

RESEARCH ARTICLE



INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print); 2321-3108 (online)

## THE HISTORY OF HUMAN PSYCHE IN ALICE WALKER'S NOVEL THE TEMPLE OF MY FAMILIAR

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Doi: <https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.7219.366>



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### ABSTRACT

Alice Walker's *The Temple of My Familiar* is a novel recording 5,00,000 years of human history. This novel is about the re-incarnation of an ancient African Goddess. It centres on the love stories of three couples, two of them young and one old. Throughout the novel people tell stories about their own lives and the lives of human beings from the beginning of time to the present day. Walkers offer a profusion of observations on such diverse issues as the ecology, spirituality and animal rights. The novel's central character, Miss.Lissie, is a goddess from primeval Africa who has been incarnated hundreds of times throughout history. She befriends Suwelo, a Narcissistic University professor whose marriage is threatened by his need to dominate and sexually exploit his wife. Through a series of conversations with Miss. Lissie and her friend Hal, Suwelo learns of Miss. Lissie's innumerable lives and experiences from the prehistoric world in which humans and animals lived in harmony under a matriarchal society.

Key words : myth, incarnated, black consciousness, optimism, slave, Goddess.

### Introduction.

Temple of My Familiar, Alice Walker's voice can be clearly heard as she tells the stories of living people and as she reaches back in history to times that can be remembered only in dreams. A young American black man named Suwelo listens to a tape recording made by an old woman named Miss Lissie. She tells two stories on the tape, both from a time beyond the beginning of written human history. In many cultures, stories about the beginning of the world are called myths.

### Discission

The Temple of My Familiar can be read as a romance of the development of human psyche, in which the human ego strives consciously and

unconsciously for wholeness. Man separate from women, one race separate from another, the old as separate from the young, tries to suppress the other. Since everything living strives for wholeness, the inevitable struggle between the groups exists. Black men suppress their women as they are being suppressed by the white race. Thus there exists a link of suppression of black women. The chief characters of this novel tried their utmost to come out of their suppressions.

The infinite faith Walker have in people's ability to understand anything that makes sense has always been justified, finally, by their behaviour. In my work and in myself. I reflect black people, women and men, as I reflect others. One day even

the most self-protective ones will look into the mirror I provide and not be afraid.

Walker was determined to protect her integrity against black critics although their harsh criticism saddened and disappointed her. Revulsion against the death feast of the West and equal revulsion against a countervailing black violence is the agony at the root of *The Temple of My Familiar*. Its fierceness erupts at many places in the text. It is an agony experienced by many black people across the world.

*The Temple of My Familiar* bears a message from Africa, in a far more determined manner. The message reaches the readers via Miss Lissie, an ancient goddess who has been incarnated hundreds of times, usually as a woman, sometimes as a man, once even as a lion, less a character than a narrative device. Lissie enables Walker to trace out the origin of man. **Most of the women or the men according to Hall are different ones. May be an aunt or somebody else female, but I don't recall anybody else (59).** Here there are just three of the ages in human evolution that Lissie lives through.

First there is an age soon after the invention of fire. The female tribes are at peace with their animal **familiars**. Here Lissie is incarnated as the first white skinned creature, a man with insufficient melanin, who flees from the heat of Africa for Europe. Hating the sun, he invents an alternative god in his own image, cold filled with rage.

Next comes an age of pygmies, in which the tribes live with the apes. This peaceful, happy age ends when men invent warfare, attack the apes and impose themselves on women as their sole guardians. Thus Walker shows to the readers the evils of patriarchy and of private property. A war is waged against the Great Goddess of Africa. The instrument of this warfare is the slave trade. Its emblem is the Gorgon's head. The head of the Goddess, still crowned with the serpents of wisdom is cut off by the white hero-warrior Perseus.

This episode gives some idea of the sweep of the myth. Alice Walker recounts a myth that inverts the places assigned to men and women,

Europe and Africa. According to her, history is the male – invented myth. In Walker's counter – myth, Africa is the cradle of true religion and civilization, and man is a funny, misbegotten creature with no breasts but an elongated clitoris. **Miss Lissie said to Suwelo, her black eyes, under wrinkled eyelids, as brilliant and as steady as a hawk's, 'but I am old now and my brain cells which are like batteries, you know- are dying, millions of them at a time (52).**

The impact of Lissie's revelations upon modern black consciousness is traced in the lives of Fanny and her ex-husband, Suwelo, a middle class academician. Suwelo finds his authentic self by absorbing Lissie's message. Fanny finds herself through her archetypal memories and by journeying back to meet her African Kinkfolk.

The stories of tribal people are accounts of their hardship, optimism, love and finally of endurance. These stories are still told today in various contents and to listen to the story – teller is to participate in the re-creation of an entire people. It is to participate in the rhythm of ancient voices, complete with nuances and laughs of delight, or cries of grief. Through these stories the readers themselves experience the dreams, the hopes, pain and the love of people.

The story teller in this account is Walker. She asks her readers to suspend learned literacy expectations and become part of the evolution of these people. **In the old country in South America, Carlotta's grandmother, Zede, has been a seamstress, but really more of a sewing magician. She was the creator of clothing, especially capes, made of features (3).**

Zede is one of the last remaining survivors of her aboriginal community and the stories following are heart wrenching accounts of the colonization of the people. Through Zede's and other character's voices, the readers experience the effects of Christianization on native people and the effects of **Civilization**. The stories are the first hand accounts and they are not obscure historical facts, after all. They are real and painful. The power of the oral tradition is overwhelming. The readers could understand the loss and pain with their eyes

glistering with tears. Walker intends it to be this way as centuries or decades have no meaning in this context.

*The Temple of My Familiar* is technically a work of fiction. It is also the moving account of the outside forces imposed upon the tribal people. It speaks and it speaks directly about the strength of love and the resistance of all living things of these world-human, animals, birds and the earth itself. This mode of storytelling has nothing to do with linear time, detailed maps or chronological order. It is as simple as telling stories in one's kitchen or over iced tea on the back porch.

The six major characters in this book tell their stories to each other. The readers are mere eavesdroppers. The characters are fortunate as their voices are distinct, poetic at times and always filled with the love of language and of humour. Christina Gomez observes thus: **The finery the women wore seemed to prove their super naturalness. The men lacking the centuries of clothing and adornment experience of the women, were able to make only the clumsiest imitations (414).**

It is the women who wield power in *The Temple of My Familiar*. The force is with them. Unlike men, women are centred. Pre-civilization prospered when women straddled their curve of the planet. Through a long monologue by Arveyda's mother-in-law, Zede, Walker transports the readers back to matriarchal feminists. Man is forced to mirror woman. Zede says that men rebelled when women laughed at them for lacking dress sense.

Mother Africa's Kharmic ambassadress in *The Temple of My Familiar* is Lissie, a woman whose past life is as thick as a pack of cards. In her restless odyssey the quintessence of black womanhood rejoices. God himself has been dethroned in this grand scenario. Mother Africa is **the Great Mother, Creator of All, Protector of All, the keeper of the Earth, The Goddess (15)**. The Goddess is nothing less than the immoral face of feminism. "I (Walker) thank the universe for my participation in existence. It is a pleasure to have always been present" (415). Walker is herself a hippie artifact. In a credit note at the end of *The Temple of My Familiar* she writes as mentioned above. Like Lissie, Walker is her own

astral projection. Her words reach beyond barriers of race, sex, time, space and species. **Charged, I feel my brain is, with memory. Yes as I said, like a battery. Exactly one hundred and thirteen, She said as if he'd spoken, before continuing her story (53).**

In a dazzling fashion, the novel moves along these various streams of conversations, storytelling and memory, recovering the various combinations of ancestry and incident that passed together, from the long foreground of these contemporary African – American lives. The novel draws to a close as the two younger couples, having struggled separately through discord and perplexity, become friends and seem destined to share their lives in trust and affection.

At the centre of this collective recovery is Lissie, **the one who remembers everything**. This great **rememberer** teaches Suwelo the story of the African race while counselling him on the conduct of life's enigmas. Her own memories through several incarnations include what she calls **dream memories** of earliest human time, when, humans and animals lived together as **familiars** in an Eden – like African paradise. Like Zede, Lissie remembers the way in which women once conducted their lives and taught their traditions to their daughters. According to Christine Hall,

it was during the hundreds of years of the slave trade in Africa that this religion was finally destroyed, although for hundreds of years previous to the slave trade it has been under attack. There were, in the earliest days, raids on the women's temples, which existed in sacred groves of trees, with the women and children dragged out by the hair and forced to marry into male dominated tribes. (63)

Lissie recalls as well how successful men attempt to mimic and eventually usurp the prerogative of women, and their subsequent invention of various misogynous regimes with which to keep women in their heartfelt place. Hence, her "memories" are also a critique of the power relations that govern the interaction of blacks and whites and of women with men. Such profound probing of the racial memory, of the species'

collective experience, seems the special prerogative of women in this novel. Miss Lissie suffers from her own brand of racism. She boasts of the fact that in every one of her incarnations she has been fortunate enough to have been a black woman. According to Walker,

this very thing had happened before, and our own parents had forgotten it, but their system of separating men and women was a consequence of an earlier period when women and men had tried to live together – and it is interesting to see today that mothers and fathers are returning to the old way of life - visiting each other and not wanting to live together. This is the pattern of freedom until man no longer wishes to dominate women and children. (88)

### Conclusion

Walker's history of the world as traced through both novels African and South American characters records this "pattern of freedom". An alternating between times when men and women could and did live together more or less in harmony and at times harmony was best maintained by living apart also. Man's need to dominate woman recurs periodically, however, and each time the two sexes enter a period of uneasy cohabitation.

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