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## Rereading, Reshuffling and Rearranging Poems: Tracing a Chronological Green Thread

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There is enough for everybody's need,  
But not for anybody's greed.

Mahatma Gandhi

Nature does not exist primarily for human use,  
But for all living species.

*Foundation of Environmental Studies*

Ecocriticism is comparatively new branch of inquiry in relation with other dominant 'isms'. It has emerged at a particular moment in history when science and technology hitherto addressed as boon have become bane. The world that upto now was considered as a safe place for human beings to gain mastery over all sciences has been metamorphosed into a large garbage can. All around, one encounters nothing but pollution and contamination. Life has become almost impossible under these circumstances. Ecocriticism addresses this issue dexterously and creatively.

As mentioned above, ecocriticism is related to the issue of survival, so its prime aim is to make people conscious about the environmental crisis. Consciousness is at the root of action. Without it, one cannot act. Ecocriticism not only makes people think but also impels to act. It combines both eco and literature that is it brings nature and culture on the same platform. It's practitioners read any form of expression from nature's standpoint. They are literary ecologists who discover ecology of literature. This paper is intended to present the ecological strains in Alice Walker's poetry from altogether new prospective. The focus is maintained on: *Horses Make A Landscape Look More Beautiful* (1985) and *Absolute Trust in the Goodness of the Earth* (2003) from a green perspective.

Though, reading of her poetry generates more sense when it is read in a chronological order, still violation of the sequence yields interesting insights into an unexplored arena. The effort here is to impart a hypothetical sequence in order to trace a chronological green thread. Poems that appeared in twenty-first century are placed prior to those of 1980s. This permutation and combination imparts an altogether a new edifice to the otherwise conventional way of evaluating poems in the sequence of their appearance. The poems have been rearranged in such a way that six different stages can be construed paralleling six hypothetical yet logical stages of human evolution in terms of shifts in their attitude towards nature.

The first stage is characterized by satiety and fulfillment. The second stage is that of curiosity and inquisitiveness. The oxymoronic situation of exploration with exploitation of the surroundings encapsulates the third. Revelation is the hallmark of the fourth one. The fifth stage depicts the plausible measures to overcome the follies. The sixth stage entails admonition and premonition. Such a division is based upon Lynn White Jr.'s essay, "Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," Rajeshwari Jha's *Prakriti Prayavaran aur Hum [Nature, Environment and We]*

and the common trends found in literature and society during these stages. However, one should always keep this in mind that these stages are hypothetical and intersect into one another. They are based chiefly on the shifting of thinking patterns of the masses rather than turning of centuries. First and sixth stages may coexist with one another at various places at any point during human evolution. This is true of other stages as well. So, the division is a broad generalization not a universal fact. Her poems are perceived and presented in such a way that they mirror the mentioned stages in sequence.

As mentioned earlier, the first stage was that of contentment and comradeship. This stage can be hypothetically stretched from man's birth till 1000 AD. In this stage, man evolved from nature accepting all her bounties with gratitude. Initially, he was afraid of the forces of nature, but with the passage of time, he established amity with them. As Rajeshwari Jha points out that primarily man learnt everything from nature. Nature provided the best possible comfort to her disciples. For water, she had springs; for warmth, sun; for fruits, trees; and for milk, cow. Man was really spending a gratified life. Whatever he desired was provided by Mother Nature. Even the literature of Europeans reveals this tendency. Chaucer in "Prologue to *Canterbury Tales*" demonstrates the harmony that existed betwixt man and nature. Chaucer reveals how in April when air is pristine and snow thaws, man leaves his abode and sets out on pilgrimage. It seems, as if man was eagerly waiting for favorable environment. His delights and sorrows were dependent on the inclemencies of weather. The Indian literature produced during this time also corroborates the same. *Shakuntla* by Kalidas, *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana*, *Upanishads* all reveal man's reverence and respect for nature. African literature that depicts those primordial days notably by Achebe and Haley are a good illustration to support this evidence.

Alice Walker, though an American by birth yet an African by race, unveils this stage dexterously in her poems. Walker's poem have a strain of nostalgia for those days when trees & birds were a common sight. In "The Tree," she wistfully recalls that glorious past which has become obsolete in present era. The protagonist describes the magnitude of the tree. For her, the tree was so wide that it was beyond human capacity to measure it even the eyes failed to comprehend it:

The tree  
Was so large  
I could not see  
The top of it  
So wide I could not see  
The ends  
Of it. (Absolute 131)

In the same poem, she quotes Jose the Shaman who expresses the same thing in different words:

My people used  
To dream  
A tree  
All of us  
Together, me  
Dreamed  
The same  
Tree. (Absolute 131)

Man was happily living as a comrade of nature. Something mischievous transpired that interrupted his friendship with non humans. Till now, birds and animals were his playmates.

Now, he started to expand his horizon beyond what he had. Inspired by curiosity, he ventured beyond his abode. Curiosity to know more is not bad, but when such an impulse takes one away from one's roots and impels one to question everything it becomes destructive. Man began to feel discontented with his possessions. It was this dissatisfaction and the desire to explore more and more that led Vasco De Gama and Columbus to imperil their lives to discover the unexplored areas of the world. This development in humans' attitude from satisfaction to dissatisfaction can be viewed as the second stage in human evolution which if chronologically imagined can be stretched from the beginning of 11<sup>th</sup> century to the close of 17<sup>th</sup> century.

In "My daughter is Coming!" Walker emphatically presents this period of dissatisfaction. Here, the mother is more worried about what she doesn't possess rather than being contented with what she has. Her daughter is coming and she is enthusiastic about it. She has done all the preparations. She has everything: a bed, a mirror, a chair, a lamp and a desk, but this doesn't gratify her. She is more concerned about whether her daughter will like the torn curtains or not. This is how she gives vent to her feelings:

Will she like her bed,  
her chair, her mirror  
desk and lamp  
Or will she see only  
the torn curtains? (360)

It was this questioning attitude that led man to move out of green walls and explore new things around him. And from here commences the next phase of destruction and deterioration of indigenous cultures with their natural settings. From here begins the complex system of imperialism and colonialism which was purely lucrative in its need and destructive in its purpose. This third phase of human evolution can be imagined spanning from the beginning of 18<sup>th</sup> century upto the Second World War when atom bombs were dropped in Japan and almost every colonized nation was amidst her freedom struggle. This was the time when nature suffered the most. For their self centered needs, the westerners busied themselves in pulverizing all human values that resulted in the mass destruction of Asians and Africans with their sacred groves. This shift in the entire attitude from protector to destroyer can be seen as most destructive in the history of human evolution. This was the time when Africans were abducted from their mother land and had to undergo excruciating experiences in America. This was the time when Asian countries were ruthlessly squeezed. This was the time when colonizers trampled upon the most ancient civilizations and obliterated both human and non human. After scalping their own lands, they voraciously set their eyes upon Asians' and Africans'. Lynn White Jr. verbalizes this: "Formerly man had been part of nature; now he was the exploiter of nature" (8). White severely indicts Christianity for being anthropocentric. He exposes the attitude of Christianity in the following lines: "To a Christian a tree can be no more than a physical fact. The whole concept of the sacred grove is alien to Christianity and to the ethos of the west. For nearly 2 millennia Christian missionaries have been chopping down sacred groves, which are idolatrous because they assume spirit in nature" (12).

Walker's poetry too reveals this entire process of destruction and decay. To quote U Sumathy, "Living at a time when the earth's support systems are under stress, poetry cannot afford to provide tranquility and aesthetic pleasure alone. It is high time that the focus is shifted from an anthropocentric vision to a biocentric vision" (22). The violence heaped on nature was of two kinds- direct and indirect. Direct exploitation was that in which man shot at elephants, burnt jungles or poisoned earth directly. Indirect exploitation was when man did something that

indirectly affected the environment. Walker, being a humanist and environmentalist, portrays both these sides. She has no soft corner for the whites who deprived earth of her greenery. She exposes white man's rationale in justifying their exploitation of nature in "Thanks Giving". She writes:

Everything that  
Has welcomed  
You  
Has paid  
A price. (108)

The word "you" here refers to Europeans. Here, her environmental consciousness converges with her awareness of her racial heritage. The word "everything" is inclusive enough to incorporate blacks, native Indians, Asians, Africans, women and nature. Walker here rises above the boundaries of being an environmentalist or a black artist or a feminist. In fact, she speaks on behalf of every marginalized or oppressed community that has suffered in the hands of whites or Europeans. It is for this reason that Martin Deleveau hails Walker not only as an eco feminist but as eco womanist. If the title- eco-humanist is also ascribed to her then it will not be an exaggeration.

In the remaining lines, she reveals the cerebralness of the oppressors that how to dominate and control, they explain everything with logic. Here, the word "play" is used ironically. On close scrutiny, it seems as if, she has used it in lieu of 'exploitation':

You want now  
To play  
With dolphins  
Your excuse:  
They think  
They want  
To play  
With  
You. (Absolute 108)

The overall tone of the poem is that of dark humour. One surely feels amazed at such an explanation. No one wants to die. Life is precious to everyone. Everything in this world has a right to exist in its own way. Europeans, armed with science and technology, supposed themselves as masters. Birds, animals, trees and even human beings failed to escape their piercing bullets. In ancient times, nature was hailed as doctor. She was panacea for all ills. Forests were containers of medicinal herbs and shrubs. But, Science changed everything. Birds and animals were slaughtered for medicinal value. Even a few were burnt to make objects like shoe polish, nail paint and lipsticks. Europeans, perhaps, want to play with dolphins so that they can use them for making objects.

Unfortunately, man in his avarice took immense liberties with his environment. With the passage of time, as man advanced, he introduced chemicals and pesticides to enhance production. In consequence, earth started losing her fecundity. These pesticides were poisonous for birds and animals and human alike. Jungles were replaced by industrial plants. In "The Tree," Walker adroitly highlights the saga of decay and destruction vividly to bring forth the harmful effects of man's undue invasion in the territories of nature. Walker takes pains to describe the aftermaths of such a lethal growth that is only growth for human not for non-human. She quotes Josh the Shaman who poignantly bewails the loss of his fellow beings:

But now  
 He said  
 Our people are  
 Dying  
 Many are sick  
 Many are scattered  
 The rainforest  
 Is being  
 Cut down. (Absolute 132)

Towards the end of the poem, Walker criticizes white man's tendency of neglecting his non-human fraternity. Nature is also a living being. The trees also react. They also can feel. Jagdish Chandra was not wrong in declaring that the trees too are sensitive. Rajeshwari Jha also explains how once she planted a tree and later wished that the tree should not have been there. As a result, she found that the leaves of the tree started withering because it felt rankled. In "The Tree" too, the tree is intimidated. It is afraid of singing aloud. It is looking for shelter and it has no place to harbor itself except in dreams. She states:

Though it is the world tree  
 And larger than the world  
 It was afraid to sing aloud  
 It was looking  
 For shelter  
 Even in  
 My  
 Small space. (Absolute133)

Perhaps, Walker wants to indicate that if life is so dear to human beings then birds, animals and trees are no exception. After all, every species on this earth has a right to exist.

Man, armed with missiles and shot guns, launched an attack on his own surroundings. The land was cleared. The jungles were cut. The trees were burnt. Birds and animals were carnaged. Nothing remained untouched. As is evident today, even earth has become sterile. The water is contaminated. The air is adulterated. The sky seems to be junkyard of flying ash. Debris has become omnipresent these days. Industrial waste has disturbed aquatic life. "Who?" captures this entire process with graphic images.

Walker doesn't waste words. She uses precise one liners to assail meanness of man. She asks a question: who has remained unvanquished? In answer she herself states that no one- not even trees, air, water and rocks. Even moon, she exclaims, is disturbed by man's growing need for knowing more and more. In last few decades, various rockets and space-shuttles have travelled even to moon and brought earth and other substances from there which means, man's voraciousness has not come to a halt. After conquering the earth, his eyes are now staring the space. His constant interference with the movements of heavenly bodies can surely jeopardize his own life. The visits of Neil Armstrong, Uri Gagrin and Rakesh Sharma can be enumerated under this very phase. This is how Walker expresses her wrath and exclamation:

Who has not been  
 Invaded  
 By the Wasichu?  
 Not I, said the people.  
 Not I, said the trees.

Not I, said the waters.  
 Not I, said the rocks.  
 Not I, said the air.  
 Moon?  
 We hoped  
 You were safe. (378)

Here too, Walker blends the parallel destruction of indigenous people with their environment. She no longer remains a mere ecologist or an environmental literary critic or an eco writer, but becomes an overall humanist who is bothered and perturbed about the oppression and exploitation of every one. Martin Deleavux germanely observes: "Walker criticizes the white man's colonial/expansionist character that affects nature/humankind at the same time, demonstrating that the former cannot be separated from the latter" (5).

It's not that Walker's poetry has revealed the direct exploitation of nature. Her poetry also brilliantly presents the indirect destruction of ecology. "Thousands of Feet Below You" can be taken as an instance. Walker draws the image of a dying boy who has died because of the dropping of the bomb. The Boy had no fault of his own. His mistake was just that he came in the way of missile. Similarly, when bombs are dropped, whatever comes their way gets destroyed whether it is human or nonhuman. Walker paints a heart touching picture of a boy whose bones are shattered and who is lying helpless in desert. She asks the destroyers to make a place for the boy when they reach home. This is how she draws a sympathetic picture of the dying boy:

Thousands of feet  
 Below you  
 There is a small  
 Boy  
 Running from  
 Your bombs...  
 Now, driven,  
 Your have shattered  
 His bones.  
 He lies steaming  
 In the desert  
 In fifty or sixty  
 Or may be one hundred  
 Oily, slimy  
 Bits. (Absolute 99)

One can imagine the plight of birds and animals who like the boy must have become casualties of war. They must have suffered and died in the same way.

After the Second World War, at least three decades can be considered as the years of revelation that marks the fourth development in human evolution in terms of his attitude towards nature. These were the years when intelligentsia of the world found themselves horrified with the revelation that how human beings have gone so far in destroying nature. This was the time when magazines and newspapers were inundated with the headlines of environmental disasters. The captions like: a village became uninhabitable because of the dumping of industrial waste, a forest was found completely evicted of its flora and fauna, water in certain part of the world was no longer safe to be used, several died of skin cancer due to ultraviolet rays, shook the very foundation of science and technology that man so far boasted with immense pleasure. Headlines

with such unheard content so far appalled the responsible people of the world. They began to gather in conferences and seminars to discuss these issues. Sanguinity can be regarded as the hallmark of these decades. As a result, Humanists and ecologists or human ecologists concluded that the earth can be saved provided people become conscious and responsible in their dealings with nature.

Walker's poetry is rich in presenting this ambience of hope as well. "These Days" can be cited for illustration. This is a long poem of which every stanza ends with the same line: "Surely the earth can be saved" this becomes a refrain which putatively must have also been chanted by humanists turned ecologists. She adds names of her friends one by one after the above quoted refrain to symbolize the entire population of the world. The names that she pens are: Belvie, Robert, Elena, Susan, Sheila, Gloria, Jan and Rebecca. The catalogue can be enlarged in accordance with the whims of readers. They can end up reading this poem by replacing these American names with their names irrespective of the caste, culture, colour and nationality. The poem ends with Walker's usual broad outlook where she extends her benevolence from particular to the entire world. She states: "Surely the earth can be saved for us" (406).

From 1980s onwards, each discipline started offering its own solutions to resolve environmental crisis. Almost every sphere of life started greening itself. Ecocriticism too was an offshoot of such an endeavour. This was the 5<sup>th</sup> chapter in human evolution in relation to its changing attitude towards environment.

Walker's poetry too presents such a development quite comprehensively. Her poems are rich in offering various remedies for this malady. Hanna Nowak rightly opines, "To call her poems hopeful strategies for recapturing one's humanity is therefore entirely apposite" (179). The first and foremost recipe to solve eco crisis is suggested in the "What will Save Us?" To let every creature continue their life in their divine essence is inevitable for solving the environmental troubles. When lucrative motives are attached with the lives of others only then it loses its right to exist. Human beings value cows for their milk and pigs for their skin. This attitude damages autonomy of animals as individuals. What essentially is required is the restoration of everything to its celestial dignity. One should always see the thing in its thingness. Distortion of any kind is bound to imperil its entity. Walker too suggests:

The restoration to the cow  
Of her dignity.  
The restoration to the pig  
Of his intelligence.  
The restoration to the child  
Of her sacredness.  
The restoration to the woman  
Of her will.  
The restoration to the man  
Of his tenderness. (Absolute 92)

The last line of the poem is very important because it urges the restoration of the kindness in man. Conventionally man is defined as hard and masculine, one who can endure any pain. On the other hand, woman is defined as tender and soft. Over the ages, man has taken upon himself the burden of going outdoors and earning. So, it is he who is the major culprit. In order to save environment, it is essential to deprive him of his hollow, but socially defined and artistically constructed image of as solid as rock. Unless man is dethroned from his inflated ego, it is difficult to save environment.



Walker reiterates the same ideology in "Without Commercial". It is a powerful poem that pleads man to see the things in their thingness. Everything is significant in its own way. It is human beings' tendency to measure things in terms of profit. For example, deers are valued for musk, snakes for skin, cows and goats are petted for milk, hens for eggs and pigs for meat. Walker in "Am I Blue?" lashes severely on this tendency of man of viewing animals in certain fixed images. (Quite often one comes across the news where animals and birds are illegally smuggled out of the country for mercenary gains and personal interests). Walker concisely points out that everything has its own importance. The color white is as important as the color black. What needs to be done is to see things with an egalitarian approach. The warp and weft of life is disturbed when human beings do not stick to this fundamental principle. For example, in *Heart of Darkness*, elephants are slaughtered for ivory. Walker addresses this issue as:

As for me

I have learnt  
to worship  
the sun  
again  
To affirm  
the adventures  
of hair  
For we are all  
Splendid  
descendents  
of wilderness  
Eden:  
needing only  
to see  
each other  
without  
commercials  
to believe  
copied skillfully  
as Adam  
Original  
As Eve. (382-83)

Lynn White Jr. blames Bible of injecting such anthropocentric beliefs in man according to which man started considering himself as different, not a part of nature. According to this sacred book, everything in this world is created to serve man's needs. Eden was given to man to frolic amidst greenery. God instructed his son to view everything as existing only to serve his gains. Everything was for him even Eve was created to kill his loneliness. White Jr. further argues: if so then Christianity bears a huge burden of guilt. In order to save nature, it is essential to view her as she is.

Yet another way out that Walker suggests is implicit in "Torture". In the poem, she seems to be counseling her readers to plant trees. After going through the poem, one assumes that miseries & troubles are everywhere. As long as there is life, there are problems. Adversities may vary from caste to race to gender or to disability, but they are there. She seems to be suggesting a simple but effective remedy to overcome these atrocities. One should plant trees in return of each

pang that one receives. In this way, the earth will one day become full of trees and plants. She pens down her opinions in her usual simple and readable style:

When they torture your mother  
Plant a tree  
When they torture your father  
Plant a tree. (389)

Here, the word “they” may refer to whites who stole Africans from their mother land. It may also signify the patriarchal forces that have hammered women since time immemorial. It may even refer to the capitalistic powers that have oppressed laborers and nature. In fact, this world designates as many power structures as possible. Here again, Walker rises above the criteria of an eco writer or a woman writer or African American writer and becomes a human writer embracing the entire cosmos. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, when the world is facing threat of extinction then this poem can serve as a mantra for eco saviors. For those who adore and venerate nature, last lines of the poem are relevant:

When they begin to torture  
The trees  
& cut down the forest  
They have made  
Start another. (389)

The last stage that is in progress today is the stage of admonition and premonition. This may be characterized as starting from the first decade of 21<sup>st</sup> century. Ecocritics and environmentalists are of the opinion that one day this world will disappear and ‘dooms day’ will become a reality. If man will not become wise in using the bounties of nature then one day she will seek vengeance. Rajeshwari Jha also opines in this regard that earthquakes, floods, volcanoes, landslides and incurable diseases are numerous ways in which nature reacts. Most of the critics today envisage such a future if destruction of nature is not subdued.

Today, things may seem fine; one is not bothered about upcoming catastrophe. Ecocriticism is not just about reading literature from the stand point of nature but it also predicts the apocalyptic ending. Walker’s Poetry also contains evidence to support such a view. In “A Few Sirens,” she heralds an era that has the power to horrify any intellectual. Today, one is living in cozy environment. The cutting of trees is not affecting anybody. It is just an activity that one thinks should be performed to establish more and more industries regardless of its consequences. First few lines of the poem can be cited to strengthen this argument:

Today I am at home  
writing poems  
My life goes well  
only a few sirens herald disaster. ( 348)

But, this moment of satisfaction is ephemeral. The protagonist has a nightmare that horrifies her. Most probably, this nightmarish vision can be linked with the unimaginable ending of the world that will occur if human beings do not mend their ways. Following lines are self sufficient in foreseeing the horrible times ahead:

in the ghetto  
down the street  
In the world, people die  
of hunger.  
On my block we lose

jobs, housing & breasts  
 But in the world  
 children are lost;  
 whole countries of children  
 starved to death  
 before the age  
 of five  
 each year;  
 their mothers squatted  
 in the filth  
 around the empty cooking pot  
 wondering:  
 But I cannot pretend  
 to know  
 what they wonder. (349)

One should take this warning seriously. If there are no jungles then there will be no food, no oxygen, no animals hence no ecosystem. In the words of Christopher Manes: the life of human beings depends on the health of forests. The jungles depend chiefly on fungus. If the fungus disappears tomorrow, the forests will also die and the phenomenon will affect the entire world. On the other hand, if Homo sapiens vanish tomorrow, the event will go unnoticed by majority of the species on the earth. In any case, human beings are least significant in comparison with fungus. They are neither interesting nor important more than lichen. Walker too admonishes humanity of such dire ramifications.

Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring's* opening lines can be taken to sum up the whole argument. He gives a sweet story of a hypothetical town. This story is broad enough to entail all the six stages highlighted above. He narrates: once there was a town. Life in that town was full of joy. Deer and foxes were seen strolling across mountains and fields. The town was surrounded by hills and orchards. Farmers were spending their lives happily.

That town was favourite destination for the birds. People also visited that town to catch fishes from far off lands. Suddenly, strange maladies attacked the town. Animals began to die. Grass withered away. Birds were no longer seen or heard twittering. Peasants were of the opinion that they were incapable of raising cattle. Doctors were not able to find the cause of so many deaths at once. Carson concludes that no one, but man himself was responsible in introducing such a calamity.

This story speaks it all. It shows that glorious past with drab present. In short, it demonstrates two civilizations- one from where man started and another where man has reached. Walker's poetry depicts all these stages that man has lived through in a chronological order, provided one rearranges and reshuffles her poems. It may be a non sensible task, but its outcomes are most sensible. Such a reading enables her readers to trace a green thread present in her poems.

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