

# EMPOWERMENT THROUGH SELF-IDENTITY IN ALICE WALKER'S THE TEMPLE OF MY FAMILIAR AND THE COLOR PURPLE

*Dr Karthikkumar. S.*  
*Assistant Professor of English*  
*Annamalai University*  
*Tamilselvam*  
*PhD Research Scholar(Part*  
*Time)Bharathiar University,*  
*Coimbatore*

Alice Walker's novels deal with human experience in general, but especially the human experience from the perspective of the suffering and the downtrodden, the hurt and the oppressed. Many of her characters are victims of racial, sexual and economic oppression and exist under degrading circumstances. Nevertheless, these characters, particularly women, do not lie down and suffer passively in the face of such trauma. Rather they manage to transcend their desperate and painful circumstances in order to affirm life. Love in its various forms offers an avenue for regeneration and healing. Another source of empowerment is resistance. A third source of power is through connecting oneself to one's ancestral past for understanding the cultural history of the past "the song of the people" is necessary for an understanding of the present and for a sense of identity. As Walker writes in her novel *Meridian*: "For it is the song of the people, transformed by the experiences of each generation, that holds them together and if any part of it is lost the people suffer and are without soul." Central to Walker's thinking is the idea that all living things must love themselves, and try to be free and that spirit will eventually triumph over convention, no matter what the cost will be.

A central theme in the novel *The Temple of My Familiar* is the challenge marginalized people face everywhere in creating an identity. Being Walker's fourth novel *The Temple of My Familiar* reveals her interest in the ancestral past of her people. It features several characters of *The Colour Purple* and reflects some of the concerns of that novel- racism, a reverence for

nature and a search for spiritual truths. Patriarchal myths are traced back to their roots in ancient goddess worship and a society in which women are revered rather than oppressed. It is an experimental novel, blurring the distinction between fiction and essay, legend and history, fantastic vision and realistic fact. It stresses the need to get in touch with one's spirit and one's spiritual past as a way towards wholeness. It attempts to create a mythology that will help establish a strong sense of self needed to combat racism, sexism and violence.

Ancestral eternity in Walker's fiction undeniably opens a gateway to wisdom and cultural connectivity. Manifestations of infinite existence include Supreme Being directing the present generation to live in coordination and harmony. Ancient presence not only helps to resolve complex issues but also constructs a sublime identity where past and present is well assimilated. The concept of ancestry in Walker's fiction thus retains ambivalent relevance of African values and embodies continuous flow of cultural ethos. Ancestral presence in Walker's *The Temple of My Familiar* operates through the memory of Lissie, the protagonist who travels a world of endlessness, where animals and human beings cohabit in harmony. However, when the world today is torn with cut throat competition, materialism, malice and envy, such ideal living is of utmost importance. This mode of establishing values through ancestral eminence is innovative and also adds aesthetic beauty to presentation.

Memories are instrumental to create integrity in the world of time. It provides a shield to passing time in defiance of outward hurdles. In *The Temple of My Familiar*, Walker attempts to relocate the lost self. The prominent character of Lissie symbolizes inner identity in the context of exterior social, political and personal life. Walker's rhetorical strategy reveals the complexity of recollective art that helps to weave a pattern of past and present. Lissie as a corporal form of African ancestry ceaselessly walks through time and space. Her infinite physical presence through various forms as human, animals and birds manifests her ancestral familiarities. She talks about her previous births as a lion, as a bird and as a white male. Incorporating the experiences of her previous lives, Lissie admits that she "swallowed past experiences all her life". She strives to absorb herself into a timeless phenomenon and appears as a transcendent ancestral figure that encompasses the whole of human civilization. She is a repository of collective memory of past and present and communicates Walker's message that by boycotting our tradition and heritage, we cannot march ahead. An interaction between the

past and present and regeneration of ancestral wealth is indispensable. Walker seems to insist in developing an ambivalent bond between African culture of the past and the present.

Dimensions of democratized world of today are explicitly generated through creativity and legacy of blacks. Past and present are to be intertwined so that continuous flow of ever-growing human civilization on this planet may go on.

Another aspect of ancestral eternity in *The Temple of My Familiar* is projected through a myth that invented history of human civilization. Ancestry for Walker is eternal human experience. It also reflects an individual quest for identity and to recapture affinity with the present world. This communion between ancestral past and present milieu works through various channels including tribal and cultural ethos. Lissie serves a central symbol and traces human life to mythical dimensions with both its recession and growth. Fanny and her ex-husband Suwelo, a middle class academician find their authentic self by pursuing Lissie's message. Their journey to meet their African kinfolk becomes possible when they penetrate into ancestral inheritance through Lissie's dreams and archetypal memories. They could have lived better in bird shape houses and followed gospel of equality and human love. But it could be possible with ancient mode of value based practical life where animals and humans coexisted in perfect balance. Ancestral eternity in the novel is also reflected through culture oriented art of conversation and language that helps to establish an atmosphere of social and emotional relatedness and also reveals a spirit of eternal truth and beauty. Walker as an artist deliberately attempts to give a concrete form to the vision of supreme functioning that operates through the chain of universal existence. The novelist seems preoccupied with the belief that human soul is a part of the infinite. She plunges deep into the obscure regions of eternal universe and enables the reader to penetrate into eternal past which is greatly related to the vitality of present. The novel synthesizes various patterns of life so that a state of self-healing totality may be recaptured.

*The Color Purple* is a novel of celebration of the heroism of black women who fight to escape from the yoke of forced identities that drives them along paths they have not chosen. The title itself signifies "a celebration of the beauty, the pleasures of living and how that celebration is at the centre of spiritual and personal growth." It also symbolizes the spirit of black woman, and her sexuality, bold and committed. In the early chapters of *The Color Purple*, Celie, the protagonist, is shown as being raped, beaten and humiliated. Her defining quality is innocence,

and it is this innocence that subjects her to violation. Overworked, poorly dressed and denied an education, she suffers in silence, writing out letters addressed to God. To her 'pa' who tries to get rid of her now that she is no longer "fresh," she is no good than a mule or cow. To induce Mr. \_\_\_ to take Celie, he even throws a cow into the bargain and this seems to be one of the major reasons which persuade Mr. \_\_\_ to marry her. Celie's fear paralyzes her: "I don't even look at men. That's the truth. I look at women, tho, cause I'm not scared of them." These words of Celie states how timid and suppressed are her feelings that she didn't even dare to speak them out. Her life does not improve in any way after her marriage to Mr. \_\_\_, for he is another powerful male figure who becomes an agent of suffering. In fact, his unarticulated name suggests a fearful effacement of a personality too dangerous to reveal. His policy of letting women know who has the upper hand generally involves a "good sound beating." His oppression is not merely physical but mental and emotional. He uses his male sexuality to batter Celie, forcing intercourse on her so that Celie, forcing intercourse on her so that Celie becomes revolted at the idea of sex. But Celie cannot fight back. All she can do is survive passively.

The second stage in Celie's life begins when she recognizes the difference between her relationship with Mr. \_\_\_ and Sofia's with Harpo, with a dawning sense that female passivity is not the only possible response to male domination. Earlier she thought that surviving passively all the torments and pain is sensible than fighting. She says, "I think bout Nettie, dead. She fight, she run away. What good it do? I don't fight; I stay where I'm told. But I'm alive." She didn't even realize that one must not only survive, but survive without being splintered and degraded, survive "whole." She sees Sofia stand up for herself before Mr. \_\_\_ refusing to be cowed down by his mean allegations. She sees her loving Harpo, but at the same time refusing to bear his dominations. Sofia is a strong girl that she fights Harpo both physically and mentally. She is very much particular in asserting her rights. For her a relationship should be true and lively from both man and wife. In Sofia, Celie sees a woman who is not dependent on a man for maintaining her existence in the world, not a victim of circumstance, but a controller of circumstance. And the arrival of Shug is the turning point in Celie's search for identity. Their relationship leads to Celie's liberation. Shug Avery possesses a strong physical and sensuous presence, quite the antithesis of Celie's timidity. She is a blues singer. She is a strong personality with assertive and demanding voice. She is economically independent therefore beyond the reach of male tyranny. To her Mr. \_\_\_ is merely Albert. When Mr. \_\_\_ threatens to

refuse permission for Celie to go with Shug to the night clubs, she treats him dismissively. This shows that she never allows any male to dominate her in any situation. Shug becomes her protector, teacher and guide.

In contrast to the negative portrayal of heterosexual relationships, the relationship between these two women is shown in a positive way. Lesbianism is here seen as a liberating experience which does not entail guilt or brutality. Also it is portrayed as similar to other forms of female love, the love between mother and daughter and between sister and sister. It is also similar to the love of a mother for her babies: "Then I feel something real soft and wet on my breasts, feel like one of my little lost babies. Way after while, I act like I a little lost baby too." At times, the sexual side of the relationship recedes in importance as love and caring take precedence: "Us sleep like sisters, me and Shug," and enjoyment comes in the form of cuddling and hugging. As Celie learns, she moves out of her state of passive dependency into a sense of her own worth. Unlike the monstrous inequality between husband and wife, theirs is a reciprocal relationship- Celie giving of herself to heal the sick and exhausted Shug, and Shug giving of herself, patiently and lovingly teaching Celie to know her potentialities. Once she experiences the erotic, the sharing of joy, she is able to stand up for her right to participate in it. It is through her awareness of her right to the passion, creativity and fulfillment that life offers that she empowers herself.

Thus begins the third phase in Celie's journey towards self-discovery-Resistance. Initially she had been weak and submissive. Now she shows the strength of will to confront Mr. \_\_\_ when she comes to learn from Shug that he has been instrumental in concealing Nettie's letters written to her from Africa. Boldly, she curses him and is almost ready to kill him: "Until you do right by me, everything you touch will crumble." Her strength is almost supernatural, since a miraculous dust devil springs up at her words, and even Shug is startled. Mr. \_\_\_ tries to bluff out this attack by his earlier tactic of humiliating insults: "You can't curse nobody. Look at you. You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. Goddam, he say, you nothing at all" but Celie continues with her curse, feeling as if the words come to her from another world: "Until you do right by me, I say, everything you even dream about will fail. . . Every lick you hit me you will suffer twice. . . The jail you plan for me is the one in which you will rot." Finally she comes out with a powerful assertion of her identity as a human being in the world: "I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook, a voice say to everything listening. But I'm here."

The final step in Celie's healing progress reveals a Transformation. The possibility of Celie's transformation is brought about by her journey away from the rural back water and to the big city, Memphis. No longer afraid, she leaves Mr. \_\_\_ to travel there with Shug, establishing a female centred household where there is beauty, love and laughter. It is a world that dares to move away from the conventional, with elephants and turtles on the curtains and bedspreads, a world where the imagination soars free to build a house that looks as if it can swim or fly. She moves to the path of self-sufficiency provided by her sewing, making pants and establishing a flourishing business which she fittingly calls "Folkspants Unlimited." Celie is able to support herself, not by means of wage-labour, for it is clear that Walker sees no hope for liberation in the transition to the industrial mode --- but by means of a trade that is both artistic and necessary. Her growth is linked to her making and wearing pants for herself and other women. She achieves liberation when she is able to break the male dictated stereotype.

For Celie's transformation to be complete, it must be not only economic and sexual, but religious as well. In fact, her liberation is part of her spiritual freedom from traditional Christianity which is seen to endorse the oppressive patriarchal power structure. Shug reveals to Celie a God who is not the "big and old and tall and grey bearded and white" stern codger of Celie's old time religion, but an expansive God of trees, air, birds, people---an erotic God who "love all them feelings," "who love everything you love" and "love admiration...just wanting to share a good thing." Celie's transformed notion of God recognizes the divinity as neither male nor female but as an androgynous spirit, who is part of the natural world and of mankind itself.

Celie learns that she must enter Creation as loved creature of her Creator who, neither white nor male, creates out of love and a desire please "its" creatures. Reverence for all of creation---trees, the color purple, humanity --- are the cure for all the ills of the world. In the face of wonders of creation, man's evil seems trivial and impermanent: "flowers, wind water, a big rock"--- these provide sustenance for women oppressed by the violence of patriarchy which assumes for itself god-like powers. But violence is not as powerful as the inexorable force of nature, which exists in even its minor manifestations, a blade of corn, little wildflowers, a field blooming purple. And those suffering and oppressed can empower themselves by imbibing in themselves this force. Later, through Nettie's letters, Celie comes to learn that she and her minister husband have also come to know, in Africa, the same loving Creator who loves all and

repudiates no part of creation. They begin to question the relevance of traditional Christianity for black people. As Nettie begins to hang pictures of Christ, Mary and the Apostles in a fabric covered African dwelling, she confesses that the pictures “made me feel very small and unhappy, so I took them down. Even the picture of Christ which generally looks good anywhere looks peculiar here.” The title of the novel highlights the spiritual quest that brings about this awareness of transcendence that is not tied to ritual or any specific belief. Also there is an idea that all that is beautiful is imbued with the spiritual.

Celie’s liberation is complete when her mind soars free to attain a sense of oneness with the universe, when people as well as stars, trees, the sky become part of the loving creation of God. She comes to represent Walker’s idea that there is within human beings an intuitive and personal mystery that transcends experience, and that everything is part of the Divine Will which is itself manifested in Nature. By now, no longer a voiceless chattel to her man, Celie returns home, where she is perceived not as a domestic slave or the means to male sexual gratification but as a whole woman, wise, resourceful, caring, sensitive and sensual. Even her outward appearance suggests the change in her. Celie who has had nothing but “church going clothes” now can present a different front: “Then too I feels different. Look different. Got on some dark blue pants and a white silk shirt that looks righteous. Little red flat—heel slippers, and a flower in my hair.” And it is in the fitness of things that Mr. \_\_\_ does not recognize her. However, the transformation extends to Mr. \_\_\_ too. We come to know of his miserable life after Celie’s going away and how he managed to pull through only after he was made to return the rest of Nettie’s letters, the moral being –“Meanness kill.” Mr. \_\_\_ is now seen as an ordinary human being who keeps a neat house and collects shells. Celie unbends enough to accept him a friend as they sit together on the porch, sewing and talking, but not as a husband.

Thus we find that Celie is completely free of oppression now. She earns her bread. She is economically, financially and socially independent. She has grown from a timid, scared girl to be a self- dignified woman. No more her world is colourless. It’s full of dark and strong colours signifying her strong personality. She brings out a world that moves away from conventional. She prepares curtains and spreads with turtles and elephants on it. She begins to live in a world where imagination soars free to build a house that looks as if it can swim or fly. She is independent now and has quenched her quest for identity.

Alice Walker has shown her women characters as the symbol of empowerment coming out of their clutches of oppression, with self-identity. Though they suffer the torments passively in the beginning finally they achieve their identity in their own way, making their own society and world in their own way.

## REFERENCES

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