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An ecocritical reading of flowers in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*[1]

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Abstract
Flowers are one of the most popular motifs in verse as well as in prose. Many critics have noted that nature is at the core of Alice Walker's epistolary novel *The Color Purple* (1983) in which depicting or writing about flowers requires special attention. However, in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, flowers are depicted and written about to convey strong negative emotions as well as positive ones. In this study, how flowers are depicted or written about in the novel is studied through an ecocritical lens. I argue that Walker's use of flowers provides examples of the vitality of a hopeful existence especially when various flowers mentioned in the novel are considered along with the seasonal changes organically affecting such floral richness. I equally argue that Walker uses flowers to show the change experienced by the major character, Celie. In that sense, Walker's flowers are in direct coexistence with the major character, Celie.

Keywords: Ecocriticism; *The Color Purple*; American literature; Novel; Flower; Nature

Introduction

In her preface, Walker (1983a, p. ix) writes:

> Having recognized myself as a worshipper of Nature by the age of eleven, because my spirit resolutely wandered out the window to find trees and wind during Sunday sermons, I saw no reason why, once free, I should bother with religious matters at all.

Significance of nature in Walker's writing is directly related with her own understanding of God. As cited by Bhuvaneswari and Jacob (2012, p. 9), Walker says: "Certainly I don't believe there is a God, although I would like to believe there is a God beyond nature. The world is God. Man is God. So is a leaf or snake" (Walker 1983b, p. 265). Naming God the "Ultimate Ancestor" (p. ix), Walker states

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that "this is the book in which [she was] able to express a new spiritual awareness (p. x). This new spiritual awareness, as her notes in her preface support along with the novel as a text, yields itself to a new understanding of nature through which nature becomes the characters' measure of all personal, emotional, verbal, experiential, and behavioral development.

Ecological writing has started in the 1960s as a political trend of thought and political action concerned with environmental problems (Royot, 2007). According to Glotfelty (1996), ecocriticism is nothing but the study of literature in relation to physical environment. Opperman (2009), on the other hand, argues that ecocritical studies focus on the separation of the human being from nature in a way to articulate how nature is exploited by them. Similarly, some others question whether human beings and nature (world) are separable or not (Arikan, 2011). It can be inferred that as the number of ecocritical studies increase in the future, new aspirations will appear in a way to bring more in-depth and holistic interpretations to the foreground.

It is argued above that ecocritical studies problematize human and nature relationship in its simplest sense. Similarly, reading *The Color Purple*, through an ecocritical lense, shows that characters of the novel cannot be separated from their physical environment as they endure their own separation from nature under constant exploitation led by the dominating males. In this study, nature and especially flowers stand out, which is the focus of this present study. Hence, this study interrogates the attributes and significance of the flowers that appear in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* from an ecocritical lense.

Flowers in *The Color Purple*

It is the rapist with whose words the novel starts. "You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy" (Walker, 1983a, 3). Walker uses this opening line so as to tell the core of the entire story. Under such a silencing brutal act, not much is left for Celie to articulate herself, but writing letters to her sister and God. In her letters, nature appears as a witness as well as a fellow that accompanies Celie in her story. Although some claim that Nettie's letters change the way Celie sees the world (Isaoğlu, 2015), it is Shug Avery, her husband's lover, who helps Celie change herself. As Park (2011) explains, Celie finds her way out of those brutal rapes and beatings caused by the males around her while especially through her relationship with Shug Avery, she further restores her tortured sexuality and individuality, eventually succeeding to stand alone as an independent and autonomous individual. Hence, Celie's letters reflect feminine sensitivity

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juxtaposing male brutality and in such letters flowers repeatedly "bloom" as though they stand by Celie during her change.

In her letters, nature appears to be a visible theme in which Celie is interested in flowers, among many properties of nature, but flowers appear as an eye catching motif in Celie's epistolary narrative. Such motif is metaphorically used by Celie and her sister Nettie who attribute special meanings to flowers in a way to show their renewed spiritual awareness that is reflected in the floral metaphors appearing in their letters. An example to this renewed spiritual awareness can be seen in Nettie's discovery of Africa where her ancestral roots reside. While describing her new understanding of her race, she uses flowers to concretize her thoughts. As Nettie writes from Africa:

> Europeans are white people who live in a place called Europe. That is where the white people down home come from. She says an African daisy and an English daisy are both flowers, but totally different kinds (p. 122).

Celie uses flowers, daisies to be more exact, while talking about her daughter who is taken away from her as early as she was two months old: "I embroider Olivia in the seat of all her daidies. I embroider lot of little stars and flowers too. He took the daidies when he took her. She was bout two month old. Now she bout six" (p. 15). This visual beauty, in fact, juxtaposes the ugliness, in more exact words, horror haunting Celie's life characterized by continuous beating, sexual abuse, and feeling of worthlessness. As Bhuvaneswari and Jacob (2012, p. 9) articulate:

> Celie's condition is deplorable. She is abused physically, sexually, emotionally and socially. She becomes pregnant at a young age. Culture norms condemn her though she is faultless. Her forced physical degradation inculcates feeling of inferiority in her that exiles her from the traditional camp of "good girls".

In *The Color Purple*, flowers are not only mentioned in their natural habitats, but also as parts of home decoration and clothing. While writing about Harpo's new home with his wife Sofia, Celie claims that Harpo asks her "to make some curtains" after which Celie "makes some out of flower sack" (p. 33). Celie, later in one of her letters to Nettie writes that she was walking down to Harpo and Sofia's house with "little red flat-heel slippers, and a flower in [her] hair" (p. 196). Hence, flowers are mentioned as properties of fashion and such representation is meaningful for both Nettie and Celie since the following explanation of Nettie precedes Celie's abovementioned walk with a flower in her hair:

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> There is a fashion in Harlem now for boys to wear something called knickers- sort of baggy pants, fitted tight just below the knee, and for girls to wear garlands of flowers in their hair (p. 121).

In the larger part of the novel, flowers accompany death. On visiting her parents' graves, Celie writes:

> Us look and look for Ma and Pa. Hope for some scrap of wood that say something. But us don't find nothing but weeds and cockleburs and paper flowers fading on some of the graves (p. 165).

This visit to the graveyard results in frustration for she cannot find their graves. Such frustration is exemplified through paper flowers, not real ones, that are fading in time. Hence, as characters' moods change from positive to negative, so do the nature of the flowers change from real and natural ones to the paper ones.

Flowers on graves are especially important for Celie, who writes about her life after her parents' death as follows:

> But now that they dead and I see my children doing well, I like to think about them. Maybe when I come back I can put some flowers on they graves (p. 243).

Unlike Mr. _____ and Harpo, who change throughout the storyline, Alphonso, who abuses and rapes Celie during her childhood remains a child abuser throughout his life. Interestingly, after Alphonso's death, Celie writes that "he has been dead two weeks but fresh flowers still blooming on his grave" (p. 221), symbolically suggesting that Alphonso was dead long ago in a way that flowers could flourish on his grave in a very short time like two weeks.

Celie changes with the help of Shug as they establish a bond against the male power that consumes Celie's energy, which she needs to go on in her life. Against those males that hinder Celie's happiness, Shug suggests that Celie speak up by saying, "Whenever you trying to pray, and man plop himself on the other end of it, tell him to git lost, say Shug. Conjure up flowers, wind, water, a big rock" (pp. 177-178). As her visit to her father's house shows, her eagerness to meet him seems like rejoices nature all around her as she writes "All round the house, all in back of it, nothing but blooming trees. Then more lilies and jonquils and roses clamming over everything" (p. 162).

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Among all the flowers Celie mentions, the rose has a special place. Celie uses the motif of the rose twice in the novel. First, she resembles her vagina to a wet rose:

> I lie back on the bed and haul up my dress. Yank down my bloomers. Stick the looking glass between my legs. Ugh. All that hair. Then my pussy lips be black. Then inside look like a wet rose (p. 75).

Second, she resembles Shug to a big rose:

> Shug a beautiful something, let me tell you. She frown a little, look out cross the yard, lean back in her chair, look like a big rose (p. 176).

According to Bhuvaneswari and Jacob (2012, p. 9) Celie gets to know the beauty of her body only by the arrival of Shug Avery. It's noteworthy that both her vagina and Shug represent femininity in the novel while Shug is continuously associated with flowers. Throughout the novel, as Celie writes, Shug is "wearing a little flowery shirt [Celie] made for her and nothing else" (p. 54).

Flowers and their colors

This "feminine" representation is supported by the color pink associated with Shug's dream house. Shug wants to build a house that is "a big round pink house, look sort of like some kind of fruit" (p. 188). She takes the pencil "and put the wood skirt in the shade" while continuing:

> Flower boxes go here, she say, drawing some.
> And geraniums in them, I say, drawing some (p. 189).

As cited by Ševčikova (2008, p. 15), according to Holtzschue (2006, p. 40) colors can recall "six levels of response" in people including personal relationship, influence of fashions, styles and trends, cultural influences and mannerisms, conscious symbolism-association, collective unconscious, and biological reactions to a color stimulus. Regardless of the kind of response they create, colors are associated with feelings although meanings attributed to colors differ from one culture to another. According to Ševčikova (2008, p. 20), in Christianity, white represents purity, peace and conciliation. However, as she cites Fontana (1993, p. 25), the same color has different associations in different cultures:

> …in Europe yellow connotes deceit and cowardice, but it is the imperial colour in China and in Buddhist tradition it stands for humility and renunciation.

Although Celie writes about flowers in a recurring manner, she does not make use of colors while writing about them. It is interesting, saddening at the same time, that her flowers are colorless-

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except for the moment she mentions the colors of flowers. Hence, it can be inferred that Celie's perception is colorless most probably because her life does not allow her to see colors in life. As mentioned above, there is an exception to Celie's perception and writing of the colors of the flowers and it coincides with her experience with Shug which shows the shift in her mood from negative to positive. As Celie changes with the help of Shug, she finds courage to meet her parents after many years. This courageous undertaking coincides with many flowers that are depicted vividly:

> For the first time in my life I wanted to see Pa. So me and Shug dress up in our new blue flower pants that match and big floppy Easter hats that match, too cept her roses red, mine yellow… Then all along the road there's Easter lilies and jonquils and daffodils and all kinds of little early wildflowers. Then us notice all the birds singing they little cans off, all up and down the hedge, that itself is putting out little yellow flowers smell like Virginia creeper (p. 161).

Conclusion

As much as it is important to study all motifs, themes or figures of speech in literary texts, studying how flowers are used in the construction of literary texts or how such representations relate to the whole of literary texts can help us understand texts in a more adequate manner. In literature, flowers are often associated with love in a way to represent characters' positive emotions in their romantic relationships. Celie's existence as a human being is accompanied by her epistolary narration of nature in which flowers have symbolic attributes supported by the use of colors. Readers realize that Walker's use of colors, while writing about all those flowers, is not only for the readers' visual pleasure, but such colorful representations juxtapose Celie's colorless life. It is also noteworthy that when colors and flowers are used together, they signal a dramatic change in Celie's perception of her horrible life moving onto a more livable one. An ecocritical reading helps us understand that flowers accompany Celie in her life, often without colors or scents. However, Walker's flowers are in direct coexistence with the major character, Celie.

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