

SPIRITUAL BONDING AND LIBERATION IN ALICE WALKER'S "THE TEMPLE OF MY FAMILIAR"

Dr.Sushila Sangwan

Asst.Professor,G.C.Nagina(Mewat)

I
am a black woman tall as a cypress
strong beyond all definition still defying space
and time
and circumstance assailed impervious
indestructible look on me and be renewed.

Mari Evans¹

The black woman as the saying goes is indeed "strong beyond all definitions." Often used and abused by her husband, and almost always without resources, suffering the oppression both of racist and sexist, she is still the lifeline of her family. She acts as glue to keep her family intact, always painstakingly trying a way out to survive. She always serves as the pinboard for the blacks to pin their blame on and even so she has survived the oddest of times. Alice Walker, as a spokesperson for the black women, tries to portray through her novels, the realistic picture of the struggles faced by them.

The black women were brought as slaves to America and were treated with extreme brutality and were denied the basic human privileges. They were exploited according to the whims and fancies of the white masters. Even after the end of slavery, they were given the lowest rank in the society. They were often raped, and subjected to all kinds of violence and were forced to live in back breaking poverty. But the extraordinary inherent strength of the black women made it possible for them only to survive. As **Barbara Smith** aptly remarks, "An ability to cope under the worst condition is not liberation, although our spiritual capacities have often made it look like a life."²

Walker depicts the plight of the black women in her novel, **The Temple of My Familiar**, which portrays almost the entire history of African-Americans. "Temple, evolves from the interaction of many voices and withholds from readers the comfort of a single resting place-a point of view, a focus or harmony of diverse and often contradictory voices."³ The mental and physical condition of the individual character and the different aspects of their existence are the basic features of the novel. It is through this novel that Walker brings to the fore the history of her ancestors who, unlike the new generation of the African-Americans, born and brought up in the new environment, have borne extreme conditions of life. A life of fulfilment for them has been a nightmare.

As all of Walker's novels are rooted deeply in her culture and tradition, this novel is also based on a similar theme. The women in her novel draw their inspiration directly or indirectly from the culture and tradition of their ancestors. As **Walker** herself says in an interview with :
[W]hat I'm doing is literally trying to reconnect us to our ancestors. All of us. I'm really trying to do that because I see that ancient past as the future, that the connection that was original is a connection; if we can affirm it in the present, it will make a different future.⁴

Mem (TLGC), Margaret (TLGC) and Celie (CP), the women of her earlier novels, succumb to the oppressive forces, Meridian (M) rejects and faces them but the women of **The Temple of My Familiar** are caught in the whirlpool of power politics. They are confronted with their own problems and dilemmas. Their problem is to cope up with the existing reality of life and at the same time, to remain connected to their past. Carlotta, daughter of Zede is frustrated by the racial and sexual bias of her colleagues. Fanny, daughter of Olivia and Grand daughter of Celie of **The Color Purple** is angry with the white racism. Zede has a pathetic past which often haunts her and Lissie Lyes, one of the major characters, often recalls her past lives and tries to interpret them in her present.

Lissie Lyes acts as the link between the past and the present. She believes herself to be a goddess reincarnated thousands of times in different races. She also claims to remember all about her past lives. She tells Suwelo, a history professor and the husband of Fanny, that "Lissie means 'the one who remembers everything'"⁵.

The different stories of Lissie depict the conditions in which the black women are forced to live, denied of happiness due to race and gender bias and strict patriarchal control.

Her tales unfold through her conversation with Suwelo. She describes her many lives through her dream memories. She narrates one of the pathetic stories in which she was a poor peasant woman. She was sold into slavery by her uncle after her father had died. According to the law of that state, her mother and her children had become the responsibility of her uncle. But "He already had more wives and children and slaves than he knew what to do with." (61) One of her uncle's wives wanted to buy trinkets and there being no money she gives her husband the idea to sell Lissie's mother and her children and he readily accepts the idea. For a few silver coins he sells all of them. And a few days before they left the coast to go to the place they were sold, they were made to kneel down in the sand and their heads were shaved. They were then branded according to the name of the estate to which they were sold. After branding them, their wounds were sprinkled with a little vinegar and palm oil. Still the swelling and burning persisted for many days.

On the day of their sailing, they were dragged to the ship and their last remaining cloth wrapped around the hip was taken away from them and they were forced into the ship bald, branded and naked. Lissie recollects:

I fought to hold on to the that last small badge of modesty, but a white man struck me a blow to the head almost without looking at me-and because he had blue eyes, I fancied he must be blind- and I reeled onto the ship with the rest (68).

Small babies were not permitted on the ship. They were taken away from women and simply smashed against the ground or were left on the trials to die or given to a tribe that did not believe in slave trade. On the ship they were packed like sardines with their heads in each others' laps and a chain connecting each of them in a row.

Lissie tells Suwelo about another anecdote from memory where women lived in a blissful, independent world of their own. Men lived in separate communities. Though they spent most of their time with each other they were not allowed to stay together. Lissie had a friend whom she had loved dearly. And after mating with her playmate, she wanted to stay with him, but she was not allowed to do so. After having a baby they run away to their cousin's tribe where they were allowed to stay together. This was how the idea of ownership had come into existence.

Lissie's dreams can be interpreted as the reflection of her personal desire to be a free woman. She had another dream which appropriately gave the novel its title, **The Temple of My Familiar**. She dreamt as if she was living in a temple, which consisted of a simple, square, one-room structure with deep set-in windows. It was painted in dust coral colours with lots of designs painted with turquoise and deep blue color symbolising rain and storm. Her familiar or pet was a small incredibly beautiful creature that was part bird as it had feathers and part fish as it could swim and also part reptile. She tells, "My little familiar, no bigger than my hand, slithered and skidded here and there in the place outside the temple... Its predominant colour was blue, but there was red and green, and flecks of gold and cerise." (117)

Once, she put it on the ground and covered it with a clear glass bowl which the familiar has broken. It looked at Lissie very curiously and did not try to run when she placed a white bowl over it. The familiar was craving for freedom and by trapping it like this, she was spoiling her relationship with it. She then shifts it under a metal washtub. Unbelievably the familiar broke open the tub and flew away using wings she never used before. Thus Walker highlights the primacy of freedom for even a small creature. In the same way, black women put up with the oppression as long as they could tolerate, all the while trying to break free from the shackles of oppression and many died in the process.

Lissie further informs Suwelo that she was also once born a lion. She was very friendly with women and children, but by the time she had grown up to be a big lion the matriarchal set up was disturbed completely by the intervention of men. Men had slowly overpowered women. As a lion, Lissie was aware of the change that was affecting their lives. Unable to become friendly with the men, the lions started moving away from human contacts in search of peace. In course of time, they became totally alienated from human beings.

The status women enjoyed during the reign of matriarchal setup was disturbed by the men, who envied women and developed a strong desire to rule. Thus the different lives of Lissie tell us about the root cause of the downfall and subjugation of women.

Zede, like Lissie, is haunted by her pathetic past. She recalls the struggle faced by her mother, also called Zede, to survive. Apart from facing the sexual and racial oppression, the black women tried to trace the various aspects of the real problem which the people of their community faced. As Zede lived in the age of slavery, she realised that the struggle for survival

was the major question confronting the women. Zede thought that the hidden talent which the women had inherited from their ancestors helped them survive in odd times. Zede, a seamstress, was considered a “sewing magician.” She made colourful capes and dresses with the feathers of peacock and other birds to be worn by dancers, priests and musicians during the village festivals. Zede, the senior, used to send her little daughter also called Zede to fetch her feathers used in making capes and headdresses from the village. As the creativity of black woman was not encouraged during her time by the patriarchal society, Zede had to shift to a hut outside their house thus symbolizing the marginal position of a woman and her creative art. Zede's misfortune came when her husband, a plantation worker died and the traditional festivals in the village were banned. But her dedication to art and craft enabled her to survive all odds. She started selling her goods in a hotel boutique, newly built near their village. With the little money she raised, she was able to train her daughter as a school teacher. After Zede junior completed the requirements to be a teacher, she took up teaching children in open space as there was no proper building. But the racist white could not tolerate it and arrested her on the charge of being a Communist. In the prison she gave birth to Carlotta. With the help of Mary Evans, she manages to escape from the prison by crossing the river in a small boat hidden in the bushes by Mary. She was able to cross the Panama Canal”... mistaken by the U.S Coast Guard for a piece of seaweed, and then floated to the coast of North America and into San Francisco Bay.” (6)

It was in San Francisco where Zede and Carlotta had started their new life. A photograph of Zede and little Carlotta depicts the real trauma of their life. “Zede's drawn face, seemingly frightened even of the photographer, ...their faces... recognized the stress of oppression, dispossession, flight.” (18) Zede spoke English with a Spanish accent and “...she sounded as if she were speaking Spanish.” (6) Her accent is one that of a “‘woman, escapee’ has marginality and dislocation inscribed in her voice.”⁶ As Zede had inherited the creativity of her mother, she was able to survive on the alien land.

Zede's recollection of her past memories makes us aware of the kind of life lived by the women in old days. “Though her voice often cracked with the effort not to weep from the pain of relieved experiences, she spoke with an eloquence... that might at last reconnect her to her world” (45).

She remembers how they were taught by their mothers about their ancestral history, love-making and babies. She also remembers that young girls and their mothers bathed under a waterfall on the full-moon day when they had periods. After their bath, they would gather around their goddess Ixtaphtaphahex, while their mothers prepared food and the girls gathered firewood. In those days the women were used to themselves and man was still fascinated by their newness:

... She had a soft brown belly and strong brown legs. So what, that she had hair to her ass that glistened like the wings of a bird. Woman was bored with it. And so she began to play with how she looked. She used feathers, shells... Occasionally they were host to a man, whom they played with, especially sexually, until they tired of him; they then abandoned him. (49)

These abandoned men had discovered later that some of the children born to the women had a great resemblance to them. The men had worshipped and feared the women and kept themselves away from them. They often spied on them whenever it was possible. For a long time the male community revolved around the women, but this situation did not last much longer. The men grew sick of their worship of women. They had become jealous of women and so decided that they would become the rulers or priests and "...that they could be the ones through whom life passed." (51) This was how the priest hood took over the power of women. Zede tells about the priests, "They always seemed, from their sour expressions, to be hurting and as if they had given up something that now plagued them with anxiety." (46)

Thus Walker traces the history of woman during the past years and explains how the societies where women were the rulers were transformed into male dominated ones. This, perhaps, prompts **Bonnie Braendlin** to comment thus:

Through horrific recollections of slavery in Zede's tales of her youth in South America and through Miss Lisse's stories of the African slave trade and the diaspora, Temple offers eyewitness accounts of the deliberate and relentless enslavement and extermination of people of color.⁷

As Lissie and Zede are attached more to their past lives, Fanny and Carlotta are confronted with the problem of self realization. They are also victims of identity crisis. The main reason for this is separation of the individual from their culture and heritage. "Temple represents this problem as a separation of African American from their heritage, a state that replicates the plight of earlier slaves but one for which African Americans now share responsibility."⁸ Though they have not faced the extreme forms of slavery and racist oppression as their ancestors, they are not able to cope up with the realities of the present world. They are neither considered purely Americans by the racist whites nor are they treated as Africans. Thus they suffer from maladjustment. Though they are free now, their condition is like that of the former slaves who couldn't work as they liked. They are always considered inferior by the racist whites. As **Frederick Jameson** explains; ...disappearance of a sense of history, the way in which our entire contemporary social system has little by little begun to lose its capacity to retain its own past, has begun to live in a perpetual present and in a perpetual change that obliterates tradition of the kind which all earlier social formations have had in one way or another to preserve.⁹

Both Carlotta and Fanny expose the problems of women in the modern age. Through their relationship with men, they bring forth the problems faced by the modern women. Fanny is depressed at the poor condition of her people and is angry with the white racists who are the ones responsible for it. She is a victim of racism which is all-pervasive. She recalls the violence during the riots of Civil Rights Movements and says: "I saw a lot of people and their white allies humiliated, brutally beaten or murdered. It seemed that the people with the most integrity were assassinated." (298) The suffering of the people is so intense that she feels "... as if my very self is leaving me." (302) Fanny had also participated in many Civil Rights

marches and had been arrested many times, the thought of which makes her upset. Suwelo consoles her that she is not the only one who is suffering. It is the whole world which has freaked out. But she is not convinced. “Her silver blade was always in the air. She thought she’d never be able to scrub all the blood off her knees. Her blood pressure, like that of so many black people, reached alarming highs.” (p.303) Her mother Olivia also tries to make her forget everything as the conditions are not as bad as they had been at the time of her ancestors. She tells Fanny:

Forgiveness is the true foundation of health and happiness, just as it is for any lasting progress. Without forgiveness, there is no forgetfulness of evil: without forgetfulness, there still remains the threat of violence. And violence does not solve anything, it only prolongs itself. (308)

Another major problem of Fanny is falling in love with spirits. She sometimes falls in love with an Indian chief dead for a century or with a spirit that does not have any relevance or resemblance to anything. Suwelo tells Carlotta that: “Fanny falls in love with spirits, rather than living people because they are the only ones she can trust. Also, spirits can be claimed and cannot reject you, may be, but living people can and often do” (397) On being asked by Suwelo as to what specific quality of the spirits attracts her, she replies that, They open door inside of me. It’s as if they’re keys to rooms inside myself... I begin to feel the stirrings in myself, the humming of the room, and my heart starts to expand with the absolute feeling of bravery, or love, or audacity, or commitment. It becomes a light, and the light enters me... I radiate this expanded light. Happiness. (186) Suwelo also complains that while making love also she is lost in her world of spirits. Thus this distractedness of Fanny makes Suwelo justify his infidelity. The main reason for her behaviour can be traced back to her upbringing. She is brought up by her grandmother Celie and Shug who worship everything that has life in it. The influence of their thinking and practice has made Fanny a distracted person and even a psychiatrist has no cure for this. To Fanny, marriage is a bondage which ties a woman to oppressive traditions of lifelong suffering and exploitation, stripping off her self- respect and identity. But Fanny rejects all these traditions which force her to submit passively. She frees herself from the bond of marriage itself which she finds is hampering her growth as an individual. She tells Suwelo during one of their heated exchanges of words that it is not he from whom she is running away but “It’s marriage I don’t want.” (138) Suwelo also loses interest in her. It is only sex which makes him stay with her. She finally decides to free herself from the bond of marriage and get rid of Suwelo. She is fed up with his overt sexuality and feels no joy in having sex with him. She often “...thinks of the years during which her sexuality was dead to her.” (386)

This self-realising experience of her physical needs makes her a contented person and helps her to develop a healthy friendship with men even after divorcing Suwelo. She leaves her job and opens a massage parlour. She indulges in sex with Arveyda without feeling guilty of her act. She gives a new definition to a man- woman relationship apart from the one encoded by society through marriage. She too overlooks the narrow vision of life giving full concern

to frustration. She chooses to work as a masseuse to become a self-contented person. Fanny's enlightened response towards life gives her scope for personal growth.

Being liberated in mind and Spirit Fanny tries to help Carlotta. Her body was repeatedly struck by pain. Like a healer through her massage she tries to uncramp her body. She is able to relieve Carlotta of Migraine which she suffered for the past one year. Carlotta is betrayed by her husband Arveyda and even by her mother Zede. Arveyda had left Carlotta for her mother and starts living with Zede. Carlotta is shocked when she comes to know about her mother's affair with Arveyda. Carlotta also finds it easy to link herself with Suwelo after Fanny leaves for Africa but they are not able to establish a firm relationship because they themselves have "... been victims, both of them carting around lonely, needy bodies that were essentially blind flesh." (387)

And another reason for their unstable relationship is that Suwelo does not take women seriously. His egoistic view of the world troubles him the most. He is not able to establish any harmony with his wife. Being a black man, he is alienated from his own roots but he is not troubled by the racist and sexist white oppressors. It is only his ego which considers women as mere commodities he exploited according to his feelings and he thinks of their mind and their creative art as stimulation of an overt sexuality. He justifies his adulterous behaviour by saying that "My woman has left me, you see, taken my rightful stuff off to another continent, totally out of reach of my dick, and left me high and dry." (245) And he further explains shamelessly that Fanny is responsible for his, undesirable behaviour. He says "May be she stayed away in Africa for such a long time because she wanted me to have the freedom to fuck around." (281)

About the uninhibited sexuality of the characters Wyatt comments that sex "... involves liberating each other's powers of self-expression rather than trying to suppress them."¹⁰ Arveyda, Suwelo, Fanny and Carlotta become friends and all four of them keep visiting each other without any formal bond of marriage. Fanny had never been against sexual relationship between man and woman but was against marriage. She wants to put an end to the enslavement of black women by black men. She wants to live with Suwelo as a self dependent and autonomous being and she plans to build a house according to the design of ancient matriarchal houses.

Thus the women are seen as risk takers and adventurers who define themselves according to their will and not by the norms of the society. From the stories and anecdotes narrated by her principal characters Lissie and Zede, from their memory of their previous births, Alice Walker redraws the social history from the viewpoint of black woman consciousness. She makes a clarion call to do away with the entrenched gender bias and to empower women with responsibilities that they are capable of shouldering with diligence and dignity.

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