

# Mapping the Black Culture in Alice Walker's

## *The Temple of My Familiar*

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Culture is an influential human device which covers the full range of socially transmitted behaviour patterns, art forms, beliefs, institutions and all other products of human work and thought. According to Edward B. Tylor, an English Anthropologist the term “culture” was used in *Primitive Culture* as “a complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society”(Web). Hoebel describes culture as “an integrated system of learned behaviour patterns which are characteristic of the members of the society and which are not a result of biological inheritance”(Web). Literature and culture are intermingled and mutually influential. Very often, literature becomes a site where cultural patterns are displayed or even transmitted them from one generation to the other.

In the multicultural American society various social groups contribute their unique cultural aspects to the general American culture. Of the numerous cultural groups, African American is more influential which is also known as black culture. This culture is both distinct and enormously influential to American culture as a whole. African-American culture is rooted in Africa. Although slavery greatly restricted the ability of Americans of African descent to practise their cultural traditions, many practices, values, and beliefs survived and over the time have modified or blended with the white culture and other cultures such as that of Native Americans. The result is a unique and dynamic black culture that continues to have a profound impact on mainstream American culture, as well as global culture.

Many of the traditions and cultural habits of the African American are a mixture of traditional African beliefs and customs and those created and adapted by the African ancestors brought to America during slavery. In this way culture refers to a set of norms and behaviours that are common to many African Americans. Song styles, fashion, cooking, historical imagery and artifacts, beauty trends, and use of language are all aspect of any culture. (Web)

Elaborate rituals and ceremonies are a significant part of African Culture. For many years African American culture developed separately from European American culture, both because of slavery and the persistence of racial discrimination in America, as well as African-American slave descendants' desire to create and maintain their own traditions. Today, African-American culture has become a significant part of American culture and yet, at the same time, remains a distinct cultural body. African cultures, slavery, slave rebellions, and the civil rights movements have shaped African-American religious, familial, political, and economic behaviours.

African American women writers find consolation in including their distinct culture within their stream of writing. They deal not only with the psychological changes of the people, but also with the cause for such changes and its ailments. Women writers like Toni Morrison, Gloria

Naylor, Maya Angelou and Alice Walker find place in literature for their valid contribution for cultural, racial and sexual issues.

Alice Walker's novel *The Temple of My Familiar* has a valid role in portraying the unique African-American culture. In the novel, the status of being an artist is linked with the process of development most of the characters have to go through. Walker has depicted in her work that multiculturalism as complements or even alternatives to the mono-cultural scenario of the mainstream ideology.

A close examination of her work unveils not merely the attention that Walker pays to the pain in Black people's lives but also reveals the fact that there has been a development in her stance from that of a protester against racism or gender discrimination to that of an advocated of peaceful co-existence through multicultural living. (Nayak 59)

The novel, *The Temple of My Familiar* is an array of incidents of various characters who are portrayed to reveal their self in relation to their culture. The characters weave together their past and present in a luminously complicated tapestry of tales. Lissie narrates her past experiences to Suwelo, who has gone to his natives in search of his real spirits. His depressed mind gets cure when he has acquainted with his native culture and realises the hypocrisy of the present life. The problems of Suwelo and Fanny obtains reinforcement when they are accustomed themselves with their real culture. Another pair Arveyda, a musician and his wife Carlotta, whose mother had to flee her homeland, entangles each other when comes to know of his past and sings the music of his homeland to flourish the frozen heart of Carlotta. Hal in the novel is an artist and a story teller who narrates numerous experiences about the past to revive Suwelo. Together, they tell the story of the dispossessed and displaced, peoples whose history is ancient and whose future not yet clear.

Each of the characters in the novel is either an artist from the beginning, or becomes one in their process of spiritual development. Zede, the elder, mother of Zede is a 'bell chemist' and a tailor, Zede, the mother of Carlotta is a tailor as well, Arveyda is a musician, Hal a painter, Lissie a painter and a storyteller, Ola is a playwright, Eleandra was a painter, Nzingha's mother made murals in their hut, Fanny becomes a massager, in her case, an art – and a playwright, Suwelo takes up carpentry, Carlotta becomes "a musician, a bell chimist" (377) just like her grandmother.

Walker elucidates that even people from other countries are attracted towards African culture. Eleanora Burnham, a great aunt of Mary Jane Briden, a writer expresses her experience during a visit to Africa. She is much impressed by their cultural and food habits in particular which lead to the strength of those people. She also imitates those things in her life. "The walls of the room were lively with beautifully fierce African masks and long beaded fly whisks. There were also a couple of rat-eaten and sweat-stained 'bwana' hats" (213). Burnham also recollects the secret of the hundred years living of the natives. "The grains they eat is so alive that if they planted it instead of eating it. . . . They eat fruit, grains, which they make into porridge, and root crops. They eat a lot of boiled greens and okra, both of which grow wild. They eat little or no meat, . . . they handle it as if it is offensive" (215).

Walker as an influential writer presents the sub cultural activities of African American life. The subculture of the African Americans undergoes a lot of changes when the characters realise their ancestry. They respond to the words of their inner selves. In the novel an artist has to do with one's own development as listening to their inner selves can be a prime source of inspiration for artists. As Carlotta informs Suwelo:

It was the story about my grandmother, Zede the Elder, who created the capes made of feathers for the priests; the woman who taught my own mother how to make beautiful feathered things. She had been a great artist, and she had had a little chime outside the door of her hut. She would strike it, and listen closely to it, and if the sound corresponded with the vibration of her soul at the time, she would nod, once – Arveyda told me Zede told him – and begin to create. (402)

Carlotta's grandmother, Zede is "a sewing magician. . . . She was the creator of clothing, especially capes, made of feathers. These capes were worn by dancers and musicians and priests at traditional village festivals and had been worn for countless generations"(3). Zede made caps and clothes made of feathers to Arveyda.

Walker describes how an artist, being a musician experiences the social function of informing people at large as a cultural revisioning. It becomes a part in the music of Arveyda. Something amazing happened when he sits on the stones given by Zede. He starts strumming the guitar that makes the people see their innate strength of their culture and enables them to display their individuality to their beloveds. As Arveyda puts it:

Artists, he now understood, were simply messengers. On them fell the responsibility for uniting the world. An awesome task, but he felt up to it, in his own life. His faith must be that the pain he brought to others and to himself – so poorly concealed in the information delivered – would lead not to destruction, but to transformation. (125)

Arveyda begins to sing gently to his wife and children about a county that wear green clothes, a land of rivers and boats, pods of dried vanilla beans. People with humble beginning do hunting, fishing, praying and making love. He sings of the red parrot feather in their ears, three insignificant stones. Also he sings of the cruelties and oppression of the blacks by the whole. Arveyda sings about Zede to her daughter, Carlotta. He wants to open the numbness of Carlotta's heart. Sings the courage of Zede "her pride in not burdening her child with an unbearable history"(126), and her true humbleness. It is the song which shapes the mind of Carlotta, she looks at Arveyda with a tear-filled eyes. He knows "he was singing for their lives. A true artist, the one whom God shows, he knew he dared not doubt the power of his song"(127).

Walker portrays the life of Lissie through three stages of evolution in her life. According to Indu K. Mallah, "one has the feeling of being given an all-embracing, holistic over-view, which spans both time and space. Miss Lissie reminisces about living in forests that seemed to cover the whole earth, playing under trees like cathedrals, and of consorting with her animal cousins, in one of her previous incarnations"(26). Lissie is incarnated as the first white-skinned creature, a man with insufficient melanin, who flees the heat of Africa for Europe. Hating the sun, he invents an alternative god in his own image, cold and filled with rage.

'Over time, if he didn't pawn it, the thing on my neck or arm would start talking to me. Especially whenever one of them looked at it. It took me years to understand that they knew that on my careless skinny, or fat, white arm I was wearing all the history, art, and culture of their own people that they and their children would ever see.' There was a pause, 'Gold,' said Miss Lissie thoughtfully, 'the white man worships gold because it is the sun he has lost.'"(359)

Walker portrays how cultural patterns reach its height when Africans consider women as goddesses. Lissie also expresses Hal's love towards her as "even when our passion for each other was at its height, Hal loved me like sister/mystic/warrior/woman/mother . . . . knowing me to

contain everybody and everything, loved me wholeheartedly, as a goddess. Which I was”(376). The ancient African culture celebrates women as goddess and Lissie enumerates this through the words of Hal. The episodes from the life of the women folk when Lissie is incarnated as woman give some idea of the sweep of the myth. Walker recounts, a myth that presents the places assigned to man and woman. In Walker's counter myth, Africa is the cradle of true religion and civilization. Lissie feels proud that for thousand years their personalities are known and appreciated by many. She narrates:

The last people on earth who had any real comprehension of our essence are themselves faded into myth, but at least before they faded completely they erected the sphinx... There are also' – Miss Lissie chuckled – 'those accounts one hears of the free-roaming lions that frequently startled visitors to Haile Selassie's palace in Ethiopia.(371)

Walker points out the strength and resilience of African women by presenting them as they face the challenges of life and overcome. Fanny and her sister Nzingha discuss the missing history of the Africans in the history books. The backwardness of the Africans are recorded in terms of their problems, “never in terms of its contributions or its centuries of oppression under whites”(268). Nzingha becomes furious and presents that “repressed anger of the African women, silent for so long . . . an enormous store house of energy and wondered whether the women knew they owned it. Anger can also be a kind of wealth, she thought”(268). She also connects the anger with the myth of Medusa, her snakelike locks of hair presented as real snakes. “Everywhere in Africa a symbol of fertility and wisdom”(269). She is considered by the Africans as the “Great Mother, Creator of All, Protector of All, the Keeper of the Earth. *The Goddess*”(269). It seems that the secret of the strength of women in Africa lies in benevolence of their goddess.

The impact of Lissie's revelations upon modern black consciousness is traced in the lives of Fanny, Celie's granddaughter and her former husband, Suwelo, a middle-class academic. O'Niel opines that “for most people, it is as if their learned behavior was biologically inherited. . . .when they come into contact with people from another culture that they become aware that their patterns of behaviour are not universal. . . . Alien cultural traits are often viewed as being not just different but inferior and less sensible, and even “unnatural”(Web n.pg). Suwelo finds his authentic self by absorbing Lissie's message; Fanny finds hers by opening herself to her dreams - her archetypal memories - and by journeying back to meet her African kinfolk.

Families, tribes, and cultures are of primary importance in the novel, *The Temple of My Familiar*. The blacks 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 storytelling brings the characters to a new understanding of the world and their place in it. Fanny, Carlotta, Suwelo, and Arveyda all need to come to terms with the stories of their parents; they seem to be floating until they learn where their roots are.

Only after having heard about her mother's past and feelings from Arveyda, Carlotta can start to heal and to find happiness again. According to Nayak,

Arveyda, the rock star with whose destiny their lives get connected, comes from a broken family. Though his music is life ‘medicine’, deep within his heart, Arveyda is lost, confused and divided. He is “part African/scots and part Blackfoot” (391) and has had an unhappy relationship with his “whirling dervish”(12) of a mother”(50).

They change shockingly. First of all, Carlotta stops teaching and becomes an artist. Just like Zedé's mother, Zedé the elder, Carlotta becomes a bell chemist. In addition, she also loses her feminine

look. She cuts her hair “nearly to my skull and standing out like a concentration-camp victim’s? or is it my tight black running suit and teal Reeboks?” (378).

Carlotta and Arveyda start living together again, even though Carlotta lives in a separate house behind Arveyda’s. They enjoy each other’s company, behave very cordially towards each other and make music together. It is during this last stage that the couple befriends Suwelo and Fanny. Arveyda develops a close bond with Fanny, who admires him as an artist for years already.

In the same way, Carlotta and Suwelo reconnect to each other. They tell each other about their parents and Suwelo observes how Carlotta is happy for the first time: “But she is happy. This is the biggest surprise of all. Where is that wailing he remembered? the insecurity? the wringing of hands? the prayer? the gnashing of teeth?” (383). It seems both Carlotta and Arveyda have found peace. Walker clearly outpours how the cultural bondage breaks when they realize their roots and get consolation through their own culture.

Suwelo realises that there are better things than teaching American history and watching football on television.

Once Suwelo reconnects with his parents, he gives up teaching “such lies”: he can no longer take American history at its face-value since it is highly biased in favour of the White male and has silenced other voices which attempt to find expression. Suwelo’s wife Fanny too goes through the same motions of suffering and self-realization; but in her case it is the direct confrontation with racism and sexism that fragments her.(Nayak 51)

By the end of the novel, *The Temple of My Familiar*, Suwelo has rejoined Fanny and lives with her in a house shaped like a bird, in which they have separate wings. In which she finds some uniqueness that directs her to the native place as well as the freedom she craves much. As for Fanny:

The women in her consciousness-raising group had taught her how to masturbate. Suddenly she'd found herself free. Sexually free, for the first time in her life. At the same time, she was learning to meditate, and was throwing off the last clinging vestiges of organized religion. She was soon meditating and masturbating and finding herself dissolved into the cosmic All. Delicious.(389)

The pattern is reiterated in the relationship between Suwelo the Black-American professor who teaches American history and his wife Fanny whose father was an African revolutionary. Though alienated once even from her own family, they come together and are transformed spiritually to live together in harmony.

While both the Arveyda-Carlotta and the Fanny Suwelo relationships suffer from fragmentation due to alienation from roots, the Lissie-Hal-Rafe relationships upholds the values of rootedness, love and care, since they love one another “just exactly as they are”(99). All of them belong to the Charleston Islands and their lives are knit together in same place from their earliest days. They enjoy an inner security and harmony.( Nayak 51-52)

Cultural bondage chained even women who are very bold. They adopt a vent through which they imagine and fulfil their wishes from the clutches of cultural bondage. Lissie, one of the main characters has gone through thirteen lives at least, in which she has been pygmy, a white woman an inmate of a North African harem, an enslaved negroes and even a lion. “She has been many women: an African peasant sold into slavery by her uncle, subjected to the horrors of the Atlantic crossing, raped and brutalized; a Moorish witch burned by the inquisition; a lesbian living in a harem, a



pygmy living in a prehistoric forest that covered the whole earth etc”(Ranveer 125). In the outset of the novel, Walker nostalgically portrays the matriarchal culture in which Zede lived and in which female creativity was revered. Walker reconstructs the creative power and strength of women which had been lost to be the brute strength of men in the course of history.

Walker highlights the peaceful coexistence of the sexes which was the norm of African culture. Another cultural breakthrough of M’Sukta, “the little woman who carried me to Africa”(228), scribbled by Eleanora Burnham in her diary. Mary Jane who is thrilled to find out truths gets into the life of M’Sukta who was in ties for the portrayal of the culture of Africa in America. “M’Sukta’s industry in the solitude of captivity impressed me strongly”(229). The ancient saying of M’Sukta’s people is that: “THEY CANNOT KILL US, BECAUSE WITHOUT US THEY DIE... the primitive philosophy of ‘The Savage in the Stacks,’ as a local paper referred to M’Sukta, assuming, ignorantly, that a museum is a library”(231). M’Sukta says that the words that she converses gives her enthusiasm and feels proud of the gift offered to her by her ancestors. To hear her own language she sings, to see her tribal cloths she weaves. It gives her a feeling of satisfaction that she is one with her native culture. In times of her sadness and sickness, her language becomes a backdrop as a miracle.

Similarly the portrayal of strong black women characters like Lissie, Fanny and Carlotta is pluralistic in nature as the women undergoes ‘sea-changes’. Further a true multicultural womanist society would be a non oppressive one where in the women like Lissie, Carlotta or Fanny too could be as self -assertive as the men and not merely endure. The fact that Fanny takes such a service-oriented, low-prestige job when she had solid academic credentials is a wonder of Carlotta. Braendlin opines that:

Recalling their mothers, the women rediscover and reclaim lost ties with their female heritage: . . . that respect individuality in community. The dissipation of anger releases the mothers from personal blame and responsibility for adult children’s problems and affirms female love and nurturance- the lessons of matriarchal prehistory.(56)

The characters of the novel, *The Temple of My Familiar* represent individual and group beliefs, values and versions of reality which are in conflict with those who dominate culture and the traditional canon. Junior Zede remembers how her mother goes to a separate hut with mud walls and a grass roof for her work. She gets inspiration in a special mud hut. “My mother, you know, smoked people, . . . if she agreed with the sound, she would nod, once, and then she would begin. ‘She made capes and headdresses of great beauty, and she did it truly as if by magic’(47).

In *The Temple of My Familiar* different sorts of communication are present: dialogues, letters, tape recordings, fragments of a diary, paintings, music, stories, etc. Using these different means of communication the characters strive to receive their native culture at all stages. They share their insights, but also reach new ones talking and listening to each other. At the end of the novel, “they all vaguely realize they have a purpose in each other’s lives. They are a collective means by which each of them will grow. They don’t discuss this, but it is felt strongly by all. There is palpable trust.” (398)

Walker as an African-American womanist writer, places the predicament of black women in its historical perspective. Throughout her writings she has tried to highlight cultural issues pertaining to the life of Africans in the cultural bondage in order to go back to their roots. So that they can ultimately be themselves. In fact, “Walker creates such a world of black men and women based on equality and mutual understanding and peaceful co-existence which is full of happiness

and prosperity”(Ranveer 134). She rejuvenates the life of ancient Africans by giving prominence to their culture which strengthens the African American mass wherever they are to follow their subculture. Walker visualizes the culture of Africans which is the embodiment of love, freedom and life, an entity for the African Americans to survive throughout.

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