

## Remember is the Key to Redemption

### -- Memory Writing in Alice Walker's *The Temple of My Familiar*

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#### Abstract

Memory is a key point in Alice Walker's *The Temple of My Familiar*. The focus of memory in this novel is set on a magic figure, Miss Lissie who remembers her previous lives dating back to a time before humanity even existed. Here Lissie is more a narrative device fused with individual and collective memory than a character in the realistic sense. By retelling her ancient memory, other protagonists in the novel who suffered from spiritual lost and mental disturbance resulted from unknown of their past start to search for their origin, and finally realize the wholeness. This paper aims to explain the significance of looking to the past and revaluing the present, and signifies the channel of effective dialogues with self and history through searching for the past.

#### Keywords

Alice Walker, *The Temple of My Familiar*, Memory.

#### 1. Introduction

The discourse on memory in Alice Walker's work, in her fiction as well as in her essays, is obvious. Among her novels, the one published in 1989 *The Temple of My Familiar* deeply reflects Walker's memory awareness. J.M. Coetzee describes this novel as "a mixture of mythic fantasy, revisionary history, exemplary biography and sermon." *The Temple of My Familiar* presents a collage of wounded characters. By the end of the novel, each one has recovered by embracing some lost part of herself or himself. Walker here reveals her reverence towards history and ancestor. Only by looking toward them and remembering the kinship to all the creation can human being become whole.

#### 2. Individual Memory: An Exhibition of 500,000 History

Memory structures *The Temple of My Familiar* in many ways, mainly symbolized through a unique figure—Miss Lissie whose name is deliberately chosen as signifying "the one who remembers everything." She believes to have incarnated multiple times transcending time and space. Her life seems like a tale with no beginning and no end. Suwolo confirms that: "You are a spirit that has had many bodies, and you travel through time and space that way" (Walker, 243). She responds, "Suwelo, in addition to being a man, and white, which I was many times after the time of which I just told you, I was also, at least once, myself a lion" (Walker, 364).

In Lissie's numerous dreams, the most spectacular scene is her memory of former lives which provides the history of black womanhood. In her story in the novel, Lissie recalls a time when Mother was an object of worship. Lissie wrote to Suwelo, "The first witches to die at the stake were the daughters of the Moors... And it was they (or, rather, we) let the Goddess of Africa 'pass' into the modern world as 'the Black Madonna.' ... whole families in Africa who worshiped the Goddess were routinely killed, sold into slavery, or converted to Islam at the point of the sword."

Merlin Stone writes in *When God Was a Woman*: “The theory that most societies were originally matrilineal, matriarchal and even polyandrous (one woman with several husbands) was the subject of several extensive studies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. [...] They suggested that all societies had to pass through matriarchal stage before becoming patriarchal and monogamous, which they appear to have regarded as a superior stage of civilization. (33)

Stone reminds us that the study of ancient female-centered religion is not a radical feminist idea. Likewise, Miss Lissie’s submerged history of the displacement of the Goddess by patriarchy is not merely Walker’s womanist idea. But it is a means for us to turn toward our own past in order to reflect and reevaluate the present system. Once, black women are regarded as goddesses, not witches. Once, animals are treated as familiars, not pets. Once, everything is equal and natural, not labeled into superior and inferior. However, in the nineteenth century when scientific racism and Darwinism pervaded, those interests often support the exploitation of the natural world by empire, patriarchy and the idea of progress. The creation of Lissie clearly reverses this evolutionary superiority and reminds of the past harmonious condition.

Lissie’s memory also relates the oppression inflicted upon the inhabitants of Africa and the American South, the subjugation of women by all men, and the patriarchal powers that suppress ancient African deities. However, Walker not only wants to present the oppression of racism and sexism. By comparing Lissie with other protagonists who all seem to be the victims of amnesia—forget their kinship with the entire creation of animals, plants and humans, Walker attempts to recall the memory that enable them live a responsible lives. Therefore, through the pursuit of forgotten collective memory, they have obtained redemption and completed wholeness.

### 3. Oblivion: Crisis of Identity

The novel presented four young protagonists, all of whom are in a condition of spiritual lost and mental disturbance. Arveyda, a rock star, falls in love with his mother-in-law; his wife Carlotta is deeply hurt and unable to extricate herself from that betrayal. Suwelo, teaching history in college, goes wrong with his marriage and career; his wife Fanny, a woman falling in love with spirit, is constantly troubled by her inner world.

As an African-American teacher of history, Suwelo is typically male-centered. Although he has admitted that “His generation of men had failed women”(Walker, 28), he is still unwilling and shows no interests in doing anything to change that situation. When it comes to his career, Suwelo finds it unnecessary to deal with other aspects of history than male side: “He wanted American history, the stuff he taught, to forever be in the center of everyone’s attention. What a few white men wanted, thought, and did. For he liked the way he could sneak in some black men’s faces later on... But now to have consider American women writers and Kalahari Bushen! It seemed a bit too much. (Walker, 203)

This incapability also extends into his private life characterized by a refusal to understand his wife’s perspective and by an oblivious attitude toward his own personal past, resulting in constant conflict. At the beginning of the novel, Suwelo deliberately cut off from the past. He wouldn’t like to recall anything about his parents whose terrible relationship and death shrouded in his life. As for the relationship with Fanny, Suwelo finds her incomprehensible: “Fanny is a body with many spirits shooting off to different realm almost every day”(Walker, 243). He also confronted with confusion in the affair with Carlotta, only taking her as sexual tool and admits that she “had no substance” for him (Walker, 237).

Fanny Nzingha’s name, given by her grandmother Celie who appears in the novel *The Colour Purple*, means freedom. As her name directs, in this novel she makes all efforts to gain her freedom. Fanny defines marriage as a bonding of souls so complete that nothing a preacher

could say about men putting it asunder has any relevance, and the marriage ceremony becomes a hypocrisy performed for the sake of the state.

Walker describes Fanny as a victim of racism who sees racism everywhere she looks and whose characteristic response is a thought of violence. She tells her therapist about the shining, gold-handled sword that is constantly not in her hand but in her look about her visions of blond heads rolling into the gutter. Due to fear of the inner murderer, Fanny kept aloof from the world, preferring the safer company of her spirit lovers. In fact it is Fanny's feeling toward whites. She envisions whites as always eating: "When I see them eating, I feel myself to be very hungry. Skin and bones. And I feel their teeth on my leg, only a cold chain. I am relieved to see it is not their teeth, only a chain, I think that when they called us 'cannibals' they were projecting" (Walker, 314).

Carlotta came to the United States with her mother Zede, from South America. Her mother's embarrassment to talk about her South America past, however, prevents Carlotta from knowing specifics about her origin. When her husband, Arveyda, admits the affair with Zede, Carlotta's jealousy makes her even further from her mother and thus from the source of knowledge about the past and about herself. The pain she carries like a physical burden: "Sometimes I felt people could tell what had happened just by looking at me. I felt I'd been in a terrible accident that had scarred me" (Walker, 324) originates less from Arveyda's betrayal than from her subsequent willful isolation from Zede. The absence of her past enables Carlotta to withdraw herself from the hurting forbidden relationship and masquerade herself with self-abusive high heels, tight shirt and miniskirts, refusing to think about her situation.

The dissociation from their individual past threw shadow on their interior and prevented them from becoming whole. However, though retelling her story, Lissie guided these protagonists directly or indirectly to searching their individual pasts as well as tying them to a collective framework.

#### 4. Remembrance: Looking for Past

Past is the core of Walker's creative imagination, she said "I think my whole program as a writer is to deal with history just so I know where I am. I can't move through time in any other way, since I have strong feelings about history and the need to bring it along. One of the scary things is how much of the past, especially our past, gets forgotten" (Tate, 185). In this novel, looking for the past is a process of growth, especially for the characters. Their quest for indentity is the personal effort to recapture the past as a significant element in the present experience.

The previously unknown meanings of the past were initiated through Suwelo's encounter with Lissie. He learns how to address his immediate past and also to deal with his relationship to women in general, particularly with Fanny.

Lissie administers to Suwelo through stories which challenge almost every aspect of his view of himself, of history and women. Suwelo is prone to believe Lissie's alternative versions of history, because her knowledge processes the authority of recalled experience: "I was talking to an African scholar one time... he got talking about how much of a cliché it was when black people here claimed their ancestors were sold into slavery by an uncle... I didn't say anything to him... But anyway, it was my uncle who sold me" (Walker, 75).

Furthermore, her stories depict critical situations in human development which make Suwelo recognize his own mistakes easily, as in Lissie's tale on the introduction of the notion of personal property and the subsequent disruption of gender harmony. Suwelo's own mistake of claiming Fanny as property, by insisting on the continuation of their marriage is a modern parallel to Lissie's story. Her husband, Hal, who shares Lissie with their mutual best friend while raising children, gives Suwelo a practical model of how to reinterpret the traditional notion of manhood. A combination of all these factors forces Suwelo to reexamine his past,

ultimately arriving at a new knowledge of how to master his relationship with Fanny. As he reaches a deeper awareness of what has gone wrong in his recent past, he achieves the power of telling others about it

Fanny's journey into the past allows her to be free of an obsessive fantasy of beheading White people. She cannot abate relieve her own suffering until she had indentified the root. Firstly, she tries to contact with her white childhood friend, Tanya, who helps her discover the cause of her violent fantasies that had lied hidden in the depth of Fanny's mind: "My grandmother was watching... she lumbered over us, and she slapped you so hard she knocked you down... you were holding you head between your hands as if you were afraid it would fall off... And she said, if I ever catch you putting your black mouth on Tanya again, I'll knock your little black head off" (Walker, 365).

After identifying the source of her obsession, she endeavors to prevent the hurtful future occurrence. Then, she takes on the journey to the African country Olinka with her mother, Olivia. It became a trip into the past, for here, she faced the unacceptable fact that she was born as a result of her father Ola's rape of Olivia, and meets him for the first time. Fanny discovers that Olivia was a revolutionary in Africa, dismissed by her male-centered colleagues after the revolution because of her gender. She also learns that Africa's present problems are mostly the result of the same ignorance that encouraged White Europeans to enslave Africans: a disregard of the connection of all creation and of the respect that is due to all its manifestations. With this new knowledge in mind, Fanny no longer split the boundary between oppressors and victims, according to race, especially after she has met her father's new White wife who owned an art school for retarded children in Olinka. "I'd no idea a white person, especially a white woman, would touch upon my life so meaningfully" (Walker, 386) marks Fanny's ultimate victory over her own stereotypes which have made her life unbearable.

For Carlotta, the betrayal courtship between Arveyda and Zede turns out to be beneficial for Arveyda who acts as a medium between the mother and daughter: "Arveyda, who held on to her as she talked, not as a lover, but as the ear that might at last reconnect her to the worl"(Walker, 57). Once Carlotta found her mother's story and about her own father by way of Arveyda, she uses the only evidence of her father's existence, namely a pair of parrot feathers and stones in order to reconnect to her past:"she began to wear the feathers... She took the stones...out and casually placed them in the original formation... beneath the arching overhang of a giant California live-oak tree... Beneath this tree she began... to eat her lunch, do yoga stretches, run in place, and meditate and pray. It was after she began wearing the new necklace that she started, for the fist time in years, to dream" (Walker, 227)

Carlotta also healed herself by shedding the stereotypically feminine clothing and chose more comfortable one. She has completed the process of becoming whole by contacting the male facet of herself, thus balancing the extremely feminine emphasis of her former identity.

Each character learns that "remembrance is the key to redemption." Moreover, each journey into the past promotes another. At the end of the novel, they realized that they are a collective and lived together. By connecting with the past, and growing with each other, finally leads to the redemption.

## 5. Conclusion

Alice Walker calls her work "a romance of the last 500,000 years", and she is therefore presenting "the other side" of a culturally accepted story and presents a means to reconcile with the past. Walker's special relationship with Zora Neale Hurston as literary foremother illustrated her emphasis on the importance of ancestry and heritage. She does follow such conception in *The Temple of My Familiar*, "The books I have produced carry forward the thoughts that I feel the ancestor were trying to help me pass on" (Walker, 95). Walker considers

literature a healer, and this novel by steeping us into the past as related by Lissie and by offering us the characters' transform through the memory, presents the magic power of remembrance leading to redemption.

## References

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