She say, my first step from the old white man was trees. Then air. Then birds. Then other people. But one day when I was sitting quiet and feeling like a motherless child, which I was, it came to me; that feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all. I knew that if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed." [10]

This conversation between Shug and Celie expresses deep philosophical and spiritual concerns which align themselves with Pantheism and other belief systems largely pagan, premodern and indigenous ones that do not conform to Judeo-Christian religious beliefs. As Walker writes in *Anything We Love Can Be Saved* [11] she has examined history and society from her mother's and grandmothers' perspective and has especially examined religion, with them in mind. She has understood "how they were manipulated away from a belief in their own judgment and faith in themselves" and were forever trying "to correct a 'flaw'—that of being black, female, human. [12]

This belief system is easy to relate to in the Indian context as in ancient belief systems, we hold in reverence various elements of Nature—we worship the Earth, Water, Air, Sky, Wind, Fire and other forms of non-human forces. The belief is also akin to the *Advaita* Philosophy or non-dualism as expressed in Ancient Indian texts like the *Bhagwad Gita* or the *Song of the Lord* which propounds that everything in creation is an expression of the divine—animate and inanimate.

This connection between God and nature also reverberates at the ending of *The Color Purple*. However, prior to that, Celie has to learn another important lesson. In the penultimate letter (letter 89) Walker tells us that just when Celie realized she can live without Shug and still be *content* she receives a letter from

Shug informing of her arrival. What follows is a statement Celie makes which is exactly what the *Bhagwad Gita* propounds—the values of equanimity and detachment. “If she come, I be happy. If she don’t, I be content. And then I figure this the lesson I was suppose to learn.”[13]

Shug has helped Celie towards her journey to self-recovery and healing--towards asserting herself as “I am”. Celie has developed a consciousness that is independent and strong. She is now no longer dependent on Albert, her husband; neither is she dependent on Shug for her happiness. Her happiness is now inside of her and it gets reflected in her pantheistic address to “*Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God*” [14] at the end of the novel. The melodramatic union with all whom Celie loved—its fervour of emotion and excitement and happiness, with its message of hope and optimism and inclusivity is a very powerful moment.

CONNECTEDNESS: HOPE AND HEALING

It is this healing that the world needs today as the pandemic situation has very well demonstrated in a very hard-hitting manner—that *we are all connected*...across caste, class, creed, gender, nationalities, geographical boundaries and especially across races. Ancient Indian wisdom also talks about the concept of “*Vasudhevkutumbkum*” which has been translated by philosophers as the idea of the entire ecosystem as a ‘family’ where each member is to be treated with mutual respect, care and recognition--that the whole earth peoples are one family. In the modern concept of individual profit and greed, industrial capitalism and fierce market competition, this concept had been brushed aside as being too idealistic. This is a lesson humankind has to relearn as the current pandemic situation has proved. It is vital that all have to be healed if each one has to survive. In this context, artists, writers and teachers have a special role in society and Walker says that increasingly, she sees her writing as “*medicine*” for her own self and for others.

Walker is drawn towards the “*Earth-centered, female reverencing religions*” [15]--a worship of Mother Earth as found in pagan belief systems, in an attempt “*to decolonize their spirit ... thereby saving it, in this fearful-of-Nature, spiritually colonized age.*” [16]

Walker’s ‘*decolonized spirit*’ dedicates the essays of *Anything We Love Can Be Saved* to her new anthem which is:

“*Joie the vivre, joie the vivre
Joie the vivre, over me
And before I’ll be slave
I’ll be dancing on my grave
And go home
To my soul
And be free*”

This is the same spirit that Maya Anjelou [17] proclaims in her poem and autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and in the eternal “*Still I Rise*”. This is the spirit which helps Sojourner Truth[18] ask “*Ain’t I a Woman*”. This is the spirit behind the Harlem renaissance, the songs of the slaves, or the creative enterprise of quilt making[19] This is the spirit behind the *Warrior Marks*.[20] This is the spirit behind Robin Wall Kimmerer’s *Braiding Sweet Grass* [21] combining indigenous wisdom, science, spirit and stories.

According to Walker, once equipped with this deep spiritual strength, vigour and creative energy, one can have the courage, the conviction and attitude to fight against injustice, oppression, impositions, discrimination. One can discover one’s self, be proud of one’s colour, body, sexuality and spirit. We can then think and speak and write ourselves into existence: as Celie powerfully exclaims: “*I’m pore, I’m black, I may be ugly and can’t cook, a voice say to everything listening. But I’m here.*”[22]. Thereby reinstating the self that had been erased and struck out in the first sentence of the novel.

This strong connection between spirituality and artistic creativity leads not to a denial of religion, but a need to a reformulation and reworking of religion as a spiritual quest. This idea finds affinity in the concept of ecofeminism and ecospirituality which leads to a recovery of the soul by a deeper understanding of the self and the earth. Although the scope of the paper does not permit detailed analysis of this issue, I would like to mention Ecofeminists such as Charlene Spretnak and Starhawk, who also draw their inspiration from premodern and from surviving indigenous wisdom and “*see spirituality as a source of inspiration for women in their struggle to change social realities. Spiritual energy empowers women. Such energy can, and should be channelled into political struggle*” [23]. Ecofeminists also draw their inspiration from premodern and from surviving indigenous wisdom, particularly those of Native Americans and indigenous populations of Australia and New Zealand. “*This is often expressed as returning to a nature-based-spirituality that the modern world has destroyed.*” [24]

Indian ecofeminist Vandana Shiva and her co-author Mies in their book, *Ecofeminism* talk about “*the ecological relevance of this emphasis on ‘spirituality’ lies in the rediscovery of the sacredness of life, according to which life on earth can be preserved only if people again begin to perceive all life forms as sacred and respect*

them as such. Political change will come from a spiritual approach combined with political struggles over the fight for immediate survival. ...the enemy of nature and women is patriarchal capitalism.”[25]

Ecofeminism thus combines two major force fields of Walker's creative journey—the spiritual quest and political struggles. “Activism is ... my muse” [26] writes Walker in *Anything We Love Can Be Saved*, “And ...it is organic. Grounded in my mother's love of beauty, the well-tended garden and the carefully swept yard, her knowing everyone in her environment was sheltered and fed.” [27]

What is remarkable about Walker is her ability to draw strength from many spiritual beliefs. She describes *The Color Purple* as a “Buddha book that's not Buddhism”. Instead of an official, institutional religion, Walker follows what she rightly calls “ a path”—where she lives out what matters most to her--love, compassion, positive energy and hope that help her stand up against injustice and oppression. This is made possible by her meditation practice which teaches going deep within one's self to access the spiritual core inside each of us. This spiritual self does not lead towards worldly renunciation but equips one to change the world not through aggression and violence but through calmness and compassion. Walker believes that if the Inner spirit is free you can have creativity, but inner liberation is important to deal with repression. [28]

From a phallogocentric reading of religion, the narrative of a master religion that controls and discriminates, we have to move to a personalized belief system of a life force that enables, empowers, impacts our daily life, and we impact the lives of others by lifting and piling small stones of activism instead of trying to lift the big boulder of heroism [29]. These alternative beliefs again align us with Walker.

The act of seeking inside oneself for strength to defy patriarchal societal norms is akin to the spirit of the Indian Bhakti tradition. According to the scholar, Sisir Kumar Das, The Bhakti movement was a movement of the common people as they revolted against the institutional religions and the Brahmanic order. “The God of the Bhakti movement is no longer a transcendent and immanent reality beyond all comprehension and senses. It is a God close to the heart of the common man. At times the deity appears as a child, and at times as a friend, and more often as a lover longing to meet his beloved.”[30]

Within the Indian Bhakti tradition, one finds several women poets -- expressing such unrestrained love for their God as Meerabai, the 16th century poet-saint from Rajasthan who imagined herself as Lord Krishna's bride--defied all societal norms--and took to singing and dancing as a form of worship. This movement also voiced the joy of the liberated spirit-- there was an abundance of emotion, emphasis on music and dance and poetry as a mode of worship, a discovery of the power and beauty of the language of the people.

It's a longing, a seeking... a spiritual quest and this spirit has to be sought deep inside oneself and once recognized and cultivated, results in acts of resistance and creativity expressed in ‘our mother's gardens’.

CONCLUSION

I believe that Black lives can be centred inside the classroom and taken out of it as carried inside our hearts. In the classroom, we form connections, we laugh and cry together, we learn to speak and we learn to share stories. We form a community of storytellers and listeners discovering our own metaphor of the field of purple flowers and desiring and resolving to heal the world.

As teachers, we have a special task to hear the silences of our students and help them regain their voices by understanding the position they come from, their prisons or cages which are preventing them from singing...so that they listen to others silences and try to help others heal their scars and learn to sing too.

As Walker says: “We begin to distinguish between the need, singly, to throw rocks at whatever is oppressing us, and the creative joy that arises when we bring our collective stones of resistance against injustice together.” [31]

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