

## Dissociation and Recollection in Alice Walker's *The Temple of My Familiar*

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### Abstract

In *The Temple of My Familiar*, Walker tries to record various incidents from the lives of her characters in their past and present. She examines the alley of history as the language of truth, which is a representation of historical past of the diasporic identities of African Americans living in the United States. The migratory characters in the novel search for their roots, since their dissociation from the past has led them to various kinds of imbalances in their personalities. Their recollection about their origin leads to a new kind of wholeness in them. Their becoming whole through recollection is as inevitable as breath for men and women of all ethnicities throughout the world. Walker tries to convey that all individuals should remember their ancestors who made their history. However old and faded, the knowledge and acknowledgement of the past adds strength to one's present life.

**KEYWORDS:** Dissociation, Recollection, Diasporic, Identity, Life.

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African Americans are those who were unwillingly brought by the Americans from Africa and their life throughout American history is only a daily struggle. For centuries, black women have been called the mule of the world and slave of a slave and they have a wretched position on earth. Brent says, "Slavery is terrible for men, but it is far more terrible for women... they have wrongs and suffering and mortification particularly their own" (405). They suffered a lot in the hands of Americans. Black women who were brought as the bonded slaves have lived through conditions of cruelties and they try to reinvent themselves.

Alice Walker has achieved a great success and become one of the most gifted and influential African American women writers. She has discussed different social issues such as oppression, poverty, share cropping, lesbian relations, racism and sexism in almost all her novels. For African American artists, the past and the present are interdependent. Their works have the potential of healing any individual or collective identity through the remembrance of the ancestors. Ancestors are the collective repository of wisdom that provides direction and inspiration to establish moral and ethical standards as precedents of the race.

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personalities. Their recollection about their origin leads to a new kind of wholeness in them. Their becoming whole through recollection is as inevitable as breath for men and women of all ethnicities throughout the world.

Walker places women in the traditional role. They use their imagination to recollect the omitted past. Their dissociation from the past deprives them from becoming whole, because they have forgotten their kinship with the entire creation of animals, plants and humans. The novel revolves around the overlapping histories and it mainly pivots on three couples which span three continents and thousands of years of evolution and it is through the specific situation of these six characters that Walker gets her message across. These characters touch one another's lives and also they recollect many things from their past.

Walker explores the depth of human characters, history and legends in the novel. It is the story of love and lives of three couples, the popular musician Arveyda, his wife Carlotta, a college teacher of women's studies, Suwelo, a history professor and Fanny, Suwelo's wife, and the elderly black couple, Miss Lissie and Mr. Hall who are the friends of Suwelo's uncle Rafe. Arveyda, Carlotta, Suwelo and Fanny belong to Walker's generation and they tell their past in order to look back their youth. All the characters gradually become familiar with one another mainly because their situations are similar in several respects. At the beginning of the novel each character is dissociated except Lissie, as they all struggle with a destructive fear or conflict in their lives. The novel relates the process of their striving as Dieke states, "For the demonstrable values of oneness, wholeness and unity as opposed to dialectical tension, exclusivity and separateness" (508).

Walker begins the novel with the introduction of Zede and her daughter Carlotta, who escapes from the terrorism of South America and both of them settle in San Francisco where Zede runs a fashionable boutique. Zede is a traveller in time, who knows many generations of her own. She remembers her ancestors who were brought from Africa to Latin America and then to the United States. Howard establishes, "To achieve wholeness, they each must journey back through the past to pick up (retrieve) those pieces of themselves that they have lost" (142). It is through Zede, the situation of women in different centuries and continents is revealed. Zede, in moments of sadness gets dissociated and remembers her past. She experiences loneliness and sufferings in her life because she did not have a peaceful childhood. She was dissociated from her family as she was sold as a slave when she was a child.

Arveyda's music is praised by all because it has the spiritual power that gives him the status of a healer in the eyes of his followers. He often feels that his mother never truly cared for him. He is a dissociated character because he had a neglected childhood. Whenever he remembered or thought about his mother he was pained. When Carlotta saw Arveyda for the first time, she notices, "She saw it in the way he really looked at her, really saw her with the calm, detached concentration" (7). They fell in love and had two children Cedrico and Angelita.

Although he truly loves Carlotta, after a while Arveyda was attracted towards his mother-in-law Zede. This love has rooted because, "She is also an artist" (26). Zede accepts the love and goes on a trip to South America to find about Zede's past slave identity. Arveyda sings her a song in which he relates everything that Zede has told him on their trip about her past and her feelings for Carlotta:

He sang of the confusion and the terror of the mother: the scars she could never reveal to the child because they still hurt her so ... Arveyda sang softly of how much the mother, far away still, loved and missed the child. How grieved she was that she had hurt her. How she prayed the child would forgive her and one day consent to see her again ... He sang until Zede, small and tentative, was visible, a wisp, before her daughter. (126)

Arveyda really fulfils his function by reconnecting mother and daughter. He helps Carlotta to become whole, which she can do only by knowing her past. Carlotta like Arveyda never knows her father. On their trip, Zede tells Arveyda about her time as a slave in a nearby village and her relationship with her lover Jesus, a fellow slave. During her slavery she was forced to mate with soldiers according to their orders. When Zede fell in love with Jesus, they together defy their slave status by owning their sexuality. Their love affair was short lived, however when Zede went for the second time to meet Jesus in his hut, they were discovered together when she claimed to have conceived Carlotta. As a punishment, Jesus was tortured and killed in front of Zede and she was forced to watch. She was taken away and brutally raped by soldiers, one after another. Finally, in a harrowing culmination, "... as Zede lay bleeding, they brought his body and threw it in with me ... Jesus throat had been cut. They had also removed his genitals. He had been violated in every conceivable way" (74). They locked Zede nakedly in a tiny hut with the mutilated body of her lover, Jesus. After a while, Zede was rescued by their tribesmen and she succeeded in fleeing to a school run by gringos. From there she was helped to escape to the United States with Carlotta by the help of a rich girl, Mary Ann Haverstock.

Zede's life is a fine example of the tortured life of a slave. The black people were brought as slaves and they were compelled to work in the fields of the white's banana plantation. They had to struggle a lot for centuries to get their freedom. Almost all the characters in the novel experience suppression, especially Zede and her sale as a sale throws light on their suffering:

... a long chain connecting us by the feet a long one row, inverting ... there was no movement contested by one's neighbours, lack of sufficient food, lack of air and exercise – never had any of us been away from air and light. (69)

Zede is suppressed and she narrates her traumatic experiences to Arveyda, in order to find some solace. The painful memory of Zede's past unites her with Carlotta, her daughter. Carlotta, a young self conscious girl was betrayed by her husband and so she started her search for her identity. She was scared permanently and so she hated men. It is stated:

Carlotta felt she hated men; their disappearances and their absences and their smugness on return. She thought of the foolish Angel Claire and saw herself as Tess; she thought of Tea Cake and saw herself as Janie. She was convinced Helga Crane was a fool. She decided the only man in all of life and literature worth her admiration was Leonard Woolf. (123)

Later Carlotta had an affair with Suwelo as an outlet for her trauma. As she hated man in general, she was averse to physical relationship with Suwelo. When Fanny returned from Africa, Suwelo set aside Carlotta and he did not want to continue his relationship with her and left her giving her even deeper scars. She says, "I almost have no memory of the way [Suwelo] treated me. He was an episode in my life. But it is true,

when he dropped me – I was so destroyed, I was angry enough to kill” (376). As a woman, she was suppressed throughout her life but she overcomes her suppression by becoming an artist as bell chemist. She finds means to heal her wounds and she gets happiness by tackling her jeopardy of dissociation.

Walker also presents the saga of a black woman, Lyssie Lyles who has many births in different races at various times. Lissie is an extraordinary woman. Her name means, the one who remembers everything. Mckay mentions that Lissie is capable of remembering:

Her many past lives that have taken place from pre history to recent centuries and in which her race gender and even species are not fixed ... These past lives can be seen as Walker’s rewriting’s of the stories and creation – myths particularly the book of Genesis, through which Judeo-Christian culture came to understand its own origins. (255-56)

Lissie, the primary protagonist of the novel has gone through thirteen different lives. She is presented as a representative of many women, an African farmer, a slave woman, a lesbian, a pigmy in the forest and lion. Her story is about the world and black woman in particular. She is a discarded wife, but the love story of Lissie is described as passionate and perfect. Lissie and Hal had passionate relationship as husband and wife. Later, their love relationship got broken. Lissie got frustrated and she eloped with a married photographer, an already married man. Her affairs with many men were not satisfactory and she was suppressed by the men she encountered. Suppression of women is not a matter today, since ancient times in many cultures females were suppressed and tortured.

Lissie remembers in one of her lives, she was lucky enough to marry a man of her own choice. But then, because she was born without a hymen and there were no bloodstained sheets to show the villagers that her marriage was consummated, she was publicly denounced and insulted. She was forced into prostitution as a punishment, for people suspected that she had already lost her virginity before marriage. Later, she died of infection at the tender age of eighteen.

Lissie also recalls a time before Islam became the accepted religion of Africa, when Mother was an object of worship. She also narrates to Suwelo how Mother worship died out before hundreds of years in Africa. She narrates:

There were, in the earliest days, raids on the woman’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. The ones who were not forced were either executed or sold into a tribe whose language was different. The men had decided they would be creator and they went about dethorning women systematically. (63-64)

The fact reveals that even at such distant times, men had been cruel to women. In a systematic and organized manner, they went about trying to subjugate women to an inferior position. Soon after mother worship died, it became part of almost all cultures that patriarchy and male superiority became the accepted norm. And slowly, through the years, women have continued to be ill treated by the males. Her incarnations in different bodies and times have helped her to understand the existence of past, present and future, as she herself declares connectedness to all three planets. Lissie’s memory allows her to

recount the multiple stories of her successive past as white or black women or men that extend in a revisionary fashion through the whole history of mankind.

Lissie's voice as her ancestor and her memory extend to a distant past, where animals and humans lived in harmony as familiars. But her life on earth was worse than that of animals. When Lissie's father died of heart attack, she was two years old. It was the responsibility of her uncle to look after her and her family according to their custom. But the male supremacy did not allow him to show any sympathy to them. She and her family, "... lived in a poor little hut off by itself and out of sight of my uncle's compound. There were four huge men squatting at the edge of the Okra patch ..." (61-62). Lissie's uncle mercilessly sold them as slaves. Her mother entreated him to have mercy on them. But the hardhearted uncle was not moved. As a result, the family had to live in a pathetic condition. Her mother's pleas for mercy went unheeded. Lissie narrates, " My mother was just begging and pleading and calling for mercy, because she knew about the slaves, but these brutes had no ears" (62). She believes that, no story in the world is complete and authentic without a black woman's story. Lissie illustrates her mother's story to show how they were suppressed by the superiors. In Walker's words:

To sell woman and children for whom you no longer wished to assume and responsibility or to sell those who were mentally infirm or who had in some way offended you, became a new tradition, an accepted way of life. (64)

Lissie's oppressive present is a contrast to her distant past when she was having affinity with animals. In her incarnations she was respected and adored and this recollection gives her strength to become whole.

Fanny, the daughter of Olivia and Ola considers marriage as slavery because she is trapped in an unsatisfying marriage. Fanny is a spiritual woman but her relationship with Suwelo is problematic. Every time Fanny tries to help Suwelo to see things from her perspective, Suwelo bluntly refuses:

[Fanny] was always trying to get [Suwelo] to read books that, to his way of thinking, had nothing to do with his own life. He was a teacher; he taught American history. He read enough. Besides, he had never read a book by a woman... But he didn't want to change the way he thought of Africa. Besides, when he wanted insight into Africa, he'd read a man. (177)

Suwelo also tried to get Fanny to fit in his view of women. He wanted her to dance to his tunes even in the master of dressing. Differences and incapability to understand each other and the inner struggles of Fanny lead her to put an end to their marriage. Later, they lived together in harmony in a house, which symbolizes the new idea of living in relationship. She lays down the condition for her love life. She says, "If isn't about not loving you. I will always love you probably, but I don't want to be married" (139). Fanny is not against love relationship between men and women, but she disapproves the notions of formal marriage. She loves Suwelo, but she does not want Suwelo to be owned by her or vice versa. She wants to have a free and amicable relationship with Suwlo. Fanny is portrayed as a womanist who wants to put an end to the enslavement of black women at the hands of the black men.

Fanny has access to spiritual nourishments and she has contact with spirits. She is so angry with the whites that she wants to kill them. Her father Ola advises her that

killing the oppressors does not free one psychologically but to harmonize her own heart she has to nourish her flesh and spirit mutually. So her anger against the whites is subdued and she is able to harmonize her relationship with Suwelo. As Sol argues:

Families, tribes and cultures are of primary importance to the novel, both in the ways that they support the various characters and in the ways in which the characters choose to perpetuate them... The importance of a culture beyond the individual is most clearly demonstrated by the way that story telling brings the characters to a new understanding of the world and their places in it. Fanny, Carlotta, Suwelo and Arveyda all need to come to terms with the stories of their parents. They seem to be adrift until they learn where their roots are. (396)

Each character has to reconcile with the past, their painful memories of childhood, the betrayals in their love affairs, short comings and grave mistakes or the gender, racist discriminations.

Walker tries to convey that all individuals should remember their ancestors who made their history. However old and faded, the knowledge and acknowledgement of the past adds strength to one's present life. Lissie establishes a new community of renewed freedom through the recovery of her past, remembrance of the ancestors, reconstructing the neglected matriarchal values and recovering origins by interlinking the past and present. These are the few ways to get reconciliation. The character in the novel gets emotionally and spiritually healed by understanding the relationship between the past and the present.

Many African women are humbled to the life of restrictions in their lives as slaves. Walker envisages an anti-racist and anti-sexist cultural practice in the world to enable men and women to live in a new atmosphere. In spite all the jeopardies, the blacks should create a new world where all the polarities like black and white, master and slave, men and women are resolved and all lead a life of harmony, fraternity and equality

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