

## **CHAPTER - V**

### **THE TEMPLE OF MY FAMILIAR : FROM WOMANIST CONSCIOUSNESS TO UNIVERSAL CONSCIOUSNESS**

The Temple of My Familiar<sup>1</sup> (1989) is the fourth novel published by Alice Walker. Alice Walker herself has called this novel as "a romance of the last 500,000 years." The novel attempts to provide a spiritual history of the universe. Once Walker had shown her female characters capable of breaking the bonds of oppression and defining themselves as whole persons, and once she had, at the same time, discovered divinity in all human and nonhuman elements of the universe, it was actually a small step to making women into goddesses. With one possible exception, the novel's goddesses constitute part of woman kind's distant past, yet the ancient matriarchal religions discovered by Walker's contemporary characters in the novel allow them to redefine relationship between the sexes. They are thus able to cure themselves of some of the same varieties of dis-ease based on societal expectations that plagued characters in Walker's earlier works. The lessons they learn about the need for balance between the flesh and the spirit help them redefine themselves.

Moreover, the novel presents the saga of a black woman called Lissie Lyles who has taken birth in different races and at different times. It is a chronicle not only of the life of the black woman but also of the woman of different races. It is the story about the manner in which women were brought under the control of patriachal social order, and also an analysis of how women lost their joy and bliss. The Temple of My Familiar

is basically an oral history written in the tradition of the African griots who were the living encyclopedias of their culture in non-literate societies. These poet-priests memorised and stored prodigious amounts of information, passing down the stories of their ancestors from one generation to the next, and thus keeping the communal identity alive. The griots were almost invariable men, but Alice Walker who has spent much of her literary career projecting womanist consciousness in her writing, inserts women into male roles and portrays female story tellers.

Miss Lissie's memory of past lives provides a convenient if artificial means of encapsulating in a single character centuries of the history of black womanhood. The story of her life is the story of thousands of lives, each one touched by the double concern of race and gender. She has been many women: an African peasant sold into slavery by her Uncle, subjected to the horrors of the Atlantic crossing, raped and brutalized; a Moorsess burned at the stake as a witch during Spanish Inquisition; a lesbian living in a harem, a pygmy living in a prehistoric forest that covered the whole earth. The novel opens with an epigraph of Lissie: "If they have lied about Me, they have lied about everything." Lissie suspects that people are wrongly informed of her. She believes that without knowing the black woman's story no story about the world could be complete and authentic. Thus hers is the only true story about herself and by implication about the black woman around her.

Looking back over her collective past, Miss Lissie realizes that she can recall few times when she was at peace. One such time was when she was a pygmy in African's ancient past. As a pygmy, she viewed the apes in the jungle as her "cousins". In fact, in her account, the peace-loving and gentle apes are superior to then rather loud contentious human counterparts. While men and women were segregated in the human community, family unity was an important element of Simian life. Miss Lissie recalls breaking with her tribe and taking up permanent residence among the apes because she and her mate chose to live together and, as a couple, raise their children, a sort of cohabitation unheard of among humans during that era.

Walker's history of the world as traced through both the novel's of African and South American characters records this "pattern of freedom", an alternating between times when men and women could and did live together more or less in harmony and times when harmony was best maintained by living apart. Man's need to dominate woman recurs periodically, however, and each time the two sexes enter a period of uneasy cohabitation.

Lissie enjoys the company of the following set of characters and undergoes a change.

**Mr. Hal and Lissie**

As the novel unfolds and Lissie's story multiply, she expands into a kind of womanist consciousness that finally attains aspects of universal consciousness. In the beginning Walker introduces Lissie in the form of pictures and then through Mr. Hal, a friend of Lissie who used to live on an island of the coast of Charleston in South Carolina. They fall in love with each other. While Mr. Hal's father hated his painting Lissie helped him paint in secret. But their relationship changes when Mr. Hal is forced to deliver his own child and as a result of this traumatic experience he loses interest in Lissie sexually. While giving birth to their child, Lissie's moans were turning into screams. He ruminates:

I could see in her eyes the hundreds of times she had suffered in giving birth, and I swore it would never happen again, and my desire for her, for sex with her or with any woman, died, and I became a eunuch myself. I just knew I would never be able to deal with making love to a woman ever again.<sup>2</sup>

Because of Hal's saintly conviction that there is too much suffering implicit in childbirth, he observes celibacy. As a result Lissie runs off with a married photographer. The photographer is not only sexually attracted to Lissie, but also enchanted by every picture he takes of her. However, after her short affair with the photographer, she comes back with a new baby in her womb. In spite of the fact, that she has run away and has come back, Hal never hates her. Lissie, on her part accepts her

husband's vow of chastity and sets up *menage a trios* to satisfy her physical needs, with a virile porter called Rafe, who happens to be Suwelo's uncle.

Miss Lissie mourns the loss of friendship that she, as a lion, had with women, pitying the poor women left alone with no fellow creatures but men. Still she admits that she was relieved to escape the "eternity of strife" that men and women, merged, had inaugurated : "In consorting with man, as he had become, woman was bound to lose her dignity, her integrity. It was a tragedy. But it was a fate lions were not prepared to share."<sup>3</sup>

Miss Lissie has kept this part of her past a secret from her husband, Hal, because he has an irrational but debilitating fear of cats. Occasionally Miss Lissie had to destroy a photograph that came too close to that part of the truth that she was trying to hide from Hal.

In contrast, she never hides any part of her self from Rafe. She says, "He loved the total me. None of my selves was hidden from him, and he feared none of them." She concludes, " So, loving Rafe and being raped by Rafe was the experience of many a lifetime. And very different from being loved by Hal, even when our passion for each other was at its height, Hal loved me like a sister/mystic/warrior/woman/mother. Which was nice. But that was only part of who I was. Rafe, on the other hand,

knowing me to contain everybody and everything, loved me wholeheartedly, as a goddess. Which I was."<sup>4</sup>

Rafe precedes Hal in death, and at her death Miss Lissie leaves for Hal a clue to her hidden feline past in the form of five pictures of lions she has painted. It remains for Suwelo to fill Hal in on the entirety of the woman who was Miss Lissie. Hal weeps to learn that Miss Lissie never felt that she could be her whole self with him. He is almost blind by that time; when Suwelo hands him one of the five paintings, he holds it upside down and can see only a single "reddish spot" which marks the return of Mr. Hal's lost vision.

The marriage between Miss Lissie and Hal, in all of its unorthodoxy, is presented as the closest to a fulfilling marriage that exists in the novel. What sustains their love is Hal's unwillingness to destroy in Miss Lissie the wildness of the lioness that he never knew, his understanding that she can never be emotionally dependent on any one man. As he watches the suffering she endures bearing their daughter, Lulu, he knows that he will never cause her such pain. After Lulu's birth he never again makes love to Miss Lissie. Theirs is a union of spirit, however, so complete that bodily union becomes insignificant. When each gives Suwelo a self-portrait, the artists signatures reveal that Hal has painted Miss Lissie's self-portrait and she his. Such is the closeness of their souls. The

portraits themselves are unique, for a while one shows the outline of a woman and the other the outline of a man, the outlines surround empty blue space.

Lissie believes that in her earlier lives she was born in Egypt, Atlantis and Africa. In addition to this she also feels that in all the lives in the recent past upto a few thousand years she was always a black woman. And as a black woman she was forced to undergo the most horrible, painful and dehumanizing experience.

In her life in Africa, when she was two years old, her father dies of heart attack. Lissie, her two sisters, a brother and her mother, as per the custom become her uncle's responsibility. Being pitiless her uncle sold all of them off as slaves. In order to escape from slavery, her mother prostrates before him for mercy but in vain. Her mother's story illustrates the plight of every black mother who has lost her spouse. Once they were sold to white men, they were thoroughly inspected to test their physical fitness. Lissie reveals that there were a few other black men, who were also sold into slavery along with them. They were sold out by the Mohametans' because there men and women used to carry on the ancient tradition of the worship of the mother, and to see a mother sold into slavery was a great deal of torture to them.



As a result of hundreds of years of the slave trade in Africa, this religion of motherworship was finally destroyed. Whole families who worshipped the Goddess of Africa "were routinely killed, sold into slavery or converted to Islam at the point of the sword."<sup>5</sup> The status of woman was invaded, raids on the women's temples, which existed in sacred groves of trees, were carried out and women and children were dragged out by the hair and forced to marry into male dominated tribes. In Walker's words:

The ones who were not forced to do this were either executed or sold into tribe whose language was different. The men had decided they would be creator, and they went about dethroning woman systematically. To sell women and children for whom you no longer wished to assume responsibility or to sell those who were mentally infirm or who had in some way offended you, became a new tradition, an accepted way of life.<sup>6</sup>

However, these motherworshippers would be the hardest of the Africans to break, for they were devoted to the Goddess. Consequently, they were heavily punished and assaulted. Naturally, Lissie felt helpless and wanted to die desparately.

Except for the Poles, Europeans were apparently not prepared to accept a black mother for their white Christ and thus burned at the stake the daughters of the Moors, claiming that both their colour and their gender allied them with the devil. Recalling their African Eden, the women seek solace by talking to the animals with whom they had once felt

kinship, yet that sense of kinship with the nonhuman only added to their persecution. Consorting with animals became a crime punishable by burning at the stake.

Walker brings out the horrifying truths about the way women were treated. Lissie tells that they were possessed by men like any other commodity. They were forcibly pushed into slavery and branded with their master's name, of which Lissie herself is a victim. Lissie tells us that she along with other slaves was dragged to a ship. At the plank that led up onto the deck, their last remaining garment, the strip of cotton around their hips was snatched away and they were forced on to the ship bald, branded and necked as they came into the world. Lissie fought to hold on to that last small badge of modesty but a white man struck her a blow to the head almost without looking at her- and because he had blue eyes, she fancied he must be blind- and she reeled onto the ship with the rest. When the ship landed, they were sold to the needy planters. Lissie, her sisters and brothers were sold to different planters; thus, making them impossible to see each other in future. She informs Suwelo about her peaceless life :

In lifetime after lifetime I have known oppression:  
from parents, siblings, relatives, governments,  
countries, continents. As well as from my own  
body and mind.<sup>7</sup>

Alice Walker firmly believes that one of the chief reasons of women's exploitation has been the male's greed for possession. She tells us that because men:

were stronger, at least during those periods when women were weak from childbearing, began to think of owning women and children ---- when man saw he could own one woman and her children, he became greedy and wanted as many as he could get.<sup>8</sup>

The title of the novel The Temple of My Familiar comes from an experience Lissie had in one of her former lives. She lived in southwest as a Native American in a temple. It was a simple, square, one room structure painted with a turquoise and deep blue symbols for rain and storm. Her familiar (what we these days call a "pet") was a creature that was a small, incredibly beautiful creature that was part bird, and part fish. Once, she took it up, put it on the ground and placed a clear-glass bowl over it. However, it didn't die. It was looking up at Lissie curiously. Then again she put a white bowl on top of it. It then was rushing furiously about in the snow. Unconsciously she was trying to control the familiar. It is only after sometime Lissie is able to understand the meaning of this kind of activity on the familiar's part. It was about freedom and that by her action she was destroying their relationship. In the end Lissie imprisoned her beautiful little familiar under a metal washtub and never gave a thought to how cruel she was to her pet. To her surprise the familiar

broke the bottom of the tub and came out in the open air. "It looked at me with pity as it passed. Then, using wings it had never used before, it flew away."<sup>9</sup> Thus she understands the primacy of freedom even among the most primitive creatures. Miss Lissie realizes that out of pride and distraction she has betrayed the beautiful little familiar that had always been loyal to her. She has betrayed her own spirit by trying to deny it the freedom of the cosmos.

Talking about one of her lives she tells us that she had lived with her mother at the edge of an immense wood. They lived in a kind of house, made of straw. She tells that her mother was the queen of the group, a small group or a tribe. Queen then meant a wise woman, a healer, a woman of experience and vision, a woman superbly trained by her mother. A really good person, whose words were always heard by the clan. As a child Lissie had spent most of her time with her mother. Lissie's mother had a familiar, an enormous lion, and they used to go together everywhere. However this lion also had a family of his own. There was a lot of exchange of visits between them and in the lion's little family of cubs, Lissie was always welcome.

This was the time when people used to meet other animals in much the same way the people today meet each other. Lissie's mother and her familiar had known each other since their childhood. All the women in

those days had their familiars. Men used to live in separate tribes and they didn't possess any pets. However, eventually in limitation of the women and their familiars, men also learned to tame the forest dogs. But compared with the lions, dogs were basically opportunistic and lazy, sorely lacking in integrity, self respect and culture.

Through a series of illustrious instances of the bond between woman and agencies of nature, Walker effectively recreates the primeval world of the matriarchs. It was a world in which women were independent, free emancipated in the true sense, Matriarchy, as Walker seems to suggest, through a variety of rich anecdotes and narratives, is synonymous with women's freedom and autonomy. It was a self-contained and independent system that rested in love, work, togetherness and companionship in the truest womanist sense. The harmony and integrity of such an unfallen world was shattered by man's feeling of guilt and shame; or we could claim the skin-complex. Consequently the patriarchal order of totems, greed and power was created.

Thus we come to know the world of women, the position and status, power and strength they enjoyed in the past and at the same time how the position and status enjoyed by them was gradually taken away from them. We also come to know the very roots of the rise and fall of women in general and the black women in particular.

### **Arveyda and Carlotta**

Another couple in the novel is Arveyda, a popular musician and his wife Carlotta, a South American wife and a daughter of Zede. Carlotta is the member of the women's studies department at California University whom Suwelo thinks as a Latina Corretta king and a woman of color. In past Carlotta has endured the humiliation of learning that her husband, Arveyda, is in love with her mother Zede.

It is Zede who tells Arveyda of a time in the history of South America when women were priestesses who produced the earth. The birth process was mystery to men, even though it sometimes produced little beings more like them than like the women. Ironically, it was the men who made women into priestess because "what the mind doesn't understand, it worships or fears. And so, if the producer of the earth was a large woman, a goddess, then women must be her priests, and must possess great and supernatural powers."<sup>10</sup> Thus in past men had elevated women to the status of goddesses and priests which men have forgotten today.

By the time of Carlotta's grandmother, Zede the Elder, men and women had reversed roles; and men had become priests of a joyless and spiritless religion. The only remnant of man's worship of the mother was the vague memory that priests must be some how feminine. "What they remembered was that they must be like women, and if they castrated

themselves at a certain age- the time of puberty, when they chose or were chosen for the priesthood they could sound like woman and speak to the universe in woman's voice."<sup>11</sup> From that time onwards women used their creative talents by means ornamenting of themselves to adorn the male priests. Arveyda was highly impressed by Zede's story.

Carlotta meets Arveyda during her last year in college when she delivers a cape of peacock feathers her mother has created for him. Arveyda has also made a matching cape for Carlotta, and in their finery they too parade on Halloween through the streets of San Francisco. They marry and have two children.

After Arveyda drops Carlotta for her mother, Carlotta puts on another type of costume. Later she admits that for a time she was a "female impersonator" putting on the onward garb that would make her attractive to men. When she wears Arveyda's shoes she tells him :

It didn't make any sense, wearing the shoes. They were killers. But even if they destroyed my feet and crippled my legs, I knew I wasn't giving them up. I liked the way men looked at me in high heels. The look in their eyes made me forget how lonely I was. How discarded.<sup>12</sup>

Thus Carlotta would like to play the role of man. Carlotta has rediscovered her creative roots. When she heard the story of her grandmothers pipe and chimes, she decided to become bell chime player.

In Arveyda's studio she shows Suwelo her instruments, wind chimes of all shapes, sizes, colours and descriptions from all over the world, which she plays with a hardwood stick. She lives in Arveyda's guest house, down a path and a ravine from the main house, and she is as happy as she has ever been. At the end Carlotta and Suwelo are still married, yet maintaining separate residences.

### Suwelo and Carlotta

when Carlotta was alone, Suwelo attracted towards her and keeps secret relations with her, when his wife is away on an extended trip to Africa. Suwelo knows that he is using her, she is equally convinced that she is using him. When Fanny, Suwelo's wife returns from Africa, Carlotta tells her that she could have murdered Suwelo, but that all along he was just a figment of my imagination. A distraction from my misery. He was just 'something' to hold on to; to be seen with; to wrestle with on the kitchen floor. Thus their relationship is not genuine. Fanny sees the irony in what Carlotta reveals : "She thinks how Suwelo believes she took advantage of Carlotta and how this is what she herself had thought. They were both wrong. There had not been a victim and an oppressor; there'd really been two victims, both of them carting around lonely, needy bodies that were essentially blind flesh."<sup>13</sup> Thus Fanny reveals that both of them come together only to satisfy their sexual desires and not for living



together for ever.' Their love is not genuine but based on physical satisfaction.

Suwelo and Carlotta relationship lacks in genuine spirit. Carlotta describes him as a mere figment of her imagination, Suwelo declares her a being of no substance. Miss Lissie, however, makes him realize that he must ask Carlotta's forgiveness, for "it is a sin to behave as if a person whose body you use is a being without substance. 'Sin' being denial of another's reality of who and what she or he actually is."<sup>14</sup> Lissie traces much of Suwelo's own pain to the fact that he is a fragmented being, in spite of the fact that his name is the same as the rune for *wholeness*. Miss Lissie tells him that it is the memory of her mothers "abandoned and suffering face" that has made him fear knowing too much of women's pain. Suwelo has tried to close doors to his past, chose them against memory and pain.

When Suwelo does go in search of Carlotta, he finds that the female impersonator is most definitely gone. Her hair is now that of a concentration-camp survivor. Gone are her sexy clothes and even her voluptuous curves her slender, flat-breasted body vulnerable, as a flower. Suwelo tells her that she doesn't even look like a woman anymore. "Obviously" she says, "this is how a woman looks."<sup>15</sup>

At the end of the novel Suwelo and Carlotta join with an intimacy they never experienced when they approach each other merely as blind flesh. Theirs is now an intimacy of the spirit, and Suwelo even undergoes a symbolic spiritual rebirth when he plunges into the hot tub they have been sharing and holds himself beneath the warm water for several moments. Thus Suwelo is changed man who wishes to live amicably with Carlotta.

### Suwelo and Fanny

Another couple in the novel is Suwelo, a history professor at a California University and his wife, Fanny Nzingha, women's studies teacher and a granddaughter of Celie of The Color Purple. Fanny is in love with Suwelo, but she is not in love with marriage. Hence she proposes to divorce her husband and compels him to live in a separate part of the house. She lays down the condition that they could see each other as and when they choose. She puts her ideas in the following words:

But I don't want to be married. I don't want to end our relationship; I want to change it. I don't want to be married. Not to you , not to anybody. But I don't want to lose you either.<sup>16</sup>

Marriage for Fanny means slavery. Hence she declares : "I've never felt free, never in my life. And I want to." And to her "freedom must mean never having ( or being able) to embarrass anybody."<sup>17</sup> She is convinced

of the enslavement through marriage, so much so that she hates the very institution of marriage. She believes that the wedding ring people wear on their fingers is nothing but a "remnant of a chain". And chains have always been an enemy of freedom.

Thus Fanny is not against sexual relationship between men and women, but against any kind of formal regimentation of their relationship. Hence, she disapproves the notions of formal marriage. No doubt, she loves Suwelo, but she doesn't want Suwelo to be owned by her or vice versa. She wants to have a free and fair relationship with Suwelo as equals.

Suwelo's relationship with his wife Fanny is disrupted by her disturbing habit of falling in love with spirits. Fanny's distractedness helps him to justify himself when he is unfaithful to her. Suwelo describes Fanny as a "space cadet", but the relevant contrast between Lissie and Fanny is not lost on him. He tells Miss Lissie "you are a spirit that has had many bodies, and you travel through time and space that way said Suwelo. Fanny is a body with many spirits shooting off to different realms almost everyday."<sup>18</sup>

Fanny wants her union with another physical being still to be an affair of the spirit. In frustration Suwelo asks Fanny why she loves him, if she indeed loves him at all, and she responds, "I love you for your

breath."<sup>19</sup> Miss Lissie and Hal laugh at this description, for they have known just such a union.

Fanny defines marriage as a bonding of souls so complete anyway that nothing a preacher could say about man's putting it asunder has any relevance and the marriage ceremony becomes a hypocrisy performed for the sake of the state. Divorce for Suwelo and Fanny thus means only "the first shedding of any nonintrinsic relatedness". Fanny moves out of their bedroom and eventually out of their house. Like their distant African ancestors Fanny and Suwelo find that separate spaces increase their harmony rather than disrupt it. When they can come together as though meeting for the first time, their lovemaking has a freshness to it.

There is a security for Fanny in keeping her relationship as much as possible on spiritual level, but hers is a false sense of security she knows she must overcome. At one point in the novel, as she gives Carlotta a message, Fanny explains that she left academia to become a masseuse because she needed to touch the bodies of other people even people she might not like, in order to force herself to confront their bodily reality and also their pain. Carlotta who is about to begin an affair with Fanny's husband, Suwelo, feels her naked body stiffen under Fanny's usually soothing hands at the mention of murder, yet Fanny's anger is not that individualised, nor is it directed towards people of color.

Suwelo describes Fanny as a victim of racism who sees racism everywhere. She looks and whose characteristic response is thoughts of violence. She tells her therapist about the shining, gold-handled sword that is constantly not in her hand but in her look and about her visions of blond heads rolling into the gutter. Out of fear of the murderer who exists within her, Fanny withdraws as far as possible from human contact, preferring the safer company of her spirit lovers. When therapist uses hypnosis to get to the root of Fanny's feelings toward whites under hypnosis, Fanny admits that she envisions whites as well as eating.

However, Fanny is hopeful that she can stop racial oppression before it starts in her. She tells her therapist, "I won't be a racist. I won't be a murderer. I won't do to them what they have done to black people. I'll die first."<sup>20</sup>

Fanny's temperament is purely womanist. She is devoted to put an end to the enslavement of black woman at the hands of the black men. She wants to live with Suwelo not as a wife, not as dependent and vice versa but as an autonomous human being. Hence she plans to build a house the way M' Sukta's people used to build. They have decided to build a house modeled on the prehistoric ceremonial house of the Ababa tribe.

In her 1984 interview with Donna Britt of the Washington Post, Walker explained that she spent the early stages of the writing of The Temple of My Familiar searching for reasons why people would willingly give over their spirituality to sources outside themselves. The answer, when it came, confirmed her belief that "the real temple of the spirit is not a church or synagogue, but freedom."<sup>21</sup> In order to achieve spiritual freedom, Suwelo and Fanny, Carlotta and Arveyda have to return to the life style of their ancestors, a life style in which neither sex seeks dominion over the other and thus one in which neither sex must surrender its spirituality to the other. Each couple chooses to live apart and free in order to live in harmony. In the end of the novel male, as well as female, characters succeed in re-entering traditional modes of thought. Walker's message is that prehistoric African spirituality survives and is perpetuated in the culture of women, her work is a powerful feminist theology.

Walker comments on the role of men and reveals the true reasons for the plight of women. Women were entirely content with their situation. However, men were still infatuated with their relative newness. Women were already in adornment and were already in high fashion. However, women didn't know why they were even interested in high fashion.

Initially, men both worshipped and feared women and kept themselves away from them. Surprisingly they understood that some of

the children the women were making, bore a striking resemblance to themselves. Obviously, they had made an important discovery about women's ability to produce life. However, men felt that this secret was kept hidden by women for a long time. The fact that the life women produced came out of a hole at her bottom came as a new knowledge to men. Consequently, they suffered from vagina envy.

In fact Walker suggests that the whole idea of priestliness is rooted in vaginal envy. Priesthood, as we know it, originated from the ideas of celibacy, and going away from one's wife and children. For, to become a priest in the old days meant one must do without one's very genitals. Men had castrated themselves at the time of puberty so that when they were chosen for priesthood they could sound like women and speak to the universe in women's voice. This is how priesthood was established. Subsequently, it was systematically used as a tool to exploit women.

Lissie and Zede take readers into the past. Carlotta, Arveyda, Fanny, Suwelo project the problems of women in our contemporary era. Through a set of such relationships The Temple of My Familiar unfold the womanist meaning of freedom and the perpetual attempt by men to dominate women and other men. The history of the war between sexes is dramatized through the stories told by Lissie. Here Walker tells us all the stories of the Blacks had forgotten during the course of time.

Throughout her works she has celebrated each link that has been forged between her and those who have gone before. The Temple of My Familiar carries that search to its limit. Asked by Oprah Winfrey in 1989 where the novel came from, Walker responded that it came "from me wanting to know my Mama, you know, I wanted to know the very first woman, our common mother from all those years ago and I just ----- thought and dreamed my way back to her."<sup>22</sup>

Thus Walker recapitulates the history of woman since the days civilisation began and describes how the society which was based on the egalitarian principles was transformed into a society of male dominance. Walker projects her own vision of a more complete, harmonious and healthy human beings, healthy in body and expansive in soul. To do so, she reinterprets history by initiating an alternative myth -- the goddess before God, the mother before the father, womb envy rather than penis envy and presents her perspectives on race, feminism, love, marriage and Africa.

Through a series of short stories and anecdotes and telling vignettes, Walker rewrites the social history from the perspective of a womanist consciousness. In order to eliminate the in-built gender bias, the narrative idiom is refreshingly purged of the stale cliches and familiar cadences. Inspired by the rediscovery of Africa and the "Power of



blackness", in its new form, Walker recreates a new world order defined and determined by the female of the species. The new empowerment confers on the women responsibilities that they are capable of shouldering with compassion and dignity. Walker wants women to walk tall in all spheres of human endeavour. Thus Walker's womanist consciousness leads her to universal consciousness.

**NOTES AND REFERENCES**

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4. Ibid., p. 372.
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6. Ibid., pp. 63-64.
7. Ibid., p. 82.
8. Ibid., p. 86.
9. Ibid., p. 118.
10. Ibid., p. 49.
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12. Ibid., p. 294.
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16. Ibid., p. 137.
17. Ibid., p. 138.
18. Ibid., p. 245.
19. Ibid., p. 284.
20. Ibid., p. 300.
21. Donna Britt, "Alice Walker and the Inner Mysteries Unraveld," Washington Post, 8 May, 1989, B-4.
22. Oprah Winfrey Show # 710. Harpo Productions Inc, 2, June 1989.