

Tribhuvan University

Black Consciousness in Alice Walker's *The Temple of My Familiar*

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Letter of Recommendation

Mr. Shankar Pujara has completed his thesis entitled “Black Consciousness in Alice Walker’s *The Temple of My Familiar*” under my supervision. He carried out his research from 2066/05/02 B.S. to 2067/01/02 B.S. I hereby recommend his thesis be submitted for viva voice.

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Approval Letter

This thesis entitled “Black Consciousness in Alice Walker’s *The Temple of My Familiar*” submitted to the Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University by Mr. Shankar Pujara has been approved by the undersigned members of the Research Committee.

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Abstract

This research examines the idea of Black consciousness in Alice Walker's *The Temple of My Familiar*. Most of the events of the novel revolve around the issue of Black consciousness of the characters. This Black consciousness inspires them to resist white privilege and redefine the black world by using their perspectives. So, this thesis argues that Black consciousness, which comes through the memorization of ancient myth, rituals, art and legend, enables the Black people to resist all white privilege and prejudice that empower them culturally and spiritually.

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I. Alice Walker as a Representative Black Writer

This research work studies Alice Walker's *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989) to examine her notion of black consciousness used in the novel. Most of the events of the novel try to develop black consciousness as each and every character brings closer to himself or herself through black consciousness which help to redefine the black images. This black consciousness helps them to resist white privilege and redefine the black world by using their perspectives. So, this thesis argues that black consciousness, which comes through the memorization of ancient myth, rituals, art and legend, enables the blacks to resist all white privilege and prejudice that empowers the blacks culturally and spiritually.

Walker's *The Temple of My Familiar* is a mixture of mythic fantasy, history, exemplary biography and sermon. It is short on narrative tension, long on inspirational message. This novel bears a message from Africa in a far more determined manner. The message reaches us via Miss Lissie, an ancient goddess who has been incarnated hundreds of times, usually as a woman, sometimes as a man, once even as a lion. The other characters affirm Black way of life while resisting the White people's domination. Thus, through the character of Lissie, and other characters, Walker explores Black consciousness.

Alice Walker, as an African American author, writes about her personal experiences. Although most critics categorize her writing as feminist, Walker describes herself as a "womanist" (*In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* xi). She defines this as a woman who loves, appreciates and prefers a woman's culture, her emotional flexibility and strength. Walker's thoughts and feelings find an outlet in her poetry and fiction. Alice Walker writes about her feelings and the morals that she was grown with; she writes

about the Black women's struggles for spiritual wholeness and sexual, political and racial equality.

Walker is one of the most prolific Black women writers in America. Her work consistently reflects her concern with racial, sexual and political issues- particularly with woman greatest heroes. Not enough credit has been given to the Black woman who has been oppressed beyond recognition. Walker's insistence on giving Black woman their due space in male and white dominated society resulted in one of the most widely read novels in America today. Alice Walker's novel, *The Color Purple* traces thirty years in the life of Cecile, a poor southern Black woman who is victimized physically and emotionally by her step father and husband, while in her teens, Cecile is repeatedly raped by her step-father, who sell the children. Then she is placed in a loveless marriage to Albert, who also beats and ferments her continuously. She eventually finds peace with the help of Albert's mistress, Shug Avery, a Blues singer who gives her the courage to leave her marriage, at the end of the novel, Ceclie is remitted with her children and while her long lost sister Nettie Walker's central characters are almost always Black women; the themes of sexism and racism a are predominant in her work but her impact is felt across both racial and sexual boundaries.

Walker's first collection of poem, *Once! Poem* (1968), includes works written during the 1960s. It addressed such topics as love, individualism, and revolution. Walker has also published two volumes of short stories, *Love and Trouble: Sorties of Black Women* (1973) and *You Can't Keep a Good Woman down: Stories* (1981), both of them contain her philosophy of Black "womanism."

Overall, Alice Walker has been a very influential author in the Black community. Moreover, she is equally popular among the non-Black community as she is a Nobel Prize winner. Although many of the criticisms are controversial on her view of Black men and their abuse toward women, the depiction cannot be narrowed down to only that, there is much more than is present in Alice Walker's writing. Her feelings, morals and opinions on women, sexuality, and racial equality shine through her all literary works.

The first novel written by Alice walker *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970) carries many of her prevalent themes, particularly the domination of powerless women by equally powerless women. In this novel, which spans the years between the Depression and the beginnings of the Civil Rights Movement in the early 1960s, she shows three generations of a Black family and explores the effects of poverty and racism on their lives. Because of his sense of failure caused by racism, Grange Copeland leads his wife to suicide and abandons his children to seek a better life in the North. His traits are passed on to his son, Brownfield who later murders his wife. At the end of novel, Grange returns to his family broken yet compassionate and attempts to make up for all the hurt he caused. Many critics accuse Walker of reviving stereotypes about the dysfunctional Black family other praised her use of intensive, descriptive language in creating believable characters.

As an African American woman writer, Alice Walker has been a strong and outspoken activist on a variety of issues related to women. As an active participant of Civil Rights Movement during the 1960s and 70s, Walker has related a Black woman's experience through the title character, Meridian in her novel *Meridian*. The movement reaffirmed African American's connection to

each other as a people and to their history of struggle against oppression. The movement also allowed Walker to claim her 'self' or individuality as she had described herself as "called to life" by the movement. Walker relates all these experiences through Meridian Hill, a student at the fiction Saxon college, who becomes active in the Civil Rights Movement. She has on-and-off relationship with another activist Truman Field, who impregnates her forcing her to seek her own individual course of life. Thus, Meridian attempts to anchor her self through different actions and reactions: rejecting to conceive and bring up Black baby, and divorcing a Black husband, Eddie working in her own way in the Civil Rights campaign.

Alice Walker's works are noted for their insightful treatment of African American culture. Her writings portray the black people's tragic experiences in a racist and sexist society and their struggle for survival and wholeness. Her focus is on black men as well as women who grow to reside in a larger world and struggle to achieve independent identities beyond white and male dominion. In her writing, she explores the "issue of the spiritual survival of black people, in particular black women" (*In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* 150). In her essay, she writes, "I am preoccupied with the spiritual survival whole of my people. [. . .] I am committed to exploring the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties and the triumphs of black women" (192).

Walker emphasizes on the black people's self definition against the evil of sexism, classism and racism. Her writing portrays the struggle of black people throughout history and are praised for their insightful and riveting portraits of black life, in particular the tragic experiences of black women in a sexist and racist society, suffering of black women at the hands of men and their struggle

for survival. In her novel, she examines the black people's search for selfhood through an analysis of the individual's relationship to the community. They struggle to claim their selves, in order to change their lives and secure a rightful place within the social network of relationship they themselves constitute, usually absorb the psychic pain involved in such a struggle and shatter the iron bars of gender which limits self empowerment.

Alice Walker's novels are unique examples of Afro-American writing because her works portray the African American people, especially women's lives. She depicts vividly the sexism, racism and poverty that make that life often a struggle. The theme of double repression – discrimination by the White community and repression from black males – of the black women in American experience is common in all of her works. However, the repression that female protagonists resist grounds for their mental and emotional rebirth. Her female characters are on search of psychological health and wholeness and eventually achieve it when they become able to fight against oppression. They embody the struggle of being in a double minority- both black and female. We find Alice Walker unfolding the oppression of Black Women in her fictions. In other words, Walker's works depict the emotional, spiritual and physical devastation that occurs when family trust is betrayed. Her focus is on black women who grow to reside in a larger world and struggle to achieve independent identity beyond male domination. Walker examines the black women's quest for selfhood through individual relationship to the community.

Walker takes writing as a way to correct wrong that she sees in the world and has dedicated herself to delineating the unique dual oppression from which black women suffer: racism and sexism. In confronting and overcoming

oppressions in their lives her women characters display strength, endurance, creativity, resourcefulness, forgiveness and resistance. She is frank in depicting the often devastating circumstances of the “twin afflictions” of racism and sexism. She is aware that black women are under two layers of oppression that is the racial and the sexual. Walker admires the struggle of black women throughout history to maintain an essential spirituality and creativity in their lives and their achievements serve as an inspiration to other. Thus, the main theme of her novels is the lives of black women, their battle with the society for their equal economical, political and sexual rights, she shows black women trying to get their racial equality. She emphasizes the healing power of love and the possibility of change which is both personal and social.

Walker’s present novel *The Temple of My Familiar* tells a story of three couples. It is an ambitious and multi-narrative novel containing the interleaved stories of: Arvedyda, a musician in search of his past; Carlotta, his Latin American wife who lives in exile from hers; Suwelo, a black professor of American history who realizes that his generation of men have failed women; Fanny, his ex-wife about to meet her father for the first time; and Lissie a vibrant individual with a thousand pasts.

Reviewers generally applaud Walker’s *The Temple of My Familiar* for its development of ideas and themes introduced in her earlier fiction and essays such as *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970), *In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women* (1973), *Meridian* (1976) and *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983). The critics have praised the novel for its castigation of white and male oppression, its valorization of African American and female identity, its emphasis on the importance of community and female friendship. At the same

time, however, they were perplexed by the novel's conglomeration of narrative techniques and styles. Joyce Maynard, for example, labeled the novel as "a radical feminist Harlequin romance written under the influence of hallucinogenic mushrooms. [. . .] There is little black history here, a little crystal healing there, with a hot tub and some acupuncture thrown in there for good measure" (qtd in Braendlin 47). James Walcott comments on the text, saying it "doesn't gel at any junction," he further says: "Pantheistic play, past-lives chronicle, black pride panorama, *The Temple of My Familiar* is the nuttiest novel I've ever read" (qtd in Braendlin 47). Another critic J. M. Coetzee, who praised the novel as a "fable of recovered origins [. . .] long on inspirational message," complained about Walker's "cliché-ridden prose and the novel's lack of narrative tension" (qtd in Braendlin 48). Doris Davenport affirmed Walker's womanist world view, but found the novel flawed by "awkward, corny and embarrassing" language and in "nauseating and contrived" sex scenes (qtd in Braendlin 47). Clearly, the novel has failed to meet the expectations of the reviewers and critics who expected Walker to be in control of language and narrative form.

Walker has written on diverse subject matters. Gayle Pemberton says, "Walker's work *The Temple of My Familiar* concerns itself with freedom, repression, sexual oppression, sexual fulfillment, memory, regret, loss, victory, love –thwarted, lost, found – and the necessity of forgiveness" (20). Similarly, Courtney L. Lewis talks about the strategy of the novel. As he says, "the real problem in *The Temple of My Familiar* is not what Walker is saying, but how she is saying it; furthermore, the book itself is complicated and convoluted, with tangled relationship between the characters" (4). These subjects are parts of a thoroughly elaborate fantasy. He further writes, "It is a brave attempt to traverse

difficult ground to celebrate Eros shorn of vulgarity, shame or loathing, to light [. . .]” (20).

Likewise, another critic Washing J Charles highlights the spiritual stuff of the novel and says, “New age of beliefs, reincarnation, or any of the spiritual stuff that this novel advocates, that did not stop from thoroughly enjoying the characters and the world they exist in” (2). Similarly, Ilkenna Dieke focuses on her writing style and states:

I would be the first to praise Alice Walker’s skill as a story teller, and her prose always entertains me and makes me think. That’s why I gave this book the stars I gave it. I don’t mind the out there’s spirituality. I don’t buy it but I have no deep gripe against it either. What I find depressing and surprisingly childish in this book. (19)

Although different critics have interpreted from various perspectives, they have not yet observed black myth, rituals and art in *The Temple of My Familiar*. So, this study will concentrate on the black consciousness the characters develop in course of living their lives. It will purely depend on the textual analysis of *The Temple of My Familiar* on the basis of the theoretical methodology – Black consciousness and its Movement.

The present research has been divided into four chapters. The first chapter presents an introduction to Alice Walker, a brief outline of the present study and a critical review of literature. The second chapter presents the concept of Black consciousness and its movement as the theoretical methodology to interpret the text. On the basis of theoretical discourse outlined in the second chapter third chapter will analyze the text. It will take some of the extracts from the text as the

evidences to prove the hypothesis of the study. In this chapter, the novel will be textually analyzed to explore the unprecedented issues. The issues related to how the characters exhibit their consciousness through relating their past history, myth, rituals and art, which wages an indirect cultural war against the white cultural values and tries to establish distinct black identity. The fourth chapter is the conclusion of this research. On the basis of the textual analysis in the chapter three, it will conclude the explanation and arguments put forward in the preceding chapters.

II. Black Consciousness as a Movement

Concept of Black Consciousness

The term, “Black Consciousness” comes from American civil rights leader W. E. B. Du Bois's evaluation of the double consciousness of American blacks who were taught to internalize about the weakness and cowardice of their race. Du Bois repeated Civil War era Black Nationalist Martin Delany’s insistence that black people take pride in their blackness as an important step in their personal liberation. This line of thought was also reflected in the Pan Africanist, Marcus Garvey, as well as Harlem Renaissance philosopher Alain Locke. A prominent Black student activist, Steve Biko reflects the concern for the existential struggle of the black person as a human being, dignified and proud of his blackness, in spite of the oppression of colonialism. The aim of this movement of black thinkers was to restore black consciousness or African consciousness, which they felt had been suppressed under colonialism.

The concept of Black consciousness emerged from the Black Consciousness Movement of late 1960s in South Africa. This movement might appear to espouse an ideology congruent to that of Black Nationalism found within United States for over a hundred years. In fact, the former has undergone many transformations and beliefs under a vast number of leaders, but there are fundamental ideas that Black Nationalism in America has stood for which the Black Consciousness movement does not advocate. While the conditions which South Africans faced under apartheid and Black Americans faced during the times of slavery represent oppressed peoples of colour attempting to combat what has become the status quo imposed upon them by the white men.

The Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) was a grassroots anti-apartheid activist movement that emerged in South Africa in the mid 1960s out of the political

vacuum created by the banning of the African National Congress and Pan Africanist Congress leadership after the Sharpeville Massacre in 1960 in South Africa. This movement represented a social movement for political consciousness. Black Consciousness origins were deeply rooted in Christianity. In 1966, the Anglican Church under the incumbent, Archbishop Robert Selby Taylor, convened a meeting which later on led to the foundation of the University Christian Movement. This was to become the vehicle for Black consciousness.

The activists of the Black Consciousness Movement attacked what they saw as traditional white values, especially the condescending values of white people of liberal opinion. They refused to engage white liberal opinion on the pros and cons of black consciousness, and emphasized the rejection of white monopoly on truth as a central principle of their movement. While this philosophy at first generated disagreement amongst black anti-Apartheid activists within South Africa, it was soon adopted by most as a positive development. As a result, there emerged a greater cohesiveness and solidarity amongst black groups in general, which in turn propelled black consciousness to the forefront of the anti-Apartheid struggle within South Africa.

The Black consciousness movement represented not only a revolt against political and economic injustice but a rejection of what Biko called the “totality of the white power structure” (qtd in Arnold 55). Black consciousness came as a shock to all the whites because it rejected white liberal modernism – the idea of freedom, justice and equality as defined by white people. For the first time there was a national movement whose focus turned what Cornel West would call the normative gaze of whiteness in on itself. The issues the movement addressed were varied as political, economic, cultural and existential. The movement came at exactly the same time that

social movements around the world were rejecting political modernism. Many were disappointed by what modernism had brought about in the name of progress in Germany and the Soviet Union.

The Black Consciousness Movement affirmed the Black power as the Black people experienced multifarious expressions in black life. This movement made it possible to take notice of the once invisible black minority in American society. The black insurgency of the 1960's also made the invisible visible, demonstrating the Black consciousness for equality and freedom. The movement contributed to new voices to be heard. Black people gave a strong and clear message that the whites needed to deal with the new black men, the persons of colour who had no intention of integrating into the whiteness of this culture, but wanted to move with power in the direction of a new humanity as defined by the forces of liberation in the oppressed black community.

Undoubtedly, the most appropriate description of this new black mood is the concept of black consciousness generated as a result of the movement, which is to say that black people were aware of the meaning of their blackness in the context of whiteness. They knew that their color was the defining characteristic of their movement in the world because it was the controlling symbol of white limitations placed on black existence. So, Black consciousness is the recognition of social, economic, and political status of black people which was determined by white people's inability to deal with the presence of colour.

Black consciousness is, in essence, the realization by the black man of the need to rally together with his brothers for the cause of their oppression. In this regard, in his essay, "I Write What I Like," one of the famous Black activists, Steve Biko defines Black consciousness saying, "By Black consciousness I mean the

cultural and political revival of an oppressed people” (Arnold 60). Another South African movement which contributed to Black consciousness was South African Students’ Organization (SASO). As this movement grew, it defined Black consciousness more fully:

- I. Black consciousness is an attitude of mind, a way of life.
- ii. The basic tenet of Black consciousness is that a Black man must reject white value systems that seek to make him a foreigner in his own country of his birth, and reduce his basic human dignity.
- ii. The Black man must build his own value system.
- iii. The concept of Black consciousness implies that the awareness of the Black people of the power they wield as a group, both economically, and politically and hence the group solidarity and cohesion are important facets of Black consciousness. (Peck 55)

This shows that Black consciousness is the black man's self-awareness. To know blackness is to know self, and to know self is to be cognizant of other selves in relation to self. It is knowing the criterion of acceptance and rejection in human encounters. To be conscious of his color means that the black person knows that his blackness is the reason for his oppression, for there is no way to account for the white racist brutality against the black community except by focusing on the colour of the victim.

For a Black person, to be aware of inhumanity and discrimination is the first step toward self-awareness. In the Black context, this means that the black man knows that the knowledge of his being places him in conflict with those who refuse to recognize his humanity. Black consciousness, therefore, is not only the knowledge of the source of black oppression; it is the black man's willingness to fight against that

source. As James H Cone argues Black consciousness is “Black power, the power of the oppressed black man to liberate himself from white enslavement by making blackness the primary means of his humanity. It is the power to be black in spite of whiteness, the courage to affirm being in the midst of nonbeing” (50). This asserts the power of the Black, which comes from accepting their colour as Black. This calls for the Black to celebrate their colour as the whites celebrate their white colour.

In order to understand the true essence of black consciousness and its impact on black life, it is necessary to proceed in the direction of a definition that does not bypass history. This requires the exploration and revisit of the Black history because to know self is to know the historical self, and for black people, which involves the investigation of other black selves who lived in a similar historical setting. Black people’s present being is defined by the being of their fathers and what they said and did in a white racist society.

It is only through ascertaining what the responses of the forefathers of the Black people were to white strictures placed on their existence that we can come to know what their responses ought to be to white people who insist on defining the boundary of black being. Oppressors are inclined to blot out all past events that are detrimental to their existence as rulers, giving the impression that their definition of humanity is the only legitimate one in the world. Black consciousness means rejecting the white oppressor's definition of being by re-creating the historical Black being that is an antithesis of everything white. James H Cone further argues: “Black consciousness is recognizing that our feelings about America are not new, but originate from past black rebels who prepared the world for their presence” (51). So, Black consciousness emerged from the rebels of very early times.

The earlier black radicals were black people who could not reconcile themselves to slavery, and thus chose to risk death rather than to accept the European definition of man. Nat Turner, Denmark Vesey, and Gabriel Prosser are prominent examples. They put into practice Martin Delany's comment: "Every people should be the originators of their own designs, the projectors of their own schemes, and creators of the events that lead to their destiny- the consummation of their desires" (qtd in Cone 52). In the words of Earl Ofari: "Black radicals such as W. E. B. DuBois, William Trotter, Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X, and Stokely Carmichael simply made modifications on the foundations which the earlier black radicals laid" (qtd in Cone 51). Black consciousness did not come into being with Stokely Carmichael and his articulation of Black Power in the spring of 1966. It began with the slave ships, the auction blocks, and the insurrections. It began when white people decided that black people and their children should be slaves for the duration of their lives. It is not possible to enslave a people because of their blackness and expect them not to be conscious of color.

Black consciousness is the manifestation of a new realization that the Blacks need to face the whites boldly. This coconsciousness gives them courage to accept their blackness. So, Black consciousness is more than color consciousness; it uses one's color as a means of liberation. Delany says: "This is the meaning of every black attempt to say yes to what whites regard as evil, and no to their definition of good. It is not enough to thank God for making us men, but we must thank him for making us black men. This is what black consciousness means" (qtd in Cone 51). Thus, defining the black historical context, Martin Delany appeals to the Black people to reject the white normativity and takes pride in being Black.

As already mentioned, the credit of theorizing the concept of Black consciousness goes to W.E.B. Du Bois as he has elaborated the term “double consciousness” in his famous book *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). In this book, he speaks of an African American as having “double consciousness” by which he means “two-ness” of being an American and a Negro. Du Bois describes this concept of double consciousness as “two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (qtd in Bruce 299). This reflects the state of being aware of the two conditions: one African and other American.

When Du Bois first used the term “double consciousness” in his essay “Strivings of the Negro People” (1897), he referred to three different issues: first the real power of white stereotypes in Black life and thought; second the double consciousness created by the practical racism that excluded every Black American from the mainstream of the society; and third the double consciousness of being both American and not American. “Double consciousness” gives an African American a sense of being different from American individual, his culture, religion and way of life. This differentiation is the Black people’s experience living in America. As Dickson Bruce observes that the essence of a distinctive American consciousness is its “spirituality, spirituality based in Africa but revealed among African Americans in their folklore, their history of patient suffering and their faith” (301). In this sense, “double consciousness” is revealed particularly to Du Bois’s efforts to privilege the spiritual in opposition to the materialistic, commercial world of white Americans. Du Bois believes that Negro blood possesses the power of spiritual message as he says, “Negro blood has a message for the world” (Bruce 301), and this message has a softening influence, which helps to change the whole world.

This “double consciousness” acts as an “African soul” which serves as an alternative to “dominant inability” to see apart from the possibilities for action and profit for the African Americans (Bruce 302). This means that this consciousness makes the Black people aware of their potentials. Du Bois describes the African Americans as gifted with a kind of “second sight” (Bruce 302). This is the affirmation of Black power in relation to the dominant power of white people in America.

Du Bois’s stress on “double consciousness” is a major source of appeal to the African American to provide an alternative to materialism. Dickson Bruce feels the need of such alternative to growing materialistic attitude in America. He says:

Far from offering an eccentric ‘message’ African American ideals offered a possible direction for American society that could be appreciated by Du Bois’s readers. As such scholars as Karl Miller and Jackson Lears have stressed, in the rapidly industrializing United States of the late nineteenth century there was a real hunger, especially on the part of the middle class, for a revival of the spiritual. (302)

Thus, “double consciousness” has helped to give definition to the positive sense of African and African American distinctiveness which Du Bois tried to develop and to offer in the Africans a kind of alternative to American materialism.

The concept of “double consciousness” is associated with the field of psychology as it is an attitude of mind. The psychological literature directly looks at the distinctiveness within a single body. Dickson Bruce believes that psychological idea of double consciousness further reinforces what Du Bois emphasizes as the genuinely alternative character of African American ideas. “Double consciousness” entails a “real opposition between the two consciousnesses confined within a single

body” (Bruce 304). Thus he bases his discussion on a body of psychological knowledge more firmly established during his time.

The idea of “double consciousness” explicitly emphasizes the integrity of distinctive states in the individual who is its subject. This consciousness allows for a sense of distinctiveness that really entails equality, a sense of distinctiveness which does not imply inferiority. It gives Du Bois exactly the vocabulary he needed to make the point he wanted to make. In the absence of any kind of adequate idea of cultural relativism, the idea of “double consciousness” allowed Du Bois to talk about an African mode of thought.

Role of Black Consciousness in Black Art

From its early origins in slave communities, through the end of the twentieth century, African American art has made a vital contribution to the art of the United States. During the period between the 1600s and the early 1800s, art took the form of small drums, quilts, wrought-iron figures, and ceramic vessels in the southern United States. These artifacts have similarities with comparable crafts in West and Central Africa. In contrast, African American artisans like the New England-based engraver Scipio Moorhead and the Baltimore portrait painter Joshua Johnson created art that was conceived in a thoroughly western European fashion.

Larry Neal says that African American art is the “aesthetic and spiritual sister of the black power concept. As such, it envisions an art that speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America” (Abrams 24). In order to perform this task, the Black Arts Movement proposes a radical reordering of the western cultural aesthetic. It proposes a separate symbolism, mythology, critique and iconography. The Black arts and the Black power concept both relate broadly to

the Afro-America's desire for self-determination and nationhood. One is concerned with the relationship between art and politics; the other is with the art of politics.

For the Afro-Americans, art was an important part of their way of life and was closely associated with everyday activities. They created their art as an instrument by which they contacted the spirit using supernatural forces. They did so to overcome the dangers of their environment and to express their religion. They believed in the universal life force which the almighty pours into the world and gives life to every creation. They even believed that the dead retain their living force through certain rituals performed.

Africans were inspired by the rituals performed by their ancestors. They also like invisible spirits to be visible. So, they carved sculptures which serve as a medium for the access to the spirit world. The figures of ancestors and spirits, masks and other cult objects are the mediums of links between god and man. The inspiring figures are supposed to bring fertility riches and the blessing upon the successors.

Africans often use masks, which they believe enable the souls of the dead, to make their appearance in a visible form. The designs of the masks depend upon its major purpose. They should be unreal as far as possible. In order to know the full meaning of the mask, one must be able to witness the ceremonies of which the mask is used. Not only the mask but also other carved objects and sculptures are used in the rituals.

Human motifs were first priority of all African tribes. They formed an analogy to particular divine forces and myths. The navel and genitals signified the continuance of mankind. The sculptures seen with a large navel can be

interpreted as a sign that a very powerful spirit would lift the body or womb. A large head could be an indication of great intelligence and will power of the spirit world.

Afro-Americans blended old styles with new when cooking, smiting, wood-carving, story-telling and gospel singing traditions. They sang folk songs reflecting their secular life, as Blaissingame points out:

The secular songs told of the slave's loves, work, floggings, and expressed his moods and reality of his oppression. On a number of occasions he sang of the proud defiance of the runaway, the courage of the black rebels, the stupidity of the black rebels, and the stupidity of the patrollers, the heartlessness of the slave traders and the kindness and cruelty of masters. (23)

They sang songs that began in the fields of the plantations to pass the themes of salvation and freedom of Christianity with a native style of singing and dancing.

Slave narratives were among the earliest forms of artistic self-expression available to African Americans; the songs were based on Christian hymn tradition, but often departed radically from the complacent austerity to white hymns. This spiritual tradition provided the birthing ground for what Levine calls "the most highly personalized genre of African-American music: the blues" (221). By the early twentieth century, the blues had emerged as a dynamic and powerful addition to the music of black America. In this regard, Schultz remarks, "In the spirituals, black Americans first started to sing of their feelings of homelessness; in the blues, they continued to sing it" (127). In a 1960 interview, blues musician Sidney Bechet identified the source of the essential connection between music and story telling. He says "Me, I want to explain myself so bad. I

want to have myself understood. And the music, it can do that. The music, it's my whole story" (qtd. in Levine 190). Although gospel and blues often differ in focus and style, both genres are musical expressions of the cultural need to the story of people.

Mahalia Jackson once remarked that blue songs "are the songs of despair, but gospel songs are the songs of hope" (qtd. in Levine 174). This comment is not pejorative judgment of blue singers; perhaps the blues developed to fill a need that gospel could not address. A deep despair that fills so many blues songs provides a communal outlet for emotions that would otherwise choke the singer; the blues may provide a way of recognizing and sharing human pain in order to overcome it. According to John Lee Hooker, the blues are "not only what's happened to you, it's what happened to your fore parents and other people. And that's what makes the blues" (qtd. in Levine 237). This historical and cultural breadth of the blues illustrates the vitality and strength of the close connection between music and folklore. Similarly, Zora Neale Hurston suggests that "[s]omewhere songs for sound-singing branched off from songs for storytelling until we arrive at prose" (qtd. in Hurston 877). She asserts that folklore is nothing less than "the boiled-down juice of human living" (875).

In addition to music, the African-Americans relied on the oral traditions, much as their African ancestors did. Orature and storytelling is a way of bridging gaps between the Black community's folk roots and the Black American tradition. Blaissingame outlines the value of the folk tales which emerged out of slave environment:

The [folk] tales also represented the distillation of folk wisdom and were used as an instructional device to teach young slaves to

survive. A projection of the slave's personal experience, dreams, and hopes, the folk tales allowed him to express hostility to his master, to poke fun at himself, and to delineate the workings of the system. At the same time, by viewing himself as an object, verbalizing his dreams and hostilities, the slave was able to preserve one more area which whites could not control. (36)

This Afro-American cultural tradition – myth, black art, folk tales and rituals – has been richly reflected in the writings of Afro-American writers.

In comparison with the Black Power movement in the United States, the Black Consciousness movement felt little need to reconstruct any sort of golden cultural heritage. African linguistic and cultural traditions were alive and well in the country. Short stories published predominantly in Drum magazine had led to the 1950s being called the Drum decade, and future Nobel Prize winner Nadine Gordimer was beginning to become active. The fallout from the Sharpeville massacre led to many of those artists entering exile, but the political oppression of the resistance itself led to a new growth of black South African Literature. In the 1970s, Staffrider magazine became the dominant forum for the publication of BC literature, mostly in the form of poetry and short stories. Book clubs, youth associations, and clandestine street-to-street exchange became popular. Various authors explored the Soweto riots in novels, including Miriam Tlali, Mthobisi Mutlootse and Mbulelo Mzamane. But the most compelling force in Black Consciousness prose was the short story, now adapted to teach political morals. An important theme of Black Consciousness literature was the rediscovery of the ordinary

However, it was in poetry that the Black Consciousness Movement first found its voice. In a sense, this was a modern update of an old tradition, since several of

South Africa's African languages had long traditions of performed poetry. Siphon Sempala, Mongane Serote, and Mafika Gwala led the way, although Sempala turned to prose after Soweto. Serote wrote from exile of his internalization of the struggles, while Gwala's work was informed and inspired by the difficulty of life in his home town of Mpumalanga near Durban. These forerunners inspired a myriad of followers, most notably poet-performance artist Ingoapele Madingoane. Thus, the Black literary movement was associated with Black Power which advocated Black separatism, Black pride and Black solidarity.

In this way, Black Consciousness is basically the realization by the black people of the need to unite together with their brothers around the cause of their oppression - the blackness of their skin - and to operate as a group in order to rid themselves of the shackles that bind them to perpetual servitude. It tries to expose the lie that black is an aberration from the "normal" and "superior" which is white. It is a manifestation of a new realization that by choosing to run away from themselves and to imitate the white man and their culture, blacks betray their own race.

The idea of Black Consciousness, which was propounded and elaborated by W.E.B. Du Bois and Steve Biko, is not to institute black racism, or return some aspect of vengeance upon white society, but rather to enforce a sense of solidarity amongst blacks in South Africa where they developed a new-found pride in themselves, their culture, their religion, and their values. Moreover, the idea of Black consciousness helps the African Americans to resist white stereotype and growing sense of American materialism, which has brought about fragmentation in their lives.

The following chapter explores the Black consciousness in Walker's *The Temple of My Familiar*, which is reflected through the characters' different activities and thoughts.

III. Black Consciousness in *The Temple of My Familiar*

This chapter argues that Black consciousness enables the Blacks to resist all white privilege and prejudice. This consciousness empowers the blacks culturally and spiritually as it comes through the memorization of ancient myth, rituals, art and legend. One of the main strengths of *The Temple of My Familiar* is that in it Walker articulates clearly an Afro-centric perspective. This perspective means the state of being comfortably and wholly Black with no schizophrenia, no alternating realities, and no question about it, either. In the case of Alice Walker Afro-centric includes “womanist” and “feminist” as well. The word encompasses spiritual and material, political and social realities, with Black women’s perspectives and visions as a norm. That perspective is a matter of irritation for those who usually think of themselves as “dominant” – usually white folks and many males of color. But Walker lives and writes from that perspective and so do numerous contemporary Black American women, to a greater degree. So, by foregrounding this African perspective, Walker focuses on the black consciousness which helps to empower the blacks culturally as well as spiritually, thereby contributing to the holistic development of the blacks.

The characters in *Temple of My Familiar* function as a group of conscious philosophers, telling stories and pursuing some kind of truth and knowledge. The main characters – Zede, Carlotta and Arveyda; Fanny and Suwelo; Miss Lissie and Mr. Hal – relate their life stories. The novel opens with Zede and her daughter Carlotta, refugees from South America. Zede speaks of her early life, of the menstrual rituals she participated in when the women gathered “by Lxetaphahex, the Goddess,” in celebration. She then tells one of the first in a series of stories of males' attempts to usurp the power of women – for “in the old, old days [. . .] only women

had been priests” (21). In Zede's passed-down tale, the males cut off parts of themselves, attempting to create life as women do.

Two other characters, Nzingha and Miss Lissie, are also examples of this link between the spiritual and physical. Nzingha rejects the White American and European culture/education she is offered. Her assessment of Europe is both a sign of its cultural imperialism/ arrogance and a reaffirmation of faith and belief in herself and Africa. She reclaims the Medusa myth when she is finally fed up with the lies about the “Greek foundations of Western civilization and art” (244) she learns at school. She remembers a slide show:

Well, anyway, there was Perseus in his chariot, and in his hand, hanging over the side, was the severed head of Medusa, her snakelike locks of hair presented as real snakes – everywhere in Africa a symbol of fertility and wisdom-and there were even two snakes floating about the corners of her mouth. She is the mother of Christian angels. She is Isis, mother of Horus, sister and lover of Osiris, Goddess of Egypt. The Goddess, who, long before she became Isis, was known all over Africa as simply the Great Mother, Creator of All, Protector of All. The Goddess. (244-45)

Being tired of such slide show in which Christian rituals of the whites are shown, Nzingha tells the professor and leaves for Africa the same day. This is the result of her being of her own Black rituals, which makes her rush to visit Africa which is the her original roots. This also reflects her “double consciousness” as she is torn between two rituals: African and American.

One of the major characters, Miss Lissie’s search for spirituality is reflected through the African tradition of regarding women as goddesses. The elderly Miss

Lissie, with long white “reggae singer’s locks [. . .] exactly one hundred and thirteen” (45) of them, is one of the main deliverers of the Afro-centric world, one who remembers and passes on the combination of spiritual and physical survival lessons from her past reincarnations. Remembering a past life in Africa, Miss Lissie says that most of the stolen and enslaved men “carried on the ancient tradition of worship of the mother, which was not tolerated by the Mohametans” (57). She continues,

These Mother worshipers would be the hardest of the Africans to break, for they were devoted to the Goddess, and they were regular chameleons, but they were broken. That is why the ultimate curse against Africa/ Mother/ Goddess – motherfucker – is still in the language. It would have been unthinkable in the Old Days, and a person saying it would have been immediately asked for his tongue. Our new masters had a genius for turning us viciously – in ways that shamed and degraded even themselves, if only they'd had sense enough to know it – against anything that once we loved. (58)

Walker's goddess is not an alien being somewhere in the sky, but an actual presence in the novel as well. Miss Lissie has been so many different women that Mr. Hal can easily "share" her with his best friend, Rafe. As she observes, “Hal loved me like a sister/ mystic/ warrior/ woman/ mother. Rafe, on the other hand, knowing me to contain everybody and everything, loved me wholeheartedly, as a goddess. Which I was” (59). As the tradition of worshipping woman as goddess is African, this reflects Lissie’s confidence and boldness to face any obstacles that would come her way.

At the beginning of the novel each of the main characters except Lissie is “spiritually fragmented” as they all struggle with a fundamental and destructive fear, frustration or conflict in their lives (93). The book relates the process of their striving

for the demonstrable values of oneness, wholeness, and unity as opposed to dialectical tension, exclusivity, and separateness. The best way to achieve such values is through “communion, as opposed to the “gribbled, self-destructive narcissism” of man as separate from woman, humans as separate from animals” (Dieke 508). This communion is the sharing and togetherness. The novel preaches communion between all the different aspects of one’s own personality, between people of different races, sexes, cultures and times and between different species or creations. Walker creates a constructive vision, which points toward a monistic thinking in which humans, animals, and the whole ecological order coexist in a unique dynamics of unity and relationship. This emphasis on communion indicates the importance Walker attaches to community in her writings.

There are three important aspects in the process each of the characters has to go through in order to become spiritually whole. First of all, in the book, being an artist is closely connected to being whole as a person. Secondly, “for Alice Walker, recollective art is a rhetorical strategy of relocating the lost self, of seeking and uncovering an inner tapestry of identity” (Dieke 509). In other words, the characters all have to reconnect with their past, which, as they find, helps shape their present and future as is quoted in the novel, “remembrance is the key to redemption” (336). Thirdly, communication plays an important role. This is their consciousness of their black history.

Every character relates themselves to their roots and past. Lissie is capable of remembering her many past lives that have taken place from prehistory to recent centuries and in which her race, gender, and even species are not fixed. These past lives can be seen as Walker’s rewritings of the stories and creation-myths, particularly the book of Genesis, through which Judeo-Christian culture came to understand its

own origins. Walker herself says: “What I’m doing is literarily trying to reconnect us to our ancestors. All of us. I’m really trying to do that because I see that ancient past as the future, that the connection that was original is a connection; if we can affirm it in the present, it will make a different future” (qtd in: Braendlin, 54). Lissie comes to realize that her different lives are not just distant memories, but still play an important role in who she is today, when she discovers that she never appears as the same woman twice in a picture:

He had never, in all his work as a photographer, photographed anyone like me, who could never present the same self more than once, and I had never in my life before found anyone who could recognize how many different women I was. But finally it dawned on me that my memory and the photographs corroborated each other exactly. I had been those people, and they were still somewhere inside of me. It was such a kick. The selves I had thought gone forever, existing only in my memory, were still there! Photographable. (91-92)

She describes her love for Hal in terms of this, saying he was “familiar, comfortable; and what’s more, emotionally recognizable. And he felt the same way. I don’t have many memories of this life that don’t have Hal somewhere in the middle of them” (59). This emphasizes on the role of past life and memories which the characters are aware of.

In her stories, Lissie informs Suwelo about some of her past lives, telling him for example how she has lived as a pygmy, as a member of a harem, as a woman without hymen and as a Moor woman. She adds that many of these lives have been shaped by some form of oppression, “from parents, siblings, relatives, governments, countries, continents. As well as from [her] own body and mind” (83). Most

importantly, Lissie's stories teach Suwelo things that he himself would not have learned otherwise. It is important to remember that Lissie's past lives are explicitly contrasted to official history, always appearing in the form of the narratives she tells to Suwelo, himself a professor of American history. All this makes them aware of the authoritative discourse of history, and hence the written facts on which his knowledge is based, often ignores the stories of women, Native Americans, other people of color and animals – groups of individuals who do not fit the authoritative description of the past.

In the novel, different sorts of communication are present: dialogues, letters, tape recordings, fragments of a diary, paintings, music, stories, etc. By communicating, the characters, all being at a different stage in their development towards wholeness as a person, help each other in the process. 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). Each couple seems to consider themselves as a spiritually "weaker" person, who can only strive for wholeness up to a certain point (namely Carlotta, Suwelo, Hal), and a stronger spiritual personality, able to achieve the highest level of wholeness (namely Arveyda, Fanny, Lissie). This consciousness of lacking spirituality and striving for wholeness is an example of Black consciousness.

Lissie, Arveyda, and Fanny achieve an awareness of their place in existence. By the novel's end, Lissie recalls her incarnations at the beginning of human history, and Arveyda and Fanny unite as incarnations of (a very different) Adam and Eve. Meanwhile, Suwelo, Carlotta, and Hal can only achieve fulfillment through their

understanding of the prodigies' i.e. Lissie's, Arveyda's and Fanny's powers and by coming to terms with their own painful pasts.

Arveyda, the son of a partly Indian, partly African/Scot mother and a partly Mexican, partly Filipino/Chinese father, suggests "Aryurveda", which means health (396). Arveyda performs the role of a Black artist as a famous musician, whose music is praised for having spiritual powers, giving him the status of a healer in the eyes of his fans:

Arveyda and his music were medicine, and, seeing or hearing him, people knew it. They flocked to him as once they might have to priests. He did not disappoint them. Each time he played, he did so with his heart and soul. Always, though he might be very tired, he played earnestly and prayerfully. (24)

Here, Walker introduces the practice of African Shamanism, which is used for healing purpose. Arveyda works to help bridge the gap between his wife Carlotta and her mother Zede through shamanism. He feels that he, not only as her husband, but as an artist especially, has the task to help Carlotta to come to terms with the past. Thinking of artists as "messengers" (125), he sings her a song in which he relates everything Zedé 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 Zedé, small and tentative, was visible, a wisp, before her daughter. (126)

Arveyda really fulfils his function as a shaman by reconnecting mother and daughter. He helps Carlotta become whole, which she can only do by embracing her past rather than avoiding it. As he discovers power in typical African shamanic practice, it is the affirmation Black consciousness. Yet, although the origin of his name and his shaman-like status as an artist suggest that Arveyda is one of the characters that is whole himself from the beginning of the novel, he also has to face up to the past as a conscious Black man.

It is only after having heard about her mother's past and feelings from Arveyda that Carlotta starts to heal and to find happiness again. She changes shockingly. First of all, she stops teaching and becomes an artist. Just like Zedé's mother, Zedé the elder, she becomes a bell chimist. In addition, she also loses her feminine look. She cuts her hair "nearly to [her] skull like a concentration-camp [victim]" and wears a "tight black running suit and teal Reeboks" (378). She adopts typical African way of life unlike the white people's life style.

Carlotta and Arveyda befriend another couple Suwelo and Fanny. Arveyda develops a close bond with Fanny, who, as a conscious Black woman, admires him as an artist for years already. Fanny is a traditional masseuse, as she gives Arveyda one of her famous massages. They even make love to each other. During the massage, Arveyda thinks:

He has given himself up to Fanny, as if all of himself is resting in her arms. He feels there is something about her, something in her essence that automatically heals and reconnects him with himself. He thinks that if he were to join himself with her in lovemaking he would feel literally re-membered. (408)

Unlike the white people who tend to regard sex as merely physical pleasure, these Black characters regard sex as a means of uniting with their ancestors. This is an act of resisting White values which comes from Black consciousness. After their (simultaneous) orgasm, “Arveyda feels as if he has rushed to meet all the ancestors and they have welcomed him with joy. “My flesh,” says Arveyda, “his lips against her hair” (409). 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 through establishing physical relationship.

After their problematic relationship, Fanny and Suwelo put aside their ambitions at a marriage in the traditional sense and live together in harmony in a house that symbolizes their new view instead:

[The house] is modelled on the prehistoric ceremonial household of M’Sukta’s people, the Ababa – a house designed by the ancient matriarchal mind and the first heterosexual household ever created. It has two wings, each complete with its own bedroom, bath, study, and kitchen; and in the center there is a ‘body’ – the ‘ceremonial’ or common space. After thousands and thousands of years of women and men living apart, the Ababa had, with great trepidation, experimented with the two tribes living, a couple to a household, together. Each person must remain free, they said. That is the main thing. And so they had designed a dwelling shaped like a bird. (399)

This passage is the reflection on the African traditional and tribal way of living when the houses were designed by wise African women. This also asserts the rights and privileges of women in traditional African society where women were regarded as respectable. So to be aware of their tradition, arts and history is one of the many examples of Black consciousness.

At the end of the novel, when he sits in the hot tub with Carlotta, Suwelo is suddenly too tired to see fragmentation, which is caused by American materialism everywhere. After Carlotta has told him about her mother and grandmother, it is his turn to let the memories come back and tell the story of his parents' death:

'My mother is dead,' Suwelo says to Carlotta. It sounds as if he's finally admitting it to himself. He sees Marcia once again timidly approach the door. She stops, her fist upraised to knock, and listens. She is so surprised to hear he is speaking of her! "Come in, Ma," he says. (403). [The door of his heart] swings open on its own, and this father, whom Suwelo has never seen and whom he realizes he resembles very much, walks in. (405)

This catharsis is accompanied by a baptism, which suggests the beginning of a new life. Walker writes: "Suwelo is touched. He feels himself slipping into an intimacy with Carlotta he's never, even with Fanny, known. He is speechless, as he plunges himself once again into the tub – only this time it feels like a baptism " (402). With all the problems in his life more or less sorted out, Suwelo can finally be whole. As is the case for the other characters, for Suwelo as well this status is connected to being an artist, as he has taken up carpentry. Finally, he lives up to his own name since Suwelo was the name of the symbol for wholeness. Through their activities and narration of their past stories, every character makes an attempt to achieve unity and wholeness.

So, the characters' efforts to resist growing materialism through the recourse to their art, history and past come from Black consciousness.

Fanny strives to achieve unity and wholeness through Black art. As she says that there were often "poets and funnymen, what you would now call 'comedians,' and, really, all kinds of people: magicians, jugglers, good horseshoe throwers, and the occasional man who quilted or did needlepoint" (169). Given the meaning of being an artist in the book, this suggests that Fanny is surrounded by "whole" persons in her home. This suggestion is supported by the fact that another character Shug finds her own religion different from the whites. Shug opposes discrimination of any kind as well as war and anger she talks about having respect and admiration for the entire creation and pleads for love and reverence among human beings. Further, she talks about heritage, about being strong, even in the most difficult of times, about the necessity of self love and about being creators. All this suggests that, both Celie and Shug are at an advanced point in their development towards becoming conscious and whole.

Besides her problems with Suwelo, Fanny is also very much conscious of racial discrimination. She struggles with more general issues as racism, which she sees, everywhere around her:

She was seeing a therapist, but essentially she was one of those victims of racism who is extremely sensitive and who grows too conscious of it. It had become like a scale or a web over her eyes. Everywhere she looked, she saw it. Racism turned her thoughts to violence. Violence made her sick. She was working on it. (296)

As the Black consciousness is an attitude of mind, Fanny's all consuming anger towards white people is symbolized by the "fantasy" she has in which she murders

white people, especially blonds who “represent white people, really white people, to [her], and therefore white oppression” (298), by means of a sword in her eye. As she says: “Underneath, there’s this raving maniac. Sometimes I see myself in the faces of the weeping screaming, completely mad women shown every day on TV. I hate white people . I visualize them sliding off the planet, and the planet saying, ‘Ah, I can breathe again!’”(303).

Robin, her therapist, relates this ardent racism against whites – whom Fanny admits to be afraid of when she is under hypnosis – to a childhood friendship between Fanny and the white Tanya, whose grandmother disapproved of their friendship:

‘You became alienated from you own body, you own self,’ said Robin.

‘You became two beings in your relationship with Tanya. The cheerfully playing little girl that others saw and the hurt child who was bewildered by her first encounter with irrational rejection.’ (331)

Being afraid she might murder someone as well as because it is “a very uptight place” (247), Fanny quits her teaching job and eventually even her administrative function at the college and opens a massage parlor. As a victim of racial discrimination, Fanny wants to explore white and Black bodies as a masseuse. As she explains to her therapist: “I took it up so that I would be forced to touch people, even those I might not like, in gentleness, and be forced to acknowledge both their bodily reality as people and also their pain. Otherwise, I am afraid I might start murdering them” (295). When Olivia fears it is getting too much, she takes her daughter to Africa to meet her biological father. Fanny’s experiences and conversations with her father and also with her half-sister Nzinga connect Fanny to her personal history and culture and allow her to return home with a renewed sense of herself and her spiritual center that is Africa. Even her father, called Abajeralasezeola and nicknamed Ola, is a native

Olinka and a famous playwright and the minister of culture. His art is a form of protest against abuses of all kinds. He has a great influence on Fanny. It is he who tells her “shortly before he died to harmonize her relations with Suwelo” (321).

Through her journey to Africa, Fanny makes a literal as well as a symbolic journey which enables her to come to terms with her destructive anger and to harmonize all the aspects of herself. In her case as well this new-found inner peace is associated with being an artist. Fanny becomes a masseuse and in the end even decides to write a play with her sister about her father. In addition, it could be argued that after she herself is healed, Fanny tries to help other people by her massages and by distributing Shug’s pamphlet. Her wholeness reaches its climax when she has sex with Arveyda and in that way finds her “spirit” (409):

Fanny thinks of her lifelong habit of falling in love with people she’ll never have to meet. Is this how people create gods, she wonders. She thinks she has always been walking just behind (oh, a hundred to a thousand years behind) the people she has found to love, and that she has been very careful that their back were turned. What would she do if one of the turned around? Fanny feels a slight quiver in her stomach. She is frightened, for a moment, as if she is about to come face to face with her own self. (408)

So, just like Carlotta and Arveyda, Fanny and Suwelo observe white and Black way of life and become conscious about their race and tradition as they reach the status of wholeness at the end of the novel.

Consciousness of Race in the Characters

Walker touches more at length on the race issue in *The Temple of My Familiar*. With the six main characters as well as most of the other ones being black,

Walker treats several dimensions of the problem, leading us to understand that racism is age-old and has existed between all sorts of people. Lissie clearly remembers the life time in which she was sold by her own uncle into slavery. She says: “The white men, who looked and smelled like nothing we had ever imagined, as if their sweat were vinegar, paid the men who’d brought us” (63). This reflects her Black consciousness of racial discrimination. Probably more than a century later, Hal’s father is not allowed into the house of his friend Heath, because he is black, which some decades later also happens to young Fanny, whose friend Tanya is white as well. Hal and Suwelo’s uncle Rafe are confronted with the race issue when “white folks wanted [them] for the army, to fight in the Great War, or so they said. The truth was, they wanted [them] to be servants for the white men who fought. They wanted [them] to fight some people none of [them] had heard of, and they were white folks, too” (97). Suwelo and Fanny also find themselves to be discriminated against. Suwelo tells Hal and Lissie: “We sold to another black family, because we knew that one of the reasons our neighbours wanted to buy our house was to keep other black people out” (241). They relate their stories of painful past when they were sold.

The most intriguing scenes dealing with racism are the ones taking place in Africa. On the one hand, Africa is the homeland of black people and so it rightfully belongs to them. Consequently, when white people come there and discriminate against the blacks, this seems even more unfair than when they do so elsewhere. In that way, Africa is presented as a kind of micro-cosmos, displaying on a smaller scale all the things that are going on in the rest of the world. As Olivia says:

The Africa we encountered had already been raped of much of its sustenance. Its people had been sold into slavery. Considering both internal and external “markets,” this “trade” had been going on for well

over a thousand years; and had no doubt begun as the early civilizations of Africa were falling into decline, around the six-hundreds. Millions of its trees had been shipped to England and Spain and other European countries to make benches and altars in those grand European cathedrals one heard so much about. (148)

Ola, Fanny's father, also tells his daughter about how the white man came to Africa and made everything go wrong. As he says: "The whites had done terrible things to us; but beyond what they were doing to us, as adults, they were destroying our children, who were starving to death – their bodies, their minds, their dreams – right before our eyes" (307). About the race issue Fanny's father Ola says:

'This frustration with the whites,' Ola said, thoughtfully, and not responding to [Fanny's] smile, 'is a natural reaction to what they have, collectively, done to you, not simply as an individual, but as a people, a culture, a race. I have been responsible for the deaths of whites,' said Ola. 'It did not "liberate" me psychologically, as Fanon suggested it might. It did not oppress me further, either. You must harmonize with your own heart,' said Ola. 'Only you will know how you can do that; for each of us it is different. Then harmonize, as much as this is ever possible, your surroundings.' (319)

Black consciousness is not only pointing out to racism, but also rejecting it and celebrating one's colour. So, As Black consciousness refers to celebrating ones' race and colour, the characters take pride in their colour. Yet, on the other hand, the scenes in Africa display other significant things revolving around the race issue. First of all, the Africans show a profound race pride themselves. As Ola says: "the government, after throwing out a majority of the white man's laws, because they oppressed the

native population, decided that the one law they would assuredly keep was the one forbidding interracial marriage. This proved they had as much race pride as the white man, you see” (348). This pride is sustained by a myth in which the white man is seen as the “prodigal son of Africa” (309):

The African white man was born without melanin, or with only incredibly small amounts of it. He was born unprotected from the sun. He must have felt cursed by God. He would later project this feeling onto us and try to make us feel cursed because we are black; but black is a colour the sun loves. The African white man could not blame the sun his plight, not without seeming ridiculous, but could eventually stop people from worshipping it. (322)

Secondly, the book on several points criticizes how little black community itself has learned from the painful experiences of slavery, white domination and racism. Ola’s art, as Fanny argues, for example also gives insights “into the oppression of women, black women by black men, who should have had more understanding – having criticized the white man’s ignorance in dealing with black people for so long” (262). Black people are guilty of sexism and other forms of oppression and misuse of power themselves. When someone asks Ola why he does not write plays that put their country and government in a more favourable light, he answers:

THE WHITE MAN IS STILL HERE. Even when he leaves, he is not gone. EVERYONE ALL OVER THE WORLD KNOWS EVERYTHING THERE IS TO KNOW ABOUT THE WHITE MAN. That’s the essential meaning of television. BUT THEY KNOW NEXT TO NOTHING ABOUT THEMSELVES. When my people stop acting

like the white man, I can write plays that show them at their best! (182-183)

Nzingha, Fanny's half-sister, draws the same conclusion: "And I feel so frustrated, because the men can always run on and on about the white man's destructiveness and yet they cannot look into their own families and their own children's lives and see that this is just the destruction the white man has planned" (255).

Yet, what makes the book especially interesting is that Walker also illustrates how racial discrimination works both ways. The two most striking examples of this are Hal and Fanny. As Lissie tells Suwelo, Hal truly fears the white man. Fanny's fear goes further and is turned into sheer hatred. As she says:

I grew up believing that white people, collectively speaking, cannot bear to witness wholeness and health in others, just as they can't bear to have people different from themselves live among them. It seemed to me that nothing, no other people certainly, could live and be healthy in their midst. They seemed to need to have other people look bad – poor, ragged, dirty, illiterate. (300)

In conclusion, the overall message the book wants to convey is that a non-separatist attitude is the healthiest. All the characters in the novel are conscious about their Black race and discrimination and they directly or indirectly try to resist it. So they are aware that racism is a destructive force that only leads people away from the goal as a human being.

Characters' Consciousness about the Black Art

As in the essays of *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, there also is a lot of reference to artists in *The Temple of My Familiar*. Most strikingly almost every single character in the novel either is an artist from the start, or becomes one as part of their

spiritual development. Zedé the elder is a bell chimist and a tailor, Zedé 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 masseuse – massage, in her case, could be said to be an art – and a playwright, Carlotta becomes a bell chimist just like her grandmother and Suwelo takes up carpentry. Besides the characters being artists, there are also some references to real life artists, not by accident mostly women and artists presumably very influential for Walker herself: Lissie's grandmother is compared to "Sojourner Truth" (102), Bessie Head stays in the same hotel in Africa as Fanny, Fanny talks about an exposition of Frida Kahlo to her therapist (326) and about Nella Larson to her father (341).

In the book, the characters exhibit Black consciousness through arts. Their adherence to their own traditional arts in contrast to modern popular American arts is the reflection of Black consciousness. The status of being a Black artist seems to be linked to the development process most of the characters have to go through. Being an artist makes it easier to become an integrated person, perfectly in balance. There are three functions of the artist that are referred to explicitly in the novel. First of all, being an artist has to do with one's own development as listening to their inner Black selves can be a prime source of inspiration for artists. As Carlotta informs Suwelo:

It was the story about my grandmother, Zedé 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 Zedé told him – and begin to create. (402)

Secondly, as an artist you have a social function in general. This suggestion is clearly reminiscent of what Walker says about artists in her collection of “womanist” prose. As Nzingha says to Fanny: “Writers don’t cause trouble so much as they describe it. Once it is described, trouble takes on a life visible to all, whereas until it is described, and made visible, only a few are able to see it” (261). Thirdly, beside their general social function of informing people at large, they have also a guiding function for specific individuals in their inner circle. Sometimes they can see things more clearly which allows them to show their beloved ones the path they should follow. 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)

In this way, all the characters show their penchant for past African cultural and spiritual history; they are conscious about their situation in the white dominated surroundings and they act fascinatingly as black artists throughout the novel.

In this way, Walker’s *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989) is a representative novel in which the central character, Miss Lissie, is presented as a very conscious person elevated to the status of a goddess from primeval Africa, Lissie, who can remember her past lives. The impact of Lissie's revelations upon modern black consciousness is traced in the lives of Fanny (Celie's granddaughter) and her ex-husband, Suwelo, a middle-class academic. 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.

Walker's vehicles in raising Black consciousness include Arveyda, a guitarist and a African traditional healer Carlotta, his Latin-American wife; Suwelo, a history teacher; Fanny, his former wife; Hal, her lover; and a group of secondary characters and wisdom figures, Miss Celie and Miss Shug. In brief, there are numerous digressions, and the oral tales which emerge from and return to the past. Suwelo inherits a house in Baltimore and meets Hal, then Lissie, whose former lives, some in Africa, are fables of slavery and peace; Fanny recalls Grandmother Celie's words of wisdom, visits Africa and her father, the playwright Ola. She finally gets together with Arveyda who is curious about Africa in a sauna, where she takes his candle in her hand.

Whether as victim or horrified participant, the characters in the novel cannot escape racism as it acts like a web over their eyes. This is the agony at the root of *The Temple of My Familiar*, which the characters especially Fanny and Suwelo are very much aware of. Its fierceness erupts at many places in the text. It is an agony experienced by all too many black people in America.

Similarly, these characters are also very conscious about their past history, arts, their race and discrimination, while being aware of their American identity too. By sticking to their tradition, they seem to indirectly resist American materialism. The Black characters struggle to retain to what Du Bois calls “African Soul or spirituality” through the means of their ancient myth, rituals, art and legend.

V. Conclusion

This thesis on Walker's *Temple of My Familiar* concludes with the findings that the Black characters function as a group of conscious philosophers, artists, storytellers and shamans as they tell stories, pursue some kind of truth and knowledge and act as shamans. The characters exhibit a profound sense of Black consciousness as they do not suffer from inferiority complex for being Black; rather, they celebrate the fact that they possess unique history, myth and vision. At the same time they are doubly conscious of their situation – as Africans and Americana in America. This black consciousness inspires them to explore their own race in relation to the white race and white privilege and redefine the black world by using their own perspectives. So, this thesis argues that black consciousness, which comes through the memorization of ancient myth, rituals, art and legend, enables the blacks to resist all white privilege and prejudice that empowers the blacks culturally and spiritually.

The main characters – Zede, Carlotta and Arveyda; Fanny and Suwelo; Miss Lissie and Mr. Hal – relate their life stories. Lissie is one of the main deliverers of the Afro-centric world, one who remembers and passes on the combination of spiritual and physical survival lessons from her past reincarnations. She is also portrayed as an incarnation of goddess which she celebrates as it empowers her in African society.

In *The Temple of My Familiar* the characters such as Zede, Carlotta, Arveyda Fanny, Suwelo, Miss Lissie and Mr. Hal communicate through different sorts of mediums: dialogues, letters, tape recordings, fragments of a diary, paintings, music, stories, etc. By communicating, they all move to a different stage in their development towards wholeness as a person and help each other in the process. They share their insights, vision and knowledge. They all vaguely realize they have a purpose in each

other's lives. All of them strive for spiritual wholeness and for stronger spiritual personality.

Arveyda is a symbolic name as it symbolizes natural medicine. As the son of a partly Indian, partly African/Scot mother and a partly Mexican, partly Filipino/Chinese father, he acts as a shaman. Arveyda works to help bridge the gap between his wife Carlotta and her mother Zede through shamanism. He feels that he, not only as her husband, but as an artist especially, has the task to help Carlotta to come to terms with the past. Arveyda performs the role of a Black artist as a famous musician, whose music is praised for having spiritual powers, giving him the status of a healer in the eyes of his fans.

Arveyda really fulfils his function as a shaman by reconnecting mother and daughter. He helps Carlotta become whole, which she can only do by embracing her past rather than avoiding it. As he discovers power in typical African shamanic practice, it is the affirmation Black consciousness. He helps his wife Carlotta and her mother achieve happiness and wholeness through his shamanic power. The origin of his name and his shaman-like status as an artist suggest that Arveyda is one of the characters that is whole himself from the beginning of the novel.

Besides, the characters are racially conscious as they reflect on their domination at the hands of the whites. Lissie clearly recalls the time in which she was sold by her own uncle into slavery. She knows well how the whites make the blacks work for them as servants. This reflects her Black consciousness of racial discrimination. Another character, Fanny's father Ola attributes the sorry state of Africa to the invasion of whites.

Finally the Black consciousness of the characters is reflected through their dedication to traditional Black arts as in the novel, there also is a lot of reference to

artists. Most importantly, almost every single character in the novel either is an artist from the start, or becomes one as part of their spiritual development. Zedé the elder is a bell chimist and a tailor, Zedé 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 masseuse – massage, in her case, could be said to be an art – and a playwright, Carlotta becomes a bell chimist just like her grandmother and Suwelo takes up carpentry.

In this way, all of the characters exhibit a sense of Black consciousness, which gives the power and inspires them to celebrate blackness as means to resist the white normativity in Africa as well as America where African Americans face different sorts of discrimination.

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