

REFLECTION OF UPANIṢADS ON WALKER'S THE COLOR PURPLE

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Abstract

The Color Purple narrates the story of an African American woman who became the victim of child rape, patriarchy, sexism, racism, domestic violence and marital rape as well, eventually found her way out and uncovered a broader aspect of spirituality instead of believing her past Christian male God anymore. The whole novel comes to us as a series of letters. The protagonist, Celie's letters to the God and to her sister, Nettie, portrays not only her tortured and abused life, but also the lives of other African American women. Some letters from Nettie were discovered in the later part of the novel which shows the lives of the tribal people (Olinka) in Africa. Breaking the silence around sexual and domestic abuse, narrating the women lives through the struggle and pain, growth and companionship, bravery and resilience, *The Color Purple* establishes a larger aspect of spirituality through love, redemption and support. The novel is called *Bildungsroman* because of the spiritual upliftment of the protagonist who initially thought the God to be a white, male identity, ended up finding all the elements of nature having the one source of Life, *Prāṇa* and manifesting one supreme entity, God. This paper aims to trace the Upaniṣadic influences on the concept of all pervasive God instead of a God with a particular gender, portrayed by the author.

Key Words

Upaniṣadic Philosophy, African American Literature, *Womanism*, Spirituality.

Introduction

Pulitzer Prize winner Alice Walker, a renowned poet and novelist is famous for her epistolary novel *The Color Purple* which questions the conventional belief system of Christianity and indicates an enormous spiritual interpretation of the existence of God. The novel specially portrays the patriarchal abuses on the black women and their creativity, faith and spirituality being the key to their freedom from sexual and racial oppression. To deal with this, Walker often considers a concept, named *Womanism*. It is a form of feminism which focuses on the problems regarding anti-black racism and sexism and against the black women specifically. In the field of *Womanism*, Walker became the first and foremost author who brings this term to use in public. Her novel *The Color Purple* is nothing but a novel which germinates the seed of *Womanism* in readers' mind. Here the protagonist Celie who was physically, mentally and sexually abused by the patriarchal male society initially, became an independent woman breaking all the boundaries she was bound to follow and uncovered a deep spiritual understanding of God. Many of the western authors used Indian spiritual teachings, practices and traditions as the core to their literary creations but most interesting thing about this novel is how spirituality and faith have been portrayed by the author. Here the protagonist Celie is seen writing her

letters to the God. Through all those letters the whole story of her being tortured and abused came to light. Under this circumstances author introduces a charming black woman character, Shug Avery, who became a corner stone in Celie's life. She was the one who brings a whole new aspect to the novel. She taught Celie to overcome all her problems with the help of Spirituality and faith. It was she who drove away the patriarchal concept of Christian God from Celie's mind and introduced her to a new concept of God being everything. It is a kind of a twist which connects feminism (*Womanism*) and Spirituality. An African American woman who was at her edge of tolerance, and was done with the male God whom she has been worshiping since her childhood. Eventually she established a God who is neither He nor She, who discriminates none and the One who doesn't oppose anything that a woman's heart desires. The God who was described by Shug Avery to Celie, exists in everything that has ever been existent. This concept is very similar to the Upanisadic concept of India and has been used as a supporting pillar of *Womanism*. So it can be stated that Walker's *The Color Purple* reflects Indian Spiritual principles enveloped in African sources. But Walker did not mention anything about the Asian influences on the novel at the time of publication. Instead of any historical influence, a found affinity with Indian spirituality developed Walker's interest in Buddhism and Hinduism.¹ Later Walker mentioned about her learning a contemplative practice called Transcendental Meditation (According to the founder of Transcendental Meditation Maharishi Mahesh Yogi it is nonreligious. It is not about worshiping any deity, but about focusing on transcending thought and experiencing union with unconditioned consciousness²). Walker used Transcendental Meditation for her mental stability after her divorce in 1976.³ Ever since she has put her active interest in Indian spirituality.⁴ For this Indian spirituality always has a significant impact on Walker's writing.

In her novel *The Color Purple* Walker shows the gradual shift of Celie and Nettie's spiritual belief from Christianity to a noninstitutionalized spirituality which is very close to classical Hindu metaphysics. The belief that all phenomena manifest from the impersonal, unconditioned God. Disguising the influence of Indian spirituality on the spiritual themes Eastern wisdom is implemented in the characters with no knowledge of Hinduism. Both of the sisters, Celie and Nettie realised that the religion which they had been practicing since their childhood, is oppressing.

Celie's step father, Alphonso brutalised and silenced Celie by raping and impregnating her and selling away her children. He also warned her,

You better not never tell nobody but God, It'd kill your mammy... when that hurt, I cry. He starts to choke me saying you better shut up and git used to it.⁵

So as directed, not knowing anyone to write to, Celie writes to God,

I am fourteen year old. I have always been a good girl. May be you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me.⁶

This is nothing but a helpless prayer from a helpless girl. But later Shug Avery, a blues singer, teaches Celie to use her spiritual dedication to her personal problems. When the abuse and the hidden letters of Nettie puts Celie at the edge of her

forbearance, She mentions God to be a *trifling, forgetful and lowdown*.⁷ For not having the conflict between the past God and the God Shug introduced her, Celie becomes disillusioned and starts to address her letters to Nettie instead of the God of the patriarchal society.

The Color Purple and the Upaniṣads

The very first words of the Novel was *Dear God*. Here the protagonist Celie is addressing her letters to the God of Patriarchal society. A male God with white robe and white beard. But at the end of the novel the concept of God has completely changed and the very last letter from Celie was addressed as, *Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God*.⁸ In the beginning she used to write her letters to God for the survival from the trauma caused by her father's sexual abuses. But with the help of Shug, at the end She starts to see God as omnipresent. She could not even connect anything with anyone in church. Later she hears from Shug that *They come to church to share God, not find God*.⁹ That's why initially Celie could not find God anywhere.

In a letter to Celie, Nettie writes, *the roofleaf became the thing they worship*.¹⁰ According to Nettie the worship of the roofleaf encompasses a limited concept of God, just like the church. She explains,

God is different to us now, after all these years in Africa. More spirit than ever before, and more internal. Most people think he has to look like something or someone—a roofleaf or Christ—but we don't. And not being tied to what God looks like, frees us.¹¹

This expresses Nettie's view of religion being similar to an all-pervasive immanent divinity. And by stating *face to face with the Olinka God*¹², Nettie highlights the taste of the *chicken and groundnut stew*¹³, and the *songs*¹⁴, all these are to be the manifestation of God. The festivals, the sensual worldly life, everything and everywhere she could find the existence of God. Though Nettie sees the religion of Olinka people liberating, she does not embrace it completely. She carefully distinguishes her belief from both Olinka's and Church's views.

The first thing Shug teaches Celie about God is,

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 no looking, or don't know what you looking for.¹⁵

Shug's statement *You come into the world with God*, is very close to the verse of *Praśnopaniṣad*,

prajāpatiś carasi garbhe tvam eva pratijāyase...¹⁶

[As Prajāpati you move in the womb and it is you indeed who take birth]¹⁷

The concept of God or the Supreme manifesting itself derives from ancient Indian spirituality. Patañjali's *Mahābhāṣya* records,

uta tvaḥ paśyan na dadarśa vācam

uta tvaḥ śṛṇvan na śṛṇoty enām/
uto tvasmai tvanvaṁ vi sasre
jāyeva patya uśatī suvāsāḥ//¹⁸

[one, indeed, although he sees, does not see speech. Another, although he hears, does not hear her. To still another, indeed, like a wife, wearing clean (and auspicious) clothes, having desire for her husband, she spreads out her body]¹⁹

In the footnote the editor writes,

Rgveda 10.71.4. According to Indian tradition the hymn itself deals with jñāna...²⁰

The first line of the quotation can also be related to the words of Swami Vivekananda,

All belongs to the Lord, because the opening verse told us to put the Lord in everything.²¹

Shug not only describes God philosophically but also she suggests a physical identification of God,

Don't look like nothing, she said. It ain't a picture show. It ain't something you can look at apart from anything else, including yourself.²²

In *Muṇḍakopaniṣad* the similar description can be traced,

yat tad adreśyam agrāhyam agotram avarṇam acakṣuḥśrotraṁ tad apāṇipādam/
nityaṁ vibhuṁ sarvagataṁ susūkṣmaṁ tad avyayaṁ yad bhūtayonim...//1.6²³

[That which is ungraspable, without family, without caste, without sight or hearing, without hands or feet, eternal, all pervading, omnipresent, exceedingly subtle, that is the Undecaying...]²⁴

In the second chapter of the same Upaniṣad it is said,

divyo hy amūrtaḥ puruṣaḥ sa bāhyābhyantaro...²⁵

[Divine and formless is the person He is without and within...]²⁶

According to Shug,

I believe God is everything, ...Everything that is or ever was or ever will be. And when you can feel that, and be happy to feel that, you've found it... My first step from the old white man was trees. Then air. Then birds. Then other people. But one day when I was sitting quiet and feeling like a motherless child, which I was, it 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 I cried and I run all round the house. I knew just what it was. In fact, when it happen, you can't miss it.²⁷

Shug's idea of God being everything, is the primary concept of Upaniṣads. The first verse of *Īśopaniṣad* says,

īśā vāsyam idam sarvaṁ yat kiñca jagatyāṁ jagat...²⁸

[Whatever is changeful in this ephemeral universe is to be enveloped by the Lord.]²⁹

In the essay *God in Everything*, Swami Vivekananda explains this more vividly. By taking the cue from *Īsopaniṣad*, he says,

We read at the commencement of one of the oldest of the Upanishads, "Whatever exists in this universe is to be covered with the Lord." We have to cover everything with the Lord Himself, not by a false sort of optimism, not by blinding our eyes to the evil, but by really seeing God in everything... In life and in death, in happiness and in misery, the Lord is equally present. The whole world is full of the Lord. Open your eyes and see Him.³⁰

He continues further,

The ideal of man is to see God in everything. But if you cannot see Him in everything, see Him in one thing, in that thing which you like best, and then see Him in another. So on you can go. There is infinite life before the soul. Take your time and you will achieve your end.³¹

Śvetaśvataropaniṣad says,

puruṣa evedaṁ sarvaṁ yad bhūtaṁ yac ca bhavyam /
utāmṛtatvasyeśāno...//3.15³²

[The person is truly this whole world, whatever has been and whatever will be. He is also the lord of immortality...]³³

Muṇḍakopaniṣad illustrates the thought of *God being everything* more explicitly,

agnīr mūrdhā cakṣuṣī candra-sūryau diśaḥ śrotre vāg vivṛtās ca vedāḥ/
vāyuḥ prāṇo hṛdayaṁ viśvamasya padbhyāṁ pṛthivī hy eṣa sarva-
bhūtāntarātmā//2.1.4³⁴

[Fire is His head, His eyes are the sun and the moon, the regions of space are His ears, His speech the revealed Vedas, air is His life and His heart the world Out of His feet the earth (is born); indeed He is the self of all beings.]³⁵

ataḥ samudrā girayaś ca sarve'smāt syandante sindhavaḥ sarvarūpāḥ/
ataś ca sarvā oṣadhayo rasaś ca yenaīṣa bhūtaiḥ tiṣṭhate hy antar-ātmā//2.1.9³⁶

[From him, all the seas and the mountains, from him flow rivers of every kind, from him are all herbs and their juice too; by which, together with the elements, the inner soul is upheld]³⁷

Now it is understood that for this teaching from Shug, Celie addressed her last letter saying,

Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God.³⁸

For the 9th verse of the 2nd chapter of *Muṇḍakopaniṣad*, Radhakrishnan adds,

While the inward way of contemplation takes us to the self, there is the other side of union with the world The knower penetrates the whole world and becomes the All.³⁹

And he concludes the chapter saying,

He gets rid of ignorance 'The universe has no separate existence apart from the person' *na viśvam nāma puruṣād anyad kincid asti*.⁴⁰

And Shug's statement *feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all. I knew that if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed*⁴¹ can be justified by these concluding part of Radhakrishnan.

Celie has believed and feared God because of some patriarchal misleading doctrines she has been taught by the church and the society. She restrained herself from any kind of pleasure she could get. But Shug cleared that up also. She focused on the most important aspect of our life, our likings. According to her,

God love all them feelings. That's some of the best stuff God did. And when you know God loves 'em you enjoys em a lot more. You can just relax, go with everything that's going, and praise God by liking what you like.⁴²

When Celie asked her, *God don't think it dirty?*⁴³, she (Shug) firmly says,

Naw, ...God made it. Listen, God love everything you love and a mess of stuff you don't. But more than anything else, God love admiration... I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it.⁴⁴

Here *the color purple* is representing all the good and beautiful things around which God created for us to enjoy. Shug is motivating Celie by saying that through the enjoyment and appreciation of God's creation she can express her gratitude and love to God.

Swami Vivekanand also focused on this in his essay *God in Everything*. He states,

You can have your wife; it does not mean that you are to abandon her, but that you are to see God in the wife. Give up your children; what does that mean? To turn them out of doors, as some human brutes do in every country? Certainly not. That is diabolism; it is not religion. But see God in your children. So, in everything.⁴⁵

He carries on,

Not that you should not have property, not that you should not have things which are necessary and things which are even luxuries. Have all that you want, and more, only know the truth and realise it. Not that you should not have property, not that you should not have things which are necessary and things which are even luxuries. Have all that you want, and more, only know the truth and realise it. Wealth does not belong to anybody. Have no idea of proprietorship, possessorship. You are nobody, nor am I, nor anyone else. All belongs to the Lord, because the opening verse told us to put the Lord in everything. God is in the wealth that you enjoy. He is in the desire that rises in your mind. He is in the things you buy to satisfy your desire; He is in your beautiful attire, in your beautiful ornaments. This is the line of thought. All will be metamorphosed as soon as you begin to see things in that light. If you put God in your every movement, in your conversation, in your form, in everything, the whole scene changes, and the world, instead of appearing as one of woe and misery, will become a heaven.⁴⁶

In this case a verse from *Aitareyopaniṣad* can also be suggested,

tamaśanāy-āpipāse abrūtām āvābhyām abhiprajānīhīti te abravīd etāsv eva vām devatāsvābhajāmy etāsu bhāginnyau karomīti. Tasmād yasyai kasyai ca devatāyai havirgrhyate bhāginyā vevāsyām aśanāy-āpipāse bhavataḥ. 1.2.5.⁴⁷

[To him (the Creator), hunger and thirst said, “For us (also) provide (some abode).” He said to them, “I assign your habitation among these very deities and make you sharers with them.” Therefore, to whatever deity an oblation is offered, hunger and thirst become partakers in it.]⁴⁸

Here this verse is relevant because it is about hunger and thirst. These are the two foremost representations of Desire. Instead of being banished they were placed everywhere to partake in every act. So it concretizes the statement of Shug,

God made it. Listen, God love everything you love.⁴⁹

According to Shug it is all about love. Love is everything we should care about. She questions the traditional belief of God and religion,

People think pleasing God is all God care about. But any fool living in the world can see it always trying to please us back.⁵⁰

The concept of love was a bit new to Celie. That's why she asked Shug,

You mean it want to be loved, just like the bible say?⁵¹

Shug answers,

Yes, ...Everything want to be loved. Us sing and dance, make faces and give flower bouquets, trying to be loved. You ever notice that trees do everything to git attention we do, except walk?⁵²

The same idea is reflected in one of the songs of Tagore,

ei ye tomār(a) prem(a) ogo hṛdaya haraṇa.
ei ye pātāy(a) ālo nāce sonāra varaṇa.
ei ye madhur(a) ālasbhare, megh(a) bhesē yāy(a) ākaś(a)' pare,
ei ye bātās(a) dehe kore amṛtakṣaraṇa.
prabhāt(a) ālor(a) dhārāy(a) āmār(a) nayan(a) bhesēche,
ei tomāri premer(a) vāṇī prāṇe ešeche.
tomāri mukh(a) oi nuyēche, mukhe tomār(a) cokh(a) thuyēche,
āmār(a) hṛday(a) āj(a) chūyēche tomāri caraṇa.⁵³

Yes, I know, this is nothing but thy love, O beloved of my heart---
this golden light that dances upon the leaves,
these idle clouds sailing across the sky,
this passing breeze leaving its coolness upon my forehead.
The morning light has flooded my eyes,
this is thy message to my heart.

Thy face is bent from above, thy eyes look down on my eyes,
and my heart has touched thy feet. [Translated by Rabindranath Tagore]⁵⁴

In the Preface to the tenth anniversary edition of the novel Walker writes,

I would have thought that a book that begins “Dear God” would immediately have been identified as a book about the desire to encounter, to hear from, the Ultimate Ancestor.⁵⁵

This reminds us the concept of *Maṅgalācaraṇa*.

Maṅgalācaraṇa refers to a “benedictory verse”. This type of verse is a customary feature of Sanskrit treatise, whether it be Śāstra-kāvya or Kāvya-śāstra etc. By this verse reverence of the author for a choiced deity (*iṣṭadevatā*) or for the preceptor is expressed. This is composed in order to remove hindrance to the full composition of the work.⁵⁶

By starting the book with *Dear God* gives the reader a clear Idea of what's the book is all about. She herself acknowledged that she is praising *the Ultimate Ancestor* in the very beginning of her book.

By *the Ultimate Ancestor* Walker worships a God who is neither white nor black, male or female, but someone who resides in everything. The spiritual belief custom, Walker follows, is pantheism which promotes the concept of God being present in all living beings. This reflects on the teachings of Shug because what Celie learns from her (Shug) is pantheism itself. But other beliefs like pagan, can also be traced there. Walker concludes the Preface saying,

This is the book in which I was able to express a new spiritual awareness, a rebirth into strong feelings of Oneness I realized I had experienced and taken for granted as a child; a chance for me as well as the main character, Celie, to encounter That Which Is Beyond Understanding But Not Beyond Loving and to say: I see and hear you clearly, Great Mystery, now that I expect to see and hear you everywhere I am, which is the right place.⁵⁷

In spite of the development of Celie and Nettie's spiritualities in the light of Upaniṣadic enlightenment, the sources, from where they attained the higher spiritual beliefs, are not Indian but African American. Initially the Indian spiritual influence was not acknowledged by Walker because it was necessary for her to establish African Americans' religion as their own. But eventually she clearly acknowledged the Indian influence on her novel *The Color Purple*.

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6. Loc. cit.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 168
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