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A Spiritual Revisioning: Alice Walker from an Ecofeminist Perspective

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Abstract of the Thesis

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This thesis explores the work of Alice Walker from an ecofeminist perspective in order to demonstrate the connections between black women and the environment. Walker offers a spiritual revisioning that embraces nature while challenging the doctrines of patriarchy and Christianity, and the social justifications that support male and Christian hegemony. Through poetry, literature, and essays, she critiques the cultural and social practices of systems used to enforce dominance over black women and nature. She attempts to dismantle hierarchical relationships that subjugate the position of women and the environment and that deprive both of spirituality and reverence.

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Ecofeminists have sought to uncover the underlying structures of patriarchy that encourage dominance over both nature and women. Proponents of this movement have fought to secure equal rights for men, women, and the environment. Ecofeminists Carolyn Merchant and Charlene Spretnak advocate a reversal of past practices and support a harmonious relationship with nonhuman nature. Merchant suggests “a partnership ethic that treats humans (including male partners and female partners) as equals in personal, household, and political relations and humans as equals partners with (rather than controlled by or dominant over) nonhuman nature” (196). In order to change people’s perceptions, Merchant focuses on the efforts of women in Africa and India to combat the materialistic and mechanistic demands of capitalism, a system predicated on patriarchy. In terms of social and cultural needs, ecofeminism embraces a more inclusive view of spirituality “centered on goddess worship, the moon, animals, and the female reproductive system” (202).

Along the same vein, Spretnak asserts that environmental concerns like deforestation and pollution have gone unnoticed and unrecognized since “a powerful industrial giant like us lives on *top* of nature . . . free to do with it what we will” (4). To correct these damages, Spretnak emphasizes an “ecological wisdom” in which humans recognize the hierarchical relationships of patriarchy. Spretnak also reveals a looming fear of the environment and women, which has been used to justify social controls, like colonialism. Therefore, at the heart of ecofeminism lies a need to unmask the structures that keep women disempowered. Spretnak argues that, “ecofeminism will address not only the interlinked dynamics in patriarchal culture of the terror of nature and the terror of the elemental power of the female but also the ways *out* of the mesmerizing conditioning that keeps women and men so cut off from our grounding in the natural world, so alienated from our larger sense of self” (6). Hence, ecofeminists propose

freeing both men and women from cultural views that undermine positive, egalitarian relationships with the environment and each other.

Much of the same can be said of social and literary activists, specifically African American women writers who have fought racial and social oppression. Writer, poet, and activist Alice Walker addresses many of the issues laid out by ecofeminism, especially the concerns of black women and the environment. Through texts like *The Color Purple*, *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, “Am I Blue?” and much of her poetry, Walker breaks down social walls that exist as a result of patriarchy. These barriers belie the importance of black women and the environment. As a result, Walker supports an “ecological wisdom” similar to Spretnak’s that calls for a unified relationship between humans and nonhuman nature. Walker proposes that such a union is vital to the survival of both groups, especially since a damaged environment mirrors the horrors of human anguish. She reveals a linked oppression between the fate of the environment and black women, who have been denied an understanding of nature, female power, or female sexuality without the interests of male satisfaction. In this paper, I intend to uncover the ecofeminist aspects of Walker’s fiction and prose by specifically examining her spiritual views and the connections between black women and nature.

As many ecofeminists have done, Walker questions the social restrictions and abuses inflicted upon women and the environment. In writing *Anything We Love Can Be Saved*, she discusses her childhood upbringing and the damaging effects of sharecropping, which exploited both the land and her parents. She envisions this system, “in which the landowner controlled land, seeds, and tools,” as “the former slaveowners’ revenge against black people for having attained their freedom” (16). Sharecropping reinforced the power dynamics of slavery by controlling both land and laborer through “rape, beatings, burnings, and being thrown off the

land” (16). These acts of oppression were synonymous with continuing patriarchal power, and enforced the perceived status of blacks as slaves. As a result, Walker admits that her parents were worked too hard and therefore alienated from their natural surroundings, which to Walker represented paradise: “The truth was, we already lived in paradise but were worked too hard by the land-grabbers to enjoy it. This is what my mother, and perhaps the other women, knew, and this was one reason why they were not permitted to speak. They might have demanded that the men of the church notice Earth. Which always leads to revolution” (14).

Walker reveals a link between the harsh realities of sharecropping and the work of black women within the church. Black women, like her mother, understood a deeper connection with the environment, which is evident in their use of bark from a red oak tree to tame chickens as one example. However, motivating black men to recognize and address these concerns would not only upset power dynamics between black men and women, but also engender a revolution. Such a revolution would challenge the already limited authority of black men. Yet, Walker encourages a revolution in thinking by questioning the very position of women and the environment. She attempts to equalize and exalt the relationship between humans and nature by recognizing embedded elements of patriarchy in social systems like sharecropping and organized religion.

In her search of patriarchal systems, Walker explores the connections between black women and nature through a spiritual revisioning. By doing so, she exposes the pitfalls of organized religion and redefines the label of “pagan,” which often denotes “heathen” by societal standards. For Walker, “pagan” is synonymous with a person “of the land, country dweller, peasant,” whose “primary spiritual relationship is with Nature and the Earth” (AWL, 17). Therefore, the author proposes that traditional Christian thought denies nature and those that

worship it a place of reverence or acknowledgment. She criticizes Christian missionaries, who enforce cultural and religious edicts that identify all women with the fallen Eve, forever vilifying them as subjects of temptation and sin. Walker intends to revitalize paganism as well as other ancient forms of spirituality in order to restore human bonds with nature.

Spiritual minister and author Pamela Smith addresses Walker's views by describing how the author's "true religion and vibrant spirituality require the renunciation of the Judeo-Christian tradition and the adoption of more panreligious and pantheist sensibilities" (7). These "pantheist sensibilities" redefine Judeo-Christian traditions that have "dethroned the mother goddesses and replaced them with male gods to whom the female deities became subservient" (Merchant, 202). In her writing, Walker reawakens ancient cultures centered upon female power that have regrettably become casualties of commercial and social gain. She emphasizes the ethereal importance of the environment by identifying prayer as the "the active affirmation in the physical world of our inseparableness from the divine; and everything, *especially* the physical world is divine" (*Living by the Word*, 192). Walker rejects a relationship with the environment that is predicated on fear, domination, and the erasure of the sacred feminine. She professes that the "physical world," which includes humans and nonhuman nature, embodies the divine. Walker underscores these qualities in her view of paganism: "I maintain that we are empty, lonely, without our pagan-heathen ancestors; that we must lively them up within ourselves, and begin to see them as whole and necessary and correct: their Earth-centered, female-reverencing religions, like their architecture, agriculture, and music, suited perfectly to the lives they led" (*AWL*, 25). Walker seeks out this "wholeness" as it pertains to the female body and spirit. Her "Earth-centered, female-reverencing religions" stand in stark contrast to traditional religions that undermine women's rights. Walker expounds upon these ideas in her literature.

Literary critics have discussed Walker's texts in terms of the relationships between black women and their struggle to overcome oppression. Many have also addressed the extent to which Walker rejects traditional modes of being based on race, class, and gender roles. E. Ellen Barker, Lindsey Tucker, and Linda Abbandonato underscore the maternal bonds of characters like Celie and Shug Avery in *The Color Purple*. Barker critiques Shug's maternal role as she nurtures Celie, who has been emotionally and physically abused by black men. Barker argues that "Shug teaches Celie to believe in herself and to see herself as an object of creation, free and equal to anyone or anything . . . When Celie discovers that she is a part of 'the creation,' that she fits into the natural order of the world, actual redemption occurs" (61- 62). Although Barker does not explicitly make a connection to ecofeminism, she does contend with Shug's role in Celie's spiritual rebirth, which is a departure from patriarchy and Christianity. This newfound spiritual view embraces nature and Celie's equal position within it. According to Lindsey Tucker, Shug presents Celie with another reality that is not fettered to male exigencies and teaches Celie to laud female sexuality. Shug intentionally blurs a distinction between women as whores and virgins by reimagining God as a nature- and woman-loving deity.

Similar to Barker and Tucker, Linda Abbandonato critiques Celie's innocent adherence to patriarchy. As a young woman Celie is denied protection by her supposed father, who rapes her repeatedly. Celie assumes blame for this man's actions and denies herself the identity of a "good girl," which entails strict obedience to her father. Silenced by rape, Abbandonato asserts that Celie's self-negation indicates the damaging results of "any woman who attempts to establish an identity outside patriarchal definition" (1108). I argue that Walker challenges "patriarchal definition" by confronting Christianity and traditional views of black women and nature.

Through Celie's character, black women find a voice within a patriarchal society, and achieve self-actualization by accepting their bodies and spirits.

From an ecofeminist perspective, Greta Gaard discusses Walker's task of re-imagining spirituality in her fifth novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. Gaard argues that this text is a critique of the cultural justifications of female genital mutilation (FGM), a custom of removing parts or entire sections of women's sexual organs. Established by male elders, this practice ensures patriarchal control over women's bodies. Walker juxtaposes this act of female circumcision with ancient rituals that once celebrated female sexuality and the environment, but have since been driven underground by patriarchy. Walker examines the extent to which these rites have been replaced by a mythological story of the Dogon tribe, which rationalizes FGM. Ultimately, Gaard argues, this cultural story "authorizes the subordination and mutilation of women" and is established to "construct gendered identity;" thereby distinguishing what is masculine and strong and what is feminine and weak (94). Walker envisions this justification for FGM as a way to alienate African women from their bodies and nature. In order to thwart female power, Walker suggests, patriarchal leaders forcibly erase traces of rituals that embrace female sexuality and pleasure. Therefore, she draws a parallel between the treatment of African women and African land, both of which are under the control of male authority.

By analyzing Walker's texts from an ecofeminist perspective, the connections she makes between spirituality, nature, and the exploitation of black women become more apparent. It is clear that Walker offers a communal bond with nature that is realized through female relationships and examination of religious ideologies. Walker suggests that a critique of patriarchy leads to the survival of the earth and black women. With this intention, Walker questions and deconstructs the framework of patriarchal power in its various forms, including

organized religion and cultural practices. Her goal is to reestablish older spiritual beliefs that embrace female sexuality and venerate nature.

As a precursor to *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, Walker's *The Color Purple* demonstrates her spiritual revisioning in literature. Walker explores the roots of Christianity and its effects on the lives of black women, particularly Shug and Celie. Branded a whore by her community, Shug allows herself the same sexual and personal freedoms afforded men, which authorizes her position as Walker's mouthpiece. Through Shug, Walker introduces readers to a God that is embodied in nature, rather than drawn from the traditionally "white folks' white bible" (202). Shug acknowledges that this sacred text paints a pejorative picture of black men and women, and denies their significance within the church. As a form of love and compassion, Shug attempts to inculcate in Celie a redefined image of God that breaks from the conventional view of a white, male deity. Through intimate discussions, Shug explains to Celie that divinity lies in a personal connection with God and nature, rather than the institution or social constructs behind organized religion: "The thing I believe. God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God. But only them that search for it inside find it. And sometimes it just manifest itself even if you not looking, or don't know what you looking for" (*The Color Purple*, 202). In order to break with tradition, Shug severs all ties to patriarchal power by removing the Church and its dictates from achieving spirituality. She exalts humans as the reservoirs of spiritual power and defies any allusions to hierarchical relationships. This influential conversation establishes ecofeminist threads within the text by stripping away customary power dynamics, and encouraging a more egalitarian relationship between believer and deity, which empowers Celie.

Acting as a channel of Walker's thinking, Shug offers Celie a more inclusive view of spirituality that resonates with ecofeminism. Shug discusses a personal departure from Christian doctrine which begins with a welcoming of nature: "My first step from the old white man was trees. Then air. Then birds. Then other people" (203). Shug does more than remove the structural elements of organized religion; she challenges its foundations by establishing a divinity in nature. Celie mirrors Shug's transformation in the novel's last letter: "Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God" (292). Both characters experience a shift in perception that empowers black women and redefines standards of spirituality. Through spiritual revisioning, Walker unlocks the ideologies that perpetuate patriarchy, and champions a deeper reverence for the earth.

Walker continues to redefine social standards by connecting Celie and Shug's experiences directly to nature. In one example, she uses natural elements to evince Celie's anguish, and later her newfound strength. Walker conflates this character's physical and emotional abuse with the devastation wrought upon nature. To withstand physical beatings, Celie imagines that she possesses the resolve and hardness of a tree: "I [Celie] make myself wood. I say to myself, Celie you a tree. That's how come I know trees fear man" (23). This salient image solidifies Celie's link to nature and underscores the dual oppressions of women and the environment. Celie acknowledges that trees must also despise men for their attempts at deforestation and effluence. In addition to connecting their abuse, Walker also elevates the importance of nature to provide Celie with the strength to escape her husband's misogyny. For the first time, she defies Mr. \_\_\_'s authority by leaving with Shug: "I give it to him straight, just like it come to me. And it seem to come to me from the trees. . . Look like when I open my

mouth the air rush in and shape words” (213). Rather than becoming “hard as wood” to withstand sexual abuse and rape, Celie embodies nature’s strength and refuses to be dominated.

In a second example, Walker again demonstrates how nature reflects the plight of black women. As Celie’s spiritual mentor, friend, and lover, Shug underscores a physical as well as spiritual connection with the natural world. She describes this bond by explaining how human pain can be manifested as a result of violence committed against the environment. Shug portrays her spiritual revelation as a young girl: “feeling like a motherless child, which I was, it come 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. And I laughed and cried and I run all around the house. I knew just what it was” (*The Color Purple*, 203). By imagining herself as “being part of everything,” Shug experiences physical harm due to the destruction of the natural world. Walker portrays Shug as equal to rather than dominant over the environment. Therefore, the concerns of the natural world are no less important or distressing than those of humans. Walker implies that black women are connected to these concerns because of the attempts made by black and white men to dominate their bodies and the environment.

Walker parallels her discussion of women, spirituality, and nature by examining the impact of Christian missionaries and Western capitalists in the novel. Celie’s beloved sister Nettie, also a missionary, illuminates her experiences with the Olinka community in Africa. Her mission to convert denizens of the rainforest symbolizes larger forces of patriarchy and capitalism that blatantly devastate the land and its people by denying them their culture and spirituality. Although Nettie sets out with unwavering conviction, she is unprepared for a nature-inspired spirituality that awaits her by way of the rootleaf. While in Africa, she begins to contemplate the rootleaf’s religious significance: “We know a rootleaf is not Jesus Christ, but in

its own humble way, is it not God?" (160). Although the Olinkas use rootleaf to build huts, its construction is accompanied by reverence and celebration, thus solidifying the connection between spirituality and environment.

Unfortunately, the natural world comes under attack when Nettie discovers that a rubber manufacturer from England plans to transform the natural setting by planting rubber trees. Due to colonialism and capitalism, this sacred rootleaf is destroyed and the Olinka village annihilated. A road is built through the rainforest to serve the economical needs of business, and delineates the intrusion of the modern world on the indigenous culture. This pathway concomitantly leads to future expansion on the part of colonialists and obliterates an insular society. Additionally, the road builders are Africans from a different tribe who are initially greeted by the Olinka with food and libations. The Olinka are unaware that these native builders are contributing to the destruction of their natural and spiritual habitat. Armed with guns, the road builders threaten resistant Olinkans after having constructed a "tarmac road running straight through the middle of it [village]," which now "seems gutted" (175). The environment becomes the subject of domination and control by modern, Western forces.

Dreadfully, the decimation does not end there. Walker reiterates the relentless cycle of oppression that continues to ravage African men and women. She discusses the system of payment that the Olinka must face in order to gather the supplies that were formerly provided by nature. Having lost their land to Western capitalists, the Olinka must relinquish use of natural resources: "Since the Olinka no longer own their village, they must pay rent for it, and in order to use the water, which also no longer belongs to them, they must pay a water tax" (176). The inroads of capitalism not only destroy the source of Olinkan spirituality, but also instill a

relationship of dominance and ownership over the environment, which the Olinkas cannot partake in.

At this point in the novel, two colonizing forces collide, one that includes Nettie and her missionary family, and another that incorporates English contractors. Each force strives to transform and “civilize” the native occupants, and thus alter the physical and social environment. Consequently, the natural landscape is terrorized and robbed of its salubrious and spiritual qualities, and the Olinka mourn this loss: “The women spend all their time in the fields, tending their crops and praying. They sing to the earth and to the sky and to their cassava and groundnuts. Songs of love and farewell” (179). The spiritual reawakening that Celie undergoes in the South mirrors the nature-centered spirituality of Africa. By aligning Celie’s and Nettie’s experiences in *The Color Purple*, Walker highlights the nefarious ability of patriarchy to trample both black women and the environment.

Walker extends her vision of Africa and its colonization in her novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, which continues the story of Tashi, an Olinkan woman. In her writing, Walker exposes the dangers of traditional, patriarchal cultures that mutilate women’s bodies and deny them physical pleasure and joy. Simultaneously, Walker continues to explore the destruction of Africa. From the start of the novel, Walker introduces its devastation with a bumper sticker that serves as an epigraph: “When the axe came into the forest, the trees said the handle is one of us.” Setting the mood of the novel, Walker describes the use of human tools intended to destroy the very environment from which they were made. Having portrayed lumbering trucks as “enormous hearses” and the trees they transported as the “battered bodies of the old sisters and brothers” in *Living by the Word*, Walker does not separate human death from nature’s death (141). Angeletta KM Gourdine elucidates Walker’s thinking by analyzing the bumper sticker:

“The blade represents the institution of patriarchy, though *it* actually cuts- severs- the trees’ bodies, much like those blades which remove women’s clitorises, the hands that hold it, that maintain it are themselves trees, women who are gears in the political machinery of patriarchy” (239). Walker’s focus in *Possessing* is the effects of female genital mutilation. This act denies women physical and emotional pleasure by brutally mutilating their bodies as young girls with shards of glass and mental cans. Like the tree parts that are used to uphold the wiles of patriarchy, women too become enforcers and victims of a tradition that cuts them off from the environment and their own bodies.

The woman circumciser, or *tsunga*, symbolizes both the blade and handle of the metaphorical axe. She performs the horrific procedure and represents feelings of anguish and surrender experienced by the women circumcised. M’Lissa, the *tsunga* of Tashi’s village, continues the cycle of violence against women as her role dictates, and becomes one of the “gears in the political machinery of patriarchy,” as Gourdine describes. Tashi, who elects to be circumcised later in life, perceives the position of the *tsunga* in relation to patriarchy: “the *tsunga* was to the traditional elders merely a witch they could control, an extension of their own dominating power” (150). Walker makes no distinction between the destruction of the environment and women’s bodies. She describes the level at which patriarchal thought has infiltrated cultural thinking and permitted such horrendous treatment of women and nature. In order to expose patriarchal ideology, she concentrates on the effects of female genital mutilation and how it replaces an ancient code of spirituality.

Through the character of Tashi and her family, Walker discusses the emotional and physical scars of FGM, as well as its origins. The mythological and cultural justifications set in motion a larger system of oppression against women and nature. With the purpose of healing

Tashi, Pierre, Adam's son, searches for an understanding of her suffering. In his search of the history and justification of female circumcision, the young man discovers the story of the Dogon tribe. According to the tale, the God Amma creates the earth, his wife, from clay, and forms her sexual organs out of an anthill and termite hill. However, Pierre tells Tashi that "at God's approach the termite hill rose up, barring the passage and displaying its masculinity. It was as strong as the organ of the stranger, and intercourse could not take place" (149). In response to her husband's advances, the earth-wife rejects him and prevents intercourse by displaying masculine qualities. As a result, the God Amma forcefully rapes his earth-wife by cutting down the termite hill and having "intercourse with the excised earth," thereby thwarting female sexual power (149). This African story prompts a framework of gendered identities whereby male figures incite and satiate sexual pleasure. These identities are socially fabricated on the belief in male power. The God Amma simultaneously asserts his authority over the environment and women by raping his earth-wife. Therefore, this seminal story reinforces male dominance, rape, and mutilation as a viable justification for denying African women sexual power and pleasure.

Another form of social justification that Walker examines is the blind idealization of prominent male figures. These men continue to place women and nature in a position of inferiority. The male figure within the novel, known as Our Leader, promotes FGM in the name of unity, tradition, and culture. He is honored by Tashi and the Olinka for his Pan-African teachings, which connect circumcision to female self-worth. By reinforcing the cultural belief of the Dogon tribe, this man teaches African women that their sexual organs are seen as masculine and therefore undesirable. He argues that female sexuality threatens male hegemony because it would supplant the need for male interaction. In her therapist's office, Tashi explains the ideology she has been relentlessly taught: "From prison Our Leader said we must keep ourselves

clean and pure as we had been since time immemorial- by cutting out unclean parts of our bodies. Everyone knew that if a woman was not circumcised her unclean parts would grow so long they'd soon touch her thighs; she'd become masculine and arouse herself. No man could enter her because her own erection would be in his way" (101). Without experiencing circumcision, Tashi risks being ostracized and rejected since she would not require a man to achieve sexual pleasure. This connection between genital mutilation and female efficacy represents the crux of patriarchal control over women's bodies. It treats female sexuality as a cultural abomination and aberration of social norms. Sexual pleasure and power are awarded solely to African men at the expense of African women. Walker elaborates on this social phenomenon in order to deconstruct the cultural tools of patriarchy that approach women's bodies and female sexuality in the same way.

Similar to her deconstruction of Christianity, Walker approaches other ideologies from the standpoint of equalizing relationships between men, women, and the environment. Walker presents an alternative view of female sexuality and spirituality that embraces nature without the influences of patriarchy. She does this through the character of Pierre's former girlfriend, who is freed from convention through a connection with nature. Pierre discusses with his father Adam that this young girl would experience orgasm while riding a horse bareback, or "against warm, smooth boulders. . . against the earth itself if it rose a bit to meet her" (156). Pierre explains that this girl was raised by "pagan parents," or "earth worshippers," who taught her that sexual relations with a man were necessary only to produce children (156). In contrast to a traditional view, sexual pleasure is not exclusively experienced by or with men. For that reason, Pierre's girlfriend begins to represent a revisioning of conventional perceptions of female sexuality.

Walker implies that female sexuality can be achieved through nature. The young girl's relationship with nature, according to Pierre, represents "someone who was *pan* sexual," similar to the way Pamela Smith describes Walker as "panreligious." Pansexuality not only offers a limitless view of sexuality and pleasure beyond labels like heterosexual, bisexual, or homosexual, but more importantly embraces Walker's image of Mother Earth, who "will do all that She can to support our choices" and "will never require that you cut off some part of your body to please It" (*AWL*, 25). Pierre recognizes society's inability to accept a pansexual view because it threatens male power. To make his argument, Pierre points to the industry of pornography, which undermines women's relationships with nature through perversion and distortion: "This ability of woman's to take pleasure in diverse ways is projected in a perverted way. I have seen films in which she is forced to copulate with donkeys and dogs and guns and other weapons. Oddly shaped vegetable and fruits. Broom handles and Coke bottles. But this is rape. Man is jealous of woman's pleasure. . .because she does not require him to achieve it" (158). Female sexuality is depicted in such a grotesque manner in order to bolster patriarchy. A relationship between women and nature is portrayed as violent, intrusive, and forceful, which explains why Pierre perceives this act as rape and a denial of female power.

Through the figure of Pierre's girlfriend, Walker encourages the significant bond between women and nature. She continues to redefine standards of sexuality and spirituality in order to uplift black women from the depths of patriarchal oppression and domination. Pierre understands that his girlfriend's sexual pleasure with nature is not solely a form of masturbation, but representative of an equal relationship between women and nature: "Her partner just happened to be something other than another human being" (157). Quite the opposite of conventional models of sexuality, this relationship does not enforce one partner as dominant over

the other, which Pierre initially expects. Unable to satisfy his girlfriend, Pierre mimics the God Amma: “No matter how I tried, it was hard not to approach her from a stance of domination” (156). Pierre perceives defeat and realizes that his gendered role has been supplanted by nature. He keenly recognizes a different type of relationship women seek with the environment when he poses the question, “Does man seek oneness with the earth by having sex with it?” (157). This “oneness” reiterates Walker’s point of achieving “wholeness” for black women. She proposes an alternative to the Dogon myth in favor of equality and unity.

In her search for a substitute, Walker explores ancient forms of spirituality that celebrate female sexuality and the environment. While imprisoned for murdering M’Lissa, Tashi receives gifts from local women potters. These women offer Tashi statues and replicas used in ancient practices that were “once revered as symbols of the Creator, Goddess, the Life Force Itself” (175). These statues establish a female- and Goddess-centered spirituality that predates the myth of the Dogon tribe. In place of a male deity, these African women offer Tashi a renewed divinity that embraces women and nature. The statues and relics reveal images of women touching their genitals, and declaring pleasure, satisfaction, and wholeness for themselves. In reference to one statue, Tashi explains: “If the word ‘MINE’ were engraved on her finger, her meaning could not be more clear” (175-176). Through these images, Walker allows African women to reclaim possession of their bodies, which have been at the mercy of patriarchy.

Inscribed and recorded on cave walls, other images of ancient women are seen worshipping and exalting their sexuality. These women are also depicted enjoying sex with men and other women, while “dancing, interacting with animals, nestled cozily underneath sheltering trees, and giving birth” (176). Women and men freely interact with nature in a seamless involvement during sex. This relationship demonstrates both the sensory and generative power

of nature. As a result, the women potters liberate Tashi's spirit from the negative social justifications of FGM. In response to their actions, Greta Gaard argues that "what these older traditions emphasize is the well-being of the people in harmony with nature- their own physical natures and the nature of this physical world" (88). The environment becomes a site of accepted sexuality and procreation.

To demonstrate the effects of patriarchy on these ancient spiritual practices, Walker emphasizes M'Lissa's experiences during childhood. Despite traditional mandates, M'Lissa's mother, a former circumciser, worships ancient forms of spirituality. Cautiously glancing over her shoulder, M'Lissa's mother travels into a "blighted forest" where she uncovers "a small smiling figure with one hand on her genitals, every part of which appeared intact" (191). Having observed her mother, M'Lissa later returns alone and begins to follow the statue's instructions. She examines her uncircumcised body and experiences sensuality; however, M'Lissa is frightened by this transgressive act. M'Lissa's mother, representative of preceding generations, recognizes the statue's ability to unravel a culture that is beholden to dominance, mutilation, and rape. Although nature provides a place of worship and safety to carefully hide the idol, M'Lissa's mother is unable to prevent her daughter's fated role as circumciser.

Shrouded in secrecy and hidden within nature, earlier forms of spirituality are deprived their restorative ability to heal the physical and emotional scarring of mutilation. Greta Gaard reiterates this point as it pertains to the right of women to their sexuality: "Walker emphasizes reclaiming women's natural right to the pleasures and wholeness of their own bodies. For Walker, women's sexuality is that part of nature that has been oppressed by patriarchal culture and religion, and as an alternative she imagines an even older tradition, one that values erotic, life-affirming, joyous relationships among humans and with the earth" (92). Unfortunately, the

images that depict the blissful faces of women enjoying sex with other women, themselves, and men are lost and replaced by one surviving impression of a woman and man copulating, and “the woman appears to be impaled” on the man’s sexual organ (176). Fortunately, Pierre’s girlfriend, Tashi herself, and M’Lissa’s mother all symbolize an alternative to women’s experience of pain, which enforces male dominance. These women are counterparts to the mindless masses that continue to reproduce bodies and traditions that force girls, young women, and the environment under the dangers of oppression, violence, and mutilation all in the name of purity, virtue, and cultural heritage. Walker defends the rights of black women as they grow into an awareness and appreciation of their bodies and nature.

In the last section of the novel, Walker parallels the exploitation of women’s bodies and the destruction of nature, which has fallen in the hands of colonialism. In one example, she focuses on the life of a dying AIDS victim, whom Adam consoles while awaiting Tashi’s execution. As a young boy, this African man was hired to attack and slaughter monkey and chimp families for the purposes of a Western medical initiative. Relying on his skill at mimicking chimp behavior, he lures the animals to their deaths in exchange for monetary wealth. As a result, white businessmen harvest a vaccine, but more importantly, exploit the connection these young boys possess with the land’s animals. Therefore, the only perceived benefits of their destructive labors are exported to Western countries, leaving Africa depleted of its animals and people, who become infected with AIDS. Walker’s male character supports a Western source of agribusiness that betrays the trust between humans and animals.

In addition to the murder of animal families, female monkeys are forced to breed with several male monkeys to produce greater amounts of vaccine. Walker compares their rape with the fate of African women, who are also violated by the demands of patriarchy. Walker

conflates their predicaments in order to demonstrate the consequences of male power. As a means to emphasize their shared oppressions, Walker considers the human suffering reflected in the screams of the monkeys: “Everything they [monkeys] think, everything they fear, everything they feel, is as clear as if you’d known them all your life. As if they’d slept in the same bed as you!” (232). Through this realization, the young man imagines killing his people, perhaps even his wife, in the name of Western science and capitalism. Influenced by patriarchal stories and social justifications at a young age, African boys are led to follow the wiles of patriarchy without question.

Offering the illusion of healing in their doctors’ robes, the white businessmen provide anything but relief. Their initiative within the novel symbolizes the rape of Africa’s land, women, and animals. After listening to the young man’s words, Adam recognizes the “evil of civilization,” which has been falsely equated with progress because it masks devastation. Having produced a vaccine out of Africa’s loss, Western medicine and modern technology thrive at the expense of consuming, butchering, and killing Africa’s natural resources. Animal families are destroyed, rendered lifeless, and stripped of their humanity, which no doubt represents the anguish wrought upon African families.

Walker elaborates on the mistrust between humans and animals due to experiences of extreme loss and violence. She highlights the potential for hatred and anger in both groups as an outcry of patriarchal oppression and exploitation. Before standing in front of a court that epitomizes patriarchy, Tashi imagines an emotional encounter with a mother leopard. This animal, years before, had charged Tashi’s mother while pregnant with Tashi after witnessing the poaching of her family. Consequently, the female leopard associated Tashi’s mother with nearby poachers and reacted with violence. Through Tashi’s dream-like experiences, Walker explores a

deeper connection between African women and animals. While imagining the animal's pain, Tashi embodies the emotional rawness of anger and suffering: "And I could feel the horror in the leopard's heart, and the rage. And now I see a pregnant human appearing on the path, and I leap for her throat" (16). In Tashi's retelling of the account, she envisions the leopard with two legs and her mother four. She intertwines their perspectives and recognizes the level at which human and animal emotions collide. Tashi empathizes with the leopard's loss and despair, which have been the result of patriarchy. The leopard's mate is skinned and left to rot alongside the bodies of her young, which are strewn "ungracefully" and murdered. Walker links the senseless death of animals with the violation of black women.

To be deprived of pleasure, love, and family, for Walker, is to be deprived of one's spirit and humanity, which is replaced by a bestial thirst for rage and loss. As a result of circumcision, Tashi is deprived the pleasure she previously experienced with Adam in the fields of Africa. Adam explains the incident from the perspective of patriarchy: "In Olinka society the strongest taboo was against making love in the fields. . . lovemaking in the fields jeopardized the crops; indeed, it was declared that if there was any fornication whatsoever in the fields the crops definitely would not grow- no one ever saw us, and the fields produced their harvests as before" (21). Tashi and Adam consciously engage in this taboo of seeking pleasure in nature. In spite of myth and fear, nature continues to grow and provides a place for lovemaking that is in no way damaged by humans. After experiencing FGM, Tashi is hardened and disconnected from the natural world, which embraces her. By contouring women physically and emotionally into instruments of male pleasure, Tashi's African culture destroys her ability, like the leopard's, to experience pleasure and love.

Elsewhere in Walker's work, she observes the potential for violence in the demeanor of animals and humans when oppressed under brutal circumstances. In her essay "Am I Blue?" she delineates the life of a neighboring horse named Blue that has been captivated and separated from other horses by a human owner. Forced to live in a few "fenced-in acres," Blue spends most of his time alone, patrolling the perimeter of his new home and observing the freedom that lies just outside his reach. Despite infrequent jaunts with a teenage boy or girl, Blue remains fairly isolated from human or animal contact until the speaker, Walker herself, arrives. Unable to move freely, Blue relies on the speaker to feed him fresh apples from a nearby tree. As a result, both the horse and speaker develop a form of communication whereby the speaker begins to understand the severity of Blue's predicament.

In search of companionship and love, Blue longs for attention, but he is rejected by his owner on two accounts: one, due to a lack of human interaction, and two, due to the sudden removal of a mate that was simply "put with him" to procreate. Based on these conditions, Walker suggests that the animal's enslavement and psychological starvation are the result of negative human actions. Denied a natural habitat and partner, Blue's fate and means of survival are dictated by his human owners. In fact, the process of naming this animal also signifies ownership, and ultimately a hierarchical relationship. Walker demonstrates that these actions are designed for the purposes of domination. She correlates the horse's behavioral responses to human experiences.

To highlight this point, Walker draws a comparison between the animal's pain and the anguish of slavery: "if I had been born into slavery, and my partner had been sold or killed, my eyes would have looked like that" (40). Walker likens Blue's mate to a female slave impregnated by her owner. The rights of both are utterly denied. As a result, Walker witnesses a

vital need to care for and respect animals in the same way people should respect all human beings regardless of race, class, or gender. Walker advocates racial equality as well as equality with nature. In reference to “Am I Blue?” she writes: “We are connected to them [animals] at least as intimately as we are connected to trees. Without plant life human beings could not breathe. . . Without free animal life I believe we will lose the spiritual equivalent of oxygen. ‘Magic,’ intuition, sheer astonishment at the forms the Universe devises in which to express life-itself- will no longer be able to breathe in us” (*Living by the Word*, 191-192). This connection between animals, plants, and human life is central to Walker’s spiritual view. Through the communication between humans and animals, Walker believes the pain shared by one is expressed and recognized in the pain of the other. This offers a greater potential for resolution. Walker’s critique of the power of slavery to dehumanize blacks and rob them of their humanity is reflected in the depths of nature’s suffering.

In addition to Walker’s prose and fiction, much of her poetry speaks to the spiritual and intimate dwellings of her personal thoughts. Similar to her essays and novels, Walker uses poetry to explore public and private forms of cruelty facing the environment and black women. She celebrates nature and love, while examining their regenerative power to express and mollify human suffering. In her 1968 poetry collection *Once*, Walker reveals her experiences growing up in the South and the harrowing realities of racism. The speaker of “South: The Name of Home” recalls witnessing,

a broken bottle  
held negligently  
in a racist fist (5-8).

This enduring image is conjured at night, while the speaker prays, and instead of inciting vengeance, it is followed by a spiritual directive that embraces nature:

God give us trees to plant  
and hands and eyes  
to love them (9-11).

In the wake of violence, ignorance, and hatred, Walker expresses the power of nature to restore the soul and address the wrongs of racial oppression. By planting trees, nature becomes the object and medium through which the speaker can experience worship and solace.

Within this same poem, nature also becomes a storehouse of the sorrow and anguish associated with abuse. Despite “years of ease” that have physically removed the speaker from prejudice, she nonetheless returns home to this site of malice. Perhaps stained by the blood of lynching or other forms of violence, the earth appears red and mourns the speaker’s pain:

the trees bent, weeping  
what secrets will not  
the ravished land  
reveal  
of its abuse? (21-25).

By asking this question, Walker connects the violence wrought upon the environment with the violence of the Civil Rights Movement. The secrets buried within the speaker’s past are also hidden within nature. Therefore, Walker implies that a history of abuse has been recorded not only in the speaker’s mind but in the land, which has also be terrorized.

In a later collection, *Horses Make a Landscape Look More Beautiful*, Walker returns to the idea of nature as a source of healing for humans in times of despair and traumatic loss. In her poem “Torture,” she discusses the power of nature to replenish what has been stripped from the human soul:

When they torture your mother/ plant a tree  
When they torture your father/ plant a tree  
When they torture your brother/ and your sister  
plant a tree/ When they assassinate/your leaders  
and lovers/plant a tree (1-11).

Again, in place of retribution for physical and emotional violence, Walker advocates the ability of nature to resolve human pain brought on by human actions. Through her poem, Walker exalts nature for satisfying the void of personal suffering. She also authorizes nature to communicate loss in the absence of human speech:

When they torture you/too bad/ to talk  
plant a tree (12-15).

Silenced by pain, Walker advises her audience to “plant a tree,” a larger metaphor for locating salvation in nature. Whether shackled by slavery or segregation, Walker allows nature to convey unspoken grievances.

Critic Ikenna Dieke writes that this poem is one example of Walker’s “earthling consciousness,” which reflects “the sympathetic symbiosis between her creative intellect and the natural environment” (200). Dieke acknowledges a connection between Walker’s poetic message and ecofeminism. She explains that “the natural environment is not perceived as ‘other,’ but instead as an essential part in the expression of one’s individuality” (200). I argue that pain and loss are part of this individuality, which is shaped by Walker’s rejection of patriarchy. Walker’s spiritual compass is directed by her belief in the restorative power of nature; and therefore her creative self emerges from a deep-seated belief in nature and paganism.

Additionally, Walker’s poem serves to support an awareness of preserving and safeguarding nature:

When they begin to torture/the trees  
And cut down the forest/they made  
start another (16-20).

By starting another forest, the speaker ensures both her and the forest’s survival, but also her emotional stability. Dieke delineates this interdependence by stating that “the person doing the planting itself has come into a new covenant that transcends separateness and fragmentation”

(203). Overcoming this reality allows for a more holistic and unifying relationship with nature. According to ecofeminists, commercialism and capitalism not only devastate and deplete nature's resources, but also distance humans from nature. Breaking these ties with patriarchal ventures begins the groundwork for a new covenant; the covenant of Walker's anti-patriarchal, anti-racist, and anti-sexist spirituality.

Poet, essayist, and novelist Alice Walker examines the effects of patriarchy on black women and the environment. She envisions a new spirituality that embraces paganism and reflects ecofeminist sentiment by elevating black women and nature to a position of spiritual significance. Through her writing, Walker works to undo the hierarchical relationships of cultural practices, including female genital mutilation and organized religion, which continue patriarchal control. By analyzing her work from an ecofeminist perspective, these connections and ideological issues are better realized as being vital to her work. Walker attempts to raise awareness and present her views on environmental concerns. In doing this, she considers the historical, racial, and social contexts within which black women have been scrutinized and subjugated. She suggests that the endemic oppression of black women bears its roots in African tradition and Christianity, which she explores in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* through Tashi's experiences and in *The Color Purple* through Nettie's letters to Celie. Her literary and social messages evoke the "partnership ethic" of Merchant's philosophy. Throughout political, economic, environmental, and domestic spheres, Walker establishes black women and nature as equal partners in a larger dialogue against social and racial oppression. From an eco-spiritual perspective, Walker explores the destruction of nature by civilization and intimates a new outlook on Mother Earth.

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