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## WOMANISM AND SEXIST OPPRESSION IN ALICE WALKER'S *THE TEMPLE OF MY FAMILIAR*

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### ABSTRACT

*The Temple of My Familiar* (1989) is a novel in which Walker envisages a world continuity and change exist. Continuity refers to the spirit of the Universe which underlies in every creature's life. Change refers to a deliberate break with the largely fragmented, fractured and frustrated image of woman with her male bedevilled world. Walker has written this novel towards an ideal of unity, the unity of culture, moral truth and imaginative thought and emotion. She brings in too many characters and plots. She kept 'Communion' as a watchword throughout the novel, communion with Time, Nature and Self. Communion with nature and self is possible if only we remember our past. The scariest thing about life is how much of the past is forgotten. In the *Temple of My Familiar* time plays a prominent role. Its growth is inseparable from the notion of the self and the self's ineradicable link to the world outside. Each character's quest for identity is the personal effort to recapture the past experience. Memory is a psychotherapeutic because it soothes a violently sundered heart.

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In the *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.

The two old women, both experienced artists, frame the story of the novel. A broad canvas of the African and African American life is exhibited in the novel. Zede, the South American seems stress or sewing magician creates traditional capes, from peacock, parrot or cockatoos feathers. These capes were worn by priests, dancers and musicians at the

local village festival. Miss Lissie a most bewitching womanist artist, serves as Walker's most direct link to romance and all of life's other complexities as they have existed over the last half a million years.

*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. Blackmen 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.

Zede, Carlotta, Miss. Lissie and Fanny are the female characters who succeed in their lives after a long struggle. They redefine the relationship between sexes. They are able to cure some of their earlier diseases which were based on the societal expectations. The lessons they learn about the need for balance between the flesh and the spirit help them redefine themselves. The female sex which had been treated as an inferior sex gained its identity through the connection with the past and its revolutionary steps towards the future in the novel. Miss. Lissie's memory of the past lives proved a convenient narration about the history of black womanhood. Her soul in one incarnation survived the horrors of the slaveship only to die in a Virginia plantation after losing a leg to a bear trap while trying to escape. In another she was fortunate enough to marry a man of her choosing, she was born without a hymen... she was denounced publicly, forced into prostitution and died of infection and exposure at the age of eighteen.

Miss. Lissie's memory recalls the ancient African religion where mother worship was practiced, whose families who worshipped the Goddess of Africa. "were routinely killed, sold into slavery or converted to Islam at the point of the Sword" (TTMF 195). Lissie tells Suwelo of subsequent death, during the hundreds of years of the slave trade in Africa of mother worship.

There were in the earlier days, raids on the women temples, the women and children dragged out by the hair and forced to marry into male demanded tribes. The ones who were not forced to do this were either executed or sold into a tribe whose language was different. The men had decided that they would be creators and they went about dethroning women systematically. (TTMF 63-64)

Near the time of her death she confides to Suwelo that in one of these dream memories she was not a woman, but a lion, a woman's familiar. Thus, she witnessed how man's jealousy and his need for dominion changed once again the pattern of freedom which was given to women. Lissie mourns the loss of freedom by the woman. She pities for the poor state of women who were left alone with no fellow creatures but men.

Zede who inherits her mother's creative gift establishes her name in the feminine artistic tradition. She escapes from the imprisonment to the United States. She is a 'women escape' (Juncker 38) who has marginality and dislocation inscribed in her voice. "An old photo of Zede holding her daughter Carlotta shows Zede's drawn face .... Partly in Shadow" (TTMF 18).

The creative art which she practices is also marginal and maternal one. Zede crossed many hardships to bring Carlotta up. Carlotta became a teacher and earned money which helped both women to lead a peaceful life but the violence which existed in their region made them to vacate their place. Later, when Carlotta married Arveyda, Zede revealed him her stress of oppression, dispossession, flight as well as the hidden mysterious face of the woman artist. The notion of feminine creativity as the repressed culture recurs in walker's description of Zede's immigrant life.

Zede makes beautiful feather caps, shawls, head bands, etc., which were popular in the sixties. The pop stars adorned their heads with feather caps and head bands, thus creating a new fashion in the society. Carlotta steals her mother – made caps and present it to Arveyda who is a rockstar musician. Their love ended in marriage. After sometime Carlotta learns that Arveyda is in love with her mother, Zede. The South American culture and its matriarchal roots were very rich to follow, but history turns to the pain producing part, man's jealousy dethroned woman from the place of Goddess. This information's about the South American life was given by Zede to Arveyda.

After Arveyda drops Carlotta for her mother, Carlotta puts on another type of costume. Later she admits to Arveyda that for a time she was a "female impersonator" (Winchell 22) putting on the outward grab that would make her attractive to men.

I Were the kind of shoes you'd asked me to wear, though they hurt and you'd deft me for my mother, who always wore flats ... It didn't make any sense, wearing the shoes. They were killers. But even if they destroyed my feet and crippled my legs, I knew I wasn't giving up. I liked the way

men looked at me in high heels. The look in their eyes made me forget how lonely I was. How discarded. (Winchell 123)

Black women, being deprived of the culture and the attitude of their men towards them, tried to console them. They have taken some artificial forms by which they can attract men. Carlotta is the black woman who got neglected by her own husband. Hence, she dresses herself up in the way men would like her to follow.

Suwelo gets attracted by Carlotta who works in the women's studies department. Suwelo, a history professor finds it easy to link Carlotta in his mind because his wife Fanny always falls in love with the spirits. Fanny realized that abuse of human faith through different forms of bondage such as racism, sexism or inhumanism leaves us divorced from the best in ourselves. Fanny is the granddaughter of Celie, Celie's children Olivia and Adam were stolen by her presumed father. They were sold to the missionaries Corrine and Samuel. They worked in Africa for the rehabilitation of the people in the developing country. Olivia falls in love with an Africa Ola, who becomes the minister for culture in Olinka. He is a playwright and a multifaceted man.

Fanny was brought up with the affection of Celie and Shug. Here she was exposed to the violence of racism. She plays with a white girl of her age, Tanya. But their friendship is restricted very much by Tanya's Grandmother. Fanny cannot eat with Tanya nor can she kiss her friend. Once Fanny kissed Tanya on the cheeks while they were playing in the backyards. Her grandmother took notice of this incident. She came to Fanny and gave her a slap which knocked Fanny down. Grandmother said to Fanny, if she ever catches Fanny putting her black mouth on Tanya again, she would knock her little black head off. This particular incident will show the cruel and bad effect of racism.

Suwelo understands Fanny and the racist oppression which she faced at her very early age. Fanny is disrupted by her disturbing habit of falling in love with spirits. When Fanny and Suwelo make love, he's never quite sure who is there, "I'm certainly not, as far as she's concerned, though, she claims otherwise" (TTMF 185). Fanny's

distractedness helps him to justify himself he is unfaithful.

Fanny falls in love with the spirits which causes Suwelo to fall in love with Carlotta who satisfied his sexual pleasures. He is convinced that Carlotta is using him equally as he uses her. Carlotta being deprived of the love of Arveyda tells Fanny that when Fanny returned from Africa and when Suwelo went back to Fanny she could have murdered him, but that" all along he was just a figment of my imagination. A distraction from my misery, He was just 'Something' to hold on to; to be seen with; to wrestle with on the kitchen floor" (Winchell 123).

Fanny could really understand the mind of Carlotta and Suwelo. In their love, "There had not been a victim and an oppressor there'd really been two victims, both of them carting around, lonely, needy bodies that were essentially blind flesh" (TTMF 386). Suwelo and Carlotta's relationship is as lacking in genuine spirit as Hal and Miss. Lissie's is filled with it. As Carlotta describes Suwelo as a mere figment of her imagination, Suwelo declares her being of no substance. Miss. Lissie however makes him realize that he must ask Carlotta's forgiveness, for "It is a sin to behave as if a person whose body you use is being without substance. Sin, being denial of another's reality of whom and what she or he actually is" (TTMF 353). Lissie traces much of Suwelo's own pain to the fact he is fragmented being, in spite of the fact that his name is same as the ruin for wholeness. Suwelo tried to close doors to his past, close them against memory and pain. In his case, his parents wait behind that closed door. Miss. Lissie tells him that it is the memory of his mother's abandoned and suffering face that has made him fear knowing too much of woman's pain. Carlotta's humiliation, after her husband starts loving her mother, creates a painful past for her. Suwelo can relate his painful past memories about his parents. Thus both have started enjoying the intimacy of their spirits. Suwelo even undergoes a symbolic rebirth by plunging into the hot tub. In his rebirth he could see his parent's coming out of the door which he had locked for many years. Suddenly he recalls the incident which he has shut out of his memory, the incident that has made him long "to

use woman's bodies without having to confront the reality of woman's pain" (Winchell 124).

Miss. Lissie, with the wisdom of the ages had seen the need in Suwelo to open the door to his past. She had also seen that his denial of the past prevented his becoming more than blind flesh. Walker uses memory as a tool to attain wholeness. She stresses the point that the African roots will enrich the black's life. Once we try to shut down our past we will be lost in the world. The past memories are like the roots of the trees from which we grow and stabilize our life. Miss. Lissie's incarnations and her collection of memories gave her the experience of 'lot of women'. The total change among the characters is brought out as they achieve self-awareness. Suwelo's change comes after he hears the advice of Miss. Lissie. She leaves her final paintings to Suwelo and advises him to make amends with Fanny and to resolve his knotty relationship with her.

*The Temple of My Familiar* reflects some of the themes of the earlier novels such as womanism and sexist oppression. Fanny is unable to tolerate the deeply ingrained sexist views of Suwelo and divorces him but maintains her friendship and sexual relationship as well. She forces him to acknowledge her as a human being and not as a sex object. Similarly Nyzingha her sister labours to make the African man including the husband realise that a man's duty is more than just that of a bread winner and that he has equal responsibility towards bringing up his children.

Miss. Lissie Lyle's character can suit the womanist definition of Walker. She lived as the outrageous, audacious person with her individuality. Her life with Mr. Hal, her husband is a spiritual one rather than a physical one. Lissie falls in love with Rafe can see the different faces in Lissie as his profession was a photographer. He took varieties of photographs of Lissie which projected some of her images. Life with Mr. Rafe has been a very successful one because he could fulfill the sexual pleasures of Lissie whereas Mr. Hal failed to do. Mr. Hal saw the pain and sufferings of Lissie during the birth of Lulu their daughter. After nursing her during the child birth, Mr. Hal decided that he will never again give Lissie this pregnancy suffering. From then again he

never made love to Lissie. But he nursed Lissie during the delivery of other children whose father is not Mr. Hal. Walker has projected Miss. Lissie's character with tremendous power as a womanist. At the same time she tried to highlight the character of Mr. Hal with his high power of sensitivity and understanding of human sufferings. Ola towards the fag end of his life recognizes his faults and questions the African system which fails to recognize the faults and questions the African system which fails to recognize the freedom of women. He wrote plays to fight his government to bring about change in his society.

In *The Temple of My familiar*, she goes a step towards redefines sexual domination issues, puts down completely the roots of male superiority by creating a past with women in dominant roles which was later to be reversed. Lissie, Fanny and Carlotta's characters are evident for the raising power of women in the black community. Racism which forms a part of lack existence is only mentioned to give a suitable socio political atmosphere to the novel. Walker's main purpose is to highlight the growth and development in the main characters. Walker has included the characters of Ola, Mary Jane Briden, and Shug Avery Celie who along with Mr. Hal and Lissie act as a guiding spirit for the younger generation. She reiterates the point that the older generation has to instruct and act as a model for the younger generation to follow.

At the end of the novel, Carlotta and Arveyda are still married, yet maintaining separate residences. Fanny and Suwelo, Arveyda's close friend by now are divorced, yet living together on hours' drive away. They are building a house modeled on the prehistoric ceremonial house of the Ababa tribe "a house designed by the ancient mind" (Winchell 125).

Walker has given some solution for the social problems. The world would be a better place if we could live in a bird shaped house and devote ourselves to bread making and message, and generally adopt Fanny's mother's gospel. Revolution against the death feast of the west and equal revulsion against a counter vailing black – violence this 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 all too many black people across the world. But the brand of salvation divorced by Fanny and Suwelo will help few of them.

Fanny's Crisis is the crisis of an oppressed woman but also the crisis of a black person living in the gunfights of white racism who does not want to turn into a hate filled racist filled racist herself. Fanny recounts a terrible recurring dream where a feast is going on at which white people are endlessly eating. Sometimes she is present at their feast as an emaciated chained slave. Sometimes she is the one being devoured. And sometimes she sees herself participating the joyless eating whether victim or horrified participant, Fanny cannot escape racism: "It had become like a scale or a web over her eyes. Everywhere she looked, she saw it. Racism turned her thoughts to violence made her sick" (J.M.Coetzee 26)

But Fanny could overcome her racist oppression by her parent's influence. Olivia, Fanny's mother tells that blacks give forgiveness to whatever whites have done to them. Ola, Fanny's father who killed his white oppressors has the first hand knowledge of killing the oppressors does not free oneself psychologically. His advice to his daughter is rather to harmonize her own heart than rage against the oppressors. "He knows that she alone can find the means of doing that, and she does so when she is able no longer to deny the body but rather to let spirit and flesh come together in a mutually nourishing way" (Winchell 129).

Fanny has learned not to deny the flesh out of fear of what her anger might lead her to do, but rather to harmonize her own heart and thus to achieve through union of body and soul the psychological wholeness that killing her oppressors could never bring. Arveyda is a fitting partner for her. Suwelo whose rebirth had happened due to the recollection of his past memories could find his actual pair only in Carlotta, because he is of a rare kind who could understand women's pain.

Walker's career has been in part of a reaching back in time to retrieve the life and literary models that she felt were denied to her. Throughout her works she has celebrated each link that has

been forged between her and those who have gone before. *The Temple of My Familiar* carried that search to its limit.

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