Chapter Two

Assimilation of Different World Religions: A Paradigmatic Shift

I want something else;
a different system
entirely.
One not seen
on this earth
for thousands of years. If ever.
Democratic Womanism.

I want to vote and work for a way of life
that honors the feminine;
a way that acknowledges
the theft of the wisdom
female and dark Mother leadership
might have provided our spaceship
all along.

(Walker, The World Will Follow Joy 173)

Walker’s literary writings are undoubtedly couched in undeniably candid and self-assertive terms, which run as a counter-discourse to the existing Western rationalistic discourse. Barbara T. Christian remarks, “There is a sense in which the ‘forbidden’ in society is consistently approached by Walker as a possible route to truth” (125). Apart from her literary output, Walker’s indomitable spirit can be witnessed in her unrelenting political activism in the fields of feminism and ecological awareness. She has been a staunch proponent of black women consciousness as she claims their righteous space and reinterprets existing history from their perspective. Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas rightly affirms the efforts of such women who are revolutionary in terms of reclaiming their identities. She writes:
Knowledge is no longer interpreted in light of the gaze of racist and misogynistic “subjectivities” that masquerade as human normativity, but rather taking into consideration a new “Black-woman” consciousness. These women have claimed their turf, re-envisioned history, mined the motherlode of their own wisdom, shared these teachings, and instilled methods for others so that the revolution will continue. (2)

Walker has enriched the arena of feminist spirituality by transcending the narrow dichotomization of politics and spirituality. Walker’s views are echoed by many ecofeminists like Judith Plaskow who do not consider spirituality and politics to be polar opposites, instead “[p]olitics becomes an expression of spirituality in its intent to create more human institutions, and religion itself is transformed by politics” (71). According to Plaskow, spirituality, in its true sense, is rooted in contemporary realities. She writes, “When spirituality is understood from a feminist perspective – not in otherworldly terms, but as the fullness of our relationship to ourselves, others, the earth and God – it cannot possibly be detached from the conditions of our existence” (71). Many feminists consider the liberational struggles for attaining equality and justice as integral part of spirituality. bell hooks, a noted African-American writer and critic also asserts the essential link between spirituality and political action:

Feminist spirituality created a space for everyone to interrogate outmoded belief systems and created new paths. Representing god in diverse ways, restoring our respect for the sacred feminine, it has helped us find ways to affirm and/ or re-affirm the importance of spiritual life. Identifying liberation from any form of domination and oppression as essentially a spiritual quest returns us to a spirituality which unites spiritual practice with our struggles for justice and liberation. (Feminism 109)

Walker has always questioned the outmoded, rigid religious practices and shown a keen interest in adapting and adopting the theological and cultural practices of other world religions. According to Sugiyama Naoko, in terms of both race and gender, criticism of organized Christian practices, theology, and interest in non-Christian religious alternatives, have been motivated by political consciousness, appeared en masse, and have come to be
represented in African-American women’s literature as well as elsewhere (178). She further postulates that in their fictional works, non-Christian religions symbolize the cultural and spiritual survival of African-Americans. The literature of African-American women resonates with earnest attempts to effect racial, gender, and environmental justice. They incorporate the images of the female deity, female rather than male characters in a privileged position, and use African-American spiritual resources that have origins in African culture. Walker, apart from assimilating and voicing her African-American heritage, portrays the essence of her native American ancestry. Walker’s multi-cultural spirituality is quintessential in her writings. bell hooks expounds, “Truly, there can be no feminist transformation of our culture without a transformation in our religious beliefs” (Feminism 106). Walker’s writings show reverence for earth-based religions, attuned to belief in the existence of pre-patriarchal societies where Goddess worship was the norm. At the same time, she finds spiritual wholeness in her ancestral lineage including her native American roots which she does not negate in favour of her African heritage. She enriches her writings by drawing on resources, ideas, beliefs, values, ethics, and rituals from diverse traditions.

It has already been discussed in the previous chapter that in the emerging field of feminist theology, various crosscurrents can be witnessed and it does not follow a straight trajectory of thought and praxis. Though the underlying premise of all feminist theologies is more or less the same, they follow diverse and varied pathways to restructure the dominant male paradigm which has stifled the autonomy of women by barring them from holding positions in churches, temples or synagogues. Feminist theologians are trying to deconstruct old patriarchal religious symbols and reinterpret them, and study images of women in the religions sacred texts and matriarchy-based religions. Many counter-cultural feminists are disillusioned with the monotheistic religions. They believe that monotheistic religions have done much harm to the self-esteem and morale of the women, relegating them to a subservient position in the society. Merlin Stone refers to a statement by Bishop C.L. Meyers opposing the ordination of women: “Christ is the source of Priesthood. The sexuality of Christ is no accident nor is his masculinity incidental. This is the divine choice” (ix). According to radical feminist theologians, the patriarchal religions are hopelessly irredeemable as they leave no scope for the empowerment of women. These feminists are trying to revive and recreate Goddess-based religions. Carol P. Christ, Charlene Spretnak, Merlin Stone, Riane Eisler, and Starhawk are some of the key figures in the field of Goddess Spirituality.
“The Goddess Movement” is an overall trend in religious or spiritual beliefs and practices that emerged out of second-wave feminism, predominantly in North America, Western Europe, Australia and New Zealand in the 1970s (“The Goddess Movement, Second Wave Feminism & Ecology”). Carol P. Christ explains that in 1976, a journal devoted to the God/d/ess emerged, titled Lady Unique. In 1975, the first women's spirituality conference was held in Boston, attended by 1,800 women and in 1978, a conference organized by the University of Santa Cruz on the Goddess drew over 500 people (“Why Women Need the Goddess”). Rebelling against the male-dominated religions and male-gendered language used for God, some women embraced the idea of a female deity that was more in tune with the feminist beliefs and inherent value of women. Since the 1970s, “Goddess-worshipping spirituality” has emerged as a recognizable international cultural movement. The re-birth of Goddess worship informs and shapes a re-embodiment of women’s spirituality and politics; thus transcending national and religious boundaries. It also embraces new forms of social responsibility and ecological commitment. Charlene Spretnak posits, “The movement called “women’s spirituality” is vital and diverse, finding form within traditional religions, in the contemporary rebirth of Goddess spirituality, and in myriad other personal and collective expressions. It has proven to be a potent antidote to the negation of the female so central to patriarchal culture” (272).

By 1972, the time of the publication of Mary Daly’s ground-breaking critique of the established religion in her book Beyond God the Father, religious studies scholar, Carol P. Christ had become alienated from the institutionalized religion. Over the course of several of her books including Laughter of Aphrodite and Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest, Carol Christ reveals that the writings of Kate Chopin, Margaret Atwood, Doris Lessing, Adrienne Rich, and Ntozake Shange can inform women's search for spiritual renewal, and chronicle her own discovery of feminist spirituality and journey from a feminism rooted within traditional theological studies to a post-Christian stance of Goddess-centered spirituality. Gayle Graham Yates maintains that many feminists prefer the word “spirituality” for defining the import, immediacy, and intensity of their experience and understanding (61). In Yates’ words:

Rather than the word “religion,” associated with historically established and institutionalized forms, feminists sometimes chose the word “spirituality” to label their discovery and affirmation. For an individual, for a group of women, or for an
institution, women's spirituality suggests a vital, active, energizing interior perception.

In “Why Women Need the Goddess”, Carol P. Christ asserts that, “[t]he simplest and most basic meaning of the symbol of the Goddess is the acknowledgment of the legitimacy of female power as a beneficent and independent power” (277).

Similar views are espoused by Starhawk who says, “The concept of a religion that worshipped a Goddess was amazing and empowering. Raised Jewish, I had been very religious as a child and had pursued my Jewish education to an advanced level. But as I reached young womanhood in the late sixties, something seemed lacking” (SD 14). She realized that patriarchy had stifled the wholeness of womanhood and Goddess-reverencing religions could lead to women’s real empowerment and broader way of experiencing God. She advances her view point in these words, “The Goddess tradition opened up new possibilities. Now my body, in all its femaleness . . . was sacred. The wild power of nature, the intense pleasure of sexual intimacy, took center stage as paths to the sacred instead of being denied, denigrated, or seen as peripheral” (SD 14). Starhawk suggests that worship of the ‘Divine female principle’ is becoming an increasingly important religion in the contemporary world, and claims that after the suppression of Goddess-worship by patriarchal religions, and “[t]he Goddess has at last stirred from sleep, and women are awakening to [their]. . . ancient power” (“Witchcraft and Women’s Culture” 262). Starhawk has a great faith in the redemptive power of the Goddess. She writes, “I see the next few years as being crucial in the transformation of our culture away from the patriarchal death cults and toward the love of life, of nature, of the female principle. . . . The long sleep of the Mother Goddess is ended. May she awaken in each of our hearts” (268).

Spiritual interest in ancient Goddesses in the West emerges from the archaeological investigations by prodigious research scholars like Marija Gimbutas, who is also an author of a dozen books about ancient and living Goddesses. Gimbutas is considered to be largely responsible for the contemporary insurgence of Goddess-oriented religions. Gimbutas maintains and tries to validate a prehistoric Goddess past by leaning heavily on “comparative mythology, early historical sources, and linguistics as well as on folklore and historical ethnography” (Language). She maintains that the Goddess-centered religion existed for a very long time, much longer than the Indo-European and the Christian religions (which
represent a relatively short period of human history), “leaving an indelible imprint on the Western psyche” (*Language* xvii). She also connects the Goddess-centered art, including pots and clay figurines having no images of warfare and male-domination with a social order where women were the heads of clans or families. According to Gimbutas, “Memories of a long-lasting gynocentric past could not be erased, and it is not surprising that the feminine principle plays a formidable role in the subconscious dream and fantasy world. It remains (in Jungian terminology) “the repository of human experience” and a “depth structure”” (*Language* 320). Referring to the controversies related to the validity and authenticity of such excavations, Starhawk explains, “Archaeologists may never be able to prove or disprove Marija Gimbutas’ theories, but the wealth of ancient images she presents to us are valuable because they work – they function elegantly, right now, as gateways to that deep connected state” (“Religion from Nature, not Archaeology”).

According to many Goddess-worshipping feminists, the main theme of the Goddess symbolism is the mystery of birth, death and the renewal of life, not only human but all life in the whole cosmos. Gimbutas is critical of archaeological literature which promotes misconceptions by associating the female figurines with “fertility Goddesses” or “Mother Goddess”. She writes, “Earth fertility became a prominent concern only in the food-producing era; hence it is not a primary function of the Goddess and has nothing to do with sexuality. . . . It is true that there are mother images and protectors of young life, and there was a Mother Earth and Mother of the Dead, but the rest of the female images cannot be generalized under the term Mother Goddess” (*Language* 316).

Like Ruether, Starhawk also believes that what gives the Goddess tradition validity is how it works for us now, at the moment, not whether or not someone else worshipped this particular image in the past. In the words of Linda E. Olds:

The growing awareness of the power of metaphor and symbol to shape our views of reality and to carry our most profound sense of personhood and spiritual identity has led many feminist theologians to seek not only to move metaphorically *Beyond God the Father* (Daly 1973) but also to search for traces within existing religious traditions of a female-centered spirituality. The search has involved not only research within the Judaeo-Christian tradition of pre-patriarchal imagery informing the heritage of Sophia
(Wisdom) and Mary, but has taken feminist scholars into Greek, Egyptian, and ancient Middle Eastern traditions as well as into the heritage of Buddhist and Hindu religions. (226)

An important strand that runs through all forms of Goddess-based religions is the identification of sexuality and spirituality as parts of one whole. Starhawk posits, “Goddess religion identifies sexuality as the expression of the creative life force of the universe. It is not dirty, nor is it merely “normal”; it is sacred, the manifestation of the Goddess” (SD 224-25). Audre Lorde, a noted black feminist critic and scholar, critiques the traditional dichotomy drawn between sexuality and spirituality:

... it has become fashionable to separate the spiritual (psychic and emotional) from the political, to see them as contradictory or antithetical. ... In the same way, we have attempted to separate the spiritual and the erotic, thereby reducing the spiritual to a world of flattened affect, a world of the ascetic who aspires to feel nothing. But nothing is farther from the truth. For the ascetic position is one of the highest fear [sic], the gravest immobility. The severe abstinence of the ascetic becomes the ruling obsession. And it is one not of self-discipline but of self-abnegation. (The Uses of Erotic 56)

Starhawk believes Witchcraft to be a religion of feminism and ecology which can contribute in developing a system of ethics and concept of justice. Walker has also used the principles and ethics of witchcraft in her novels to show its feminist and ecological side. Like Walker, Starhawk has taken part in non-violent protests against nuclear power, challenged military interference in Central America, and has also taken steps to preserve the environment. In Starhawk’s words, “It led me down to Nicaragua and into ongoing work to build alliances with people of color and the native peoples whose own earth-based religions and traditional lands are being threatened or destroyed” (SD 18). Starhawk considers her tradition to be an evolving, dynamic one and feels proud in calling herself a witch. Her spirituality is not of the separatist bandwagon as her group ‘Reclaiming’ honors both God and Goddess, and works with male and female images of divinity. She maintains, “Inclusiveness
is especially important when we consider the mysteries, the deep question of our lives” (SD 19). The study uses and applies Starhawk’s insights into earth-based Goddess religions to Walker’s novels which resonate with Goddess imagery. For Starhawk, the image of a female deity serves as a means of empowerment whether or not matriarchal societies or Goddess-worshipping religions actually existed. Starhawk maintains:

To us, Goddesses, Gods, and for that matter, archaeological theories are not something to believe in, nor are they merely metaphors. An image of deity, a symbol on a pot, a cave painting, a liturgy are more like portals to particular states of consciousness and constellations of energies. Meditate on them, contemplate them, and they take you someplace, generally into some aspect of those cycles of death and regeneration. The heart of my connection to the Goddess has . . . much more to do with what I notice when I step outside my door: that oak leaves fall to the ground, decay and make fertile soil. Calling that process sacred means that I approach this everyday miracle with a sense of awe and wonder and gratitude, and that in very practical terms, I compost my own garbage. (“Religion from Nature, not Archaeology”)  

Many ecofeminists believe in the solidarity of human beings with the natural processes of creation so as to foster ecological balance. In “A Pagan response to Katrina”, Starhawk explains how we need to work in synchronicity with the Goddess to bring about ecological healing: “The Goddess is not omnipotent—she is co-creative with human beings. She needs human help to create fertility and regeneration. The elements, the ancestors, the spirit beings that surround us want to work with us to protect and heal the earth, but they need our invitation.” She talks further about the constructive as well as destructive energies of the Goddess. She maintains: “The Goddess does not punish us, but she also doesn’t shield us from the logical consequences of our actions. Katrina’s destructive power was a consequence of a human course that is contemptuous of nature.” A native American proverb says, “If we don’t change our direction, we’re going to wind up where we’re headed.”
In the words of L. Teal Willoughby, “Symbols are powerful transformers of consciousness; a closer look at the role of symbols in ecofeminists’ rituals can offer insights on how they work in the process of moving out of the patriarchal worldview into an ecofeminist consciousness” (133). The symbol of Goddess also has the potential to bring about transformation and liberation for women. In the words of Carol P. Christ:

The symbol of Goddess aids the process of naming and reclaiming the female body and its cycles and processes. In the ancient world and among modern women, the Goddess symbol represents the birth, death, and rebirth processes of the natural and human worlds. The female body is viewed as the direct incarnation of waxing and waning, life and death cycles in the universe. . . . The life-giving powers of the Goddess in her creative aspect are not limited to physical birth, for the Goddess is also seen as the creator of all the arts of civilization, including healing, writing, and the giving of just law. Women in the middle of life who are not physical mothers may give birth to poems, songs, and books, or nurture other women, men, and children. They too are incarnations of the Goddess in her creative, life-giving aspect. . . . Thus, women learn to value youth, creativity, and wisdom in themselves and other women. (“Why Women Need the Goddess”)

It becomes clear that the true meaning of belief in Goddess entails a celebration and affirmation of natural life processes, creativity, sexuality, and wisdom. Along with respect for female power, the Goddess traditions manifest a deep reverence for nature. However, androcentric religions have considered nature as a commodity to be exploited along with women. Clearly religions need to be involved in the development of a more comprehensive worldview which pays due respect to women, and develop an ethics to ground movements toward sustainability. Taking into consideration the present environmental degradation, it is of formidable urgency that an alliance of scholars, religious leaders, and activists create a common ground for dialogue and creative partnership in envisioning and implementing long range of sustainable solutions to some of our most pressing environmental problems. It is essential to mobilize the sensibilities of people because the attitudes and values that shape people’s concept of nature come primarily from religious worldviews and ethical practices.
Any religion across the globe, in order to show its true essence and respect for the interconnected matrix of life, should be able to provide a broad orientation to the cosmos and human roles in it.

In an interview by Evelyn C. White, Walker expresses her belief in the existence of matriarchal societies: “We know that matriarchal societies existed before. It’s important that we start thinking about ancient future ways, because this way is not working” (TWC 199). Clearly, she is against the Western patriarchal mindset which has caused unsalvageable harm to the resources of the earth. In another interview by Marianne Schnall, Walker had maintained: “And then the foundation of so much of the patriarchal religion is the destruction of the Goddess worship that was before it, and the destruction of the feminine” (TWC 301). Her solidarity with Goddess-centered movement and paganism seem to be a beacon of light which has the potential to bring about restructuring of thought pattern conducive to ecological harmony and at the same time, compatible with feminism. In another interview by Paula Giddings, Walker uses the expression “thank the Goddess” (TWC 91) which shows her reverence for Goddess religion, though at the same time she refutes being a separatist.

According to Alice Walker, the security of the world and that of women are closely interrelated. Her firm conviction in the existence of matriarchal societies parallels the findings of Marija Gimbutas’s archaeological excavations. Walker promulgates:

Out of a woman’s security---which always means free agency in society, sexual and spiritual autonomy, as well as the well-being of her children and the sanctity of her home—comes ultimate security for the world. Archaeological findings in ruins of matristic, prepatriarchal societies bear this out. Evidence shows that for thousands of years before male domination of Earth, women headed vibrant cultures that traded, reasoned, and celebrated with each other without the need to erect forts or walls”(AWLS 42)

Carolyn Merchant in her pivotal book The Death of Nature explains how the notions regarding witchcraft were different for men and women in the seventeenth century. She says, “From the perspective of the male, the witch was a symbol of disorder in nature and society. . . . . But from a female perspective, witchcraft represented form of power by which oppressed
lower-class women could retaliate against social injustices, and a source of healing through
the use of spirits and the regenerative powers of nature” (155). Starhawk draws heavily upon
the teachings of the old practice of witchcraft. Walker also seems to have embodied much of
the teaching and thought of the witchcraft and Goddess-based religion in her fictional as well
as non-fictional works. Starhawk posits:

The three core principles of Goddess religion are immanence, interconnection and
community . . . nature, culture and life in all their diversity are sacred. Immanence
calls us to live our spirituality here in the world, to take action to preserve the life of
the earth, to live with integrity and responsibility. Interconnection is the
understanding that all being is interrelated, that we are link with all of the cosmos as
parts of one living organism (SD22).

She also maintains that the primary focus of Goddess-based religion is not individual
salvation but the growth and transformation that comes through intimate interactions and
common struggles (SD22). Walker’s creative epistemology clearly springs from her deep
love for earth-based religions including her pagan ideology. She assimilates and incorporates
principles of Goddess-reverencing religions in her writings. Walker’s paganism propels her
characters to believe in a pantheistic idea of ‘Divine’ as Shug Avery in CP says, “I believe
God is everything that is, ever was or ever will be” (176). Walker shares that it was “years
after writing these words for Shug that I discovered they were also spoken, millennia ago, by
Isis, ancient Goddess of Africa, who, as an African, can be said to be a spiritual mother of us
all” (AWLS 3-4).

Walker attempts to dismantle the Western patriarchal thinking (cemented over
centuries) by using the images of Goddess, literally as well as metaphorically, as a source of
celebration and affirmation of female power. Determined to free themselves from the
constrictions of the dominant male paradigm and to combat the encroachments of hierarchical
dualism, Walker’s writings come across as an incisive critique of all that alienates women
from their bodies and considers her as a commodity. Many of Walker’s novels discern her
paradigmatic approach where she leaves the baggage of orthodox Christianity. She articulates
her subversive thoughts unabashedly and in the process, embraces some aspects of the
Goddess-worshipping religion, suggestive of her pagan inclinations. Her counter-discourse
does not stop short of a complete reversal of patriarchal values and norms. She presents a profusion of Goddess images and symbols, and tries to rewrite history using an egalitarian approach.

Walker’s womanist spirit is pervasive throughout her richly textured literary output. Her belief in the existence of matrastic and matrilineal societies in the past seems to carry potential and enables women to transcend national, racial and class boundaries. Borrego espouses:

African-American women writers have been involved for the last thirty years in a project of deconstruction and reconstruction of the past through mythology and re-memory, discovering new ways of structuring and developing narrative devices, and striving to reveal their cultural realities. In doing this, they cannot ignore the origins of African American culture in the dark period of colonization and slavery. Neither can they deny the vestiges of African world views that their rich oral tradition has kept alive for nearly four hundred years of struggle with “whiteness.” (2)

Walker also dismantles the old patriarchal myths to pave way for ‘revisionist’ history. Such a history appears to be resounding Jungian philosophy of “collective unconscious”- a history common to the origins of entire mankind. She may have belief in the authenticity of Goddess-reverencing pre-patriarchal societies. Nevertheless, more than this belief, there are principles of Goddess-based religions which she has embodied in all her writings. Being a believer in the power of Goddess does not necessarily imply worshipping any particular Goddess rather Walker feels that every woman has the capacity of being a “Goddess” herself which entails a celebratory acceptance of one’s body, an affirmation of the entire universe as a cosmic whole, and identification with the principles of immanence, interconnection and community. Walker’s stance can be understood when she recounts her mother’s essential connection with nature in an interview with William R. Ferris: “I grew up with a woman who was so connected to life and so much in sync with the source of all that there is. . . . There’s no doubt in my mind that my mother was a great, great spirit, and I actually think of her as a Goddess [italics mine]” (TWC 236). When asked by Marianne Schnall about the need of women to experience their own personal epiphany so as to get in touch with their own feminine power, Walker said, “I don’t know if that’s the only way they can do it, but
anything that encourages women to accept themselves as who they are and what they are and to honor the feminine in them would be very, very helpful for the world’s healing” (TWC289).

Walker’s acceptance and reiteration of the principles of mutuality, community, harmony, and immanence (which form the essence of Goddess-based religions and paganism) need to be examined in the light of her novels. Along with the reinforcement of these principles, self-love forms the essence of her fiction. In TMF, Arveyada, a renowned musician, becomes a catalyst for Zedé who connects her with her lost world. Zedé, a Latin American woman, had been a victim of rape and every conceivable act of violence. It may seem immoral to fall in love with wife’s mother, but Arveyada being a sensitive artist is capable of falling in love so easily and healing the psychological wounds of a person. Walker writes, “Artists, he now understood, were simply messengers. On them fell the responsibility for uniting the world” (TMF 125). He brings about a transformation of her entire being by helping her get rid of the vestiges of her shyness, tormented inner self, and apprehensions. She undergoes self-healing by recollecting the childhood memories of her gynocentric past. While narrating her memories, she tells Arveyda, “Our mothers taught us about lovemaking and babies when we become Señoritas, of course, but all along also they taught us the history of our civilization” (45). In keeping with the tradition of Goddess worship, Zedé reminisces the time when the connection with the moon was a source of celebration and an affirmation of female identity: “I will always remember there was a gigantic waterfall. . . . We went there to bathe while we had our period, whole groups of girls and their mothers. It was always on the full moon” (45). Walker seems to be influenced by the proponents of Goddess-worshipping spirituality. In “Nine Touchstones of the Goddess Religion”, Carol P. Christ talks about the earth-based and female-honoring culture of the religion based on Goddess worship:

The symbols and rituals of Goddess religion celebrate our connection to the cycles of the moon and the seasons of the sun and our participation in the mysteries of birth, death, and renewal. They encourage us to appreciate diversity and difference: Darkness and light, springtime and winter, all people and all beings are sacred. Goddess symbols honor the body of the Goddess and our own bodies, calling us to embrace embodied life and to care for the earth body. . . . Goddess images resacralize
the female body, enabling women to take pride in our female selves, encouraging men
to treat women and children with respect and to acknowledge their own connection to
the life force. This is the ethos, the sense of what is real and valuable, created by the
mythos of Goddess religion.

In BLFS, Señor Robinson understands the Mundo tribe and their rituals by becoming
an angel after his death. During his lifetime, he deliberately distances and alienates himself
from the indigenous Mundo tribe he comes to study, and tries to impose Christianity on them.
He lacks deeper understanding and knowledge of their customs and rituals. His daughter’s
lover, Manuelito (an ‘angel’ after death) makes him aware of how sexuality is celebrated and
blessed by the elders of the tribe. He also tells how women are related to moon and share its
rhythms. He explains, “That a woman’s tides, her blood tides, connect with the moon. That
this is how women know in their bodies that they are a part of everything, even something so
distant as the moon” (208). Manuelito explains how consummation is thought to be sacred in
their tribe and “we burned sweetgrass to cleanse ourselves and our surroundings. . . . That
eggs were eaten in the hope that the union would be fertile, not just in children, but in ideas,
creativity, bountifulness of the tribe. . . . We explained that the kissing was respectful . . .”
(163).

Walker unmasks women’s subjugation at the hands of men by interspersing her
fictional works with the past and present stories of their oppression and systematic dethroning
of matriarchal societies. She writes, “The very first societies, cultures, and civilizations, all
over the world were founded by women. . . . These matristic (mother-centered) societies were
violently overthrown by men, who then instituted societies dominated by men” (AWLS 166).
The internationally acclaimed novelist Monique Wittig captured the novelty and flavor of the
affirmation of female power when she wrote in her mythic work Les Guerilleres. She said:

There was a time when you were not a slave, remember that. You walked alone, full
of laughter, you bathed bare-bellied. You say you have lost all recollection of it, remember. . . . You say there are not words to describe it, you say it does not exist.

But remember. Make an effort to remember. Or, failing that, invent. (89)
Musing over how time had stopped for women in the Middle Ages in the Middle East or other parts of the world, Kate Talkingtree ponders over an alternative past when women had control over their bodies. She says:

There were women on the planet who were not allowed to show their faces. Not permitted to smile at a man who was not a relative without the possibility of being beaten. There were women being stoned, for showing legs or hair. And yet the carvings all around them spoke of another time before the present, and before, even the recorded past. A time when women were joyous about their naked bodies. Free. (NTH48)

Similar instances of violence against women are ruminated by the dwarf woman, Irene in BLFS, who herself has been victimized at the hands of puritan church authorities. She unveils the role of religion which unleashes violence and torture on women. Walker does not only criticize the Western representation, but also the Eastern countries where oppression of women is still the norm. Walker maintains: “And in some cultures they have written in their religious books the size and shape of the stones to be used. Some are of a special size and shape to break the woman’s nose, others to crack her skull. There had been many recent stonings in Saudi Arabia and Iran . . .” (55). In the same novel, Walker describes the nightmarish horror of Susannah after seeing the photographs of the women from the Nuer tribe of Southwest Ethiopia, who were required to wear ceramic disks the size of dinner plates in their bottom lips. Her mother, Langley explains this practice as a tradition of keeping women under subjugation: “From the men’s perspective, however, the women’s condition assured that the women could barely speak in the men’s presence, so heavy was the ceramic disk, and this ensured their silence . . .” (164).

TMF is a novel in which she rewrites the evolution of human race, status of women in prehistoric times, worship of the Goddess and systematic dethroning of the Goddess (especially the destruction of Goddess or Mother Africa), consequences of linear Western dualistic thought in addition to her stance on the ecological devastation of earth. In Walker’s own words: “. . . when I was writing TMF, that whole period was so amazing for me because I felt that I had really connected with the ancient knowledge that we all have, and that it was really a matter not of trying to learn something, but of remembering” (TWC 101). The theme
of community, harmony, and interrelatedness is prominent in _TMF_ and is often found in Miss Lissie’s telling of her past lives, which form part of the non-linear narrative of the novel. Her name means “the one who remembers everything” (_TMF_52). Walker presents her as a character which embodies many lives inside her. Margaret Busby writes in “Literary Feature Reviews”: “her memories of previous incarnations are vividly, and educationally-told tales of severance from the tribe, of slave traders shaving their African captives’ untamed hair... tales of changing gender, race, even species” (qtd. in Hare 202). In the words of Karla Simcikova, Lissie attempts to trace back in history our common source of humanity, our ultimate ancestor (_TMF_46). It is through remembrance of her previous lives that Walker tries to trace Lissie’s oppression at the hands of parents, siblings, relatives, governments, countries, continents. Lissie also considers her own body and mind as agents responsible for her exploitation. In the dream world of her memory, she has spent some part of every life healing wounds from the forces of oppression and “blessed periods are a vacation” (_TMF_83).

Through Lissie, Walker recreates an alternative view of the prehistoric and historic past to bring to the fore those times when humans and non-humans lived in a state of mutual reciprocity with each other, unencumbered by dualistic hierarchical pattern of thought. Lissie’s dream memory echoes the past time when matriarchal egalitarian societies were usurped by patriarchy. She remembers herself as an African tribal girl living in peace in the company of cousins (apes): “My life with the cousins is the only dream memory of peace that I have” (_TMF_88). This was the time when women had free agency and were not under the control of patriarchy: “Our cousins, like our fathers and aunts, lived in different trees from ours, and it was fun to visit them” (_TMF_84). She recounts how in many lifetimes, she herself and women in general were victimized, tortured, raped, burnt, and treated as mere sex objects. Walker links the marginalization of women with the desacralization of nature by explaining how the communal way of living gave way to the idea of “[o]wnership” and “[w]hich grew out of the way the forest now began to be viewed as something cut into pieces that belonged to this tribe or that... men, because they were stronger, at least during those periods, when women were weak from childbearing, began to think of owning women and children” (87). Lissie narrates painful as well as the empowering stories of her past lives as a pygmy, member of a harem, a woman without hymen, a moor woman, and surprisingly, as a white man too. Suwelo, a professor of History, inherits a big pink envelope left by Lissie for him, containing written accounts of her past lives’ experiences. As a moor woman, she describes the persecution of witches at the hands of Islam religion and how the Christian
religion has appropriated the old pre-Christian symbols by passing off the Goddess of Africa into the modern world as “the Black Madonna” (TMF197). Continuing with the harrowing description of oppression, the letter reads: “. . . the whole families in Africa who worshiped the Goddess were routinely killed, sold into slavery, or converted to Islam at the point of the sword” (TMF197).

In TMF, as a parallel to these oppressed histories, Walker portrays M’Sukta whose tribe, the Balawyua, or the Ababa, has been, since time immemorial, a matriarchy (The information about M’Sukta tribe comes from the letters left by Mary Jane’s great-aunt, Eleanora Burnham). By reading about the rich cultural heritage of M’Sukta’s tribe (though unfortunately almost extinct due to intertribal warfare and slave raiding), Mary Jane Briden, a white playwright, is flabbergasted to acknowledge the smallness of her own accomplishments. Her own knowledge of language, history, and literature seems superficial and narrow. She admits:

The history I knew was not hers, the geography I knew placed an elephant herd where her village had been, the science I knew did not teach me how to make dyes and medicines and the other things M’Sukta could do; the literature I read talked about savages and blackamoors, and that was when it was being polite. The languages I knew failed me entirely when I stood before her. (230)

Mary Jane Briden contemplates the apathy of the English people towards the Africans and the gross neglect and suppression of a culture of which M’Sukta was a living legacy at the Museum of Natural History (as mentioned in the letters left by her great grand aunt). She also realizes how the passion and savagery of the English people were tamed, “But it had not really become tame, only repressed- and the worship of nature turned into its opposite . . .” (TMF234). Mary Ann is a woman who dares to impugn her own parents for their utter disregard of environment. Walker writes: “Mary Ann described them as people who had personally assassinated six rivers and massacred twelve lakes, because they manufactured a deadly substance that was always swimming away from them” (TMF79). Towards the end of the novel, Fanny and Suwelo plan to build a house modeled on the prehistoric ceremonial household of M’Sukta’s people, the Ababa which is “a house designed by the ancient matriarchal mind and the first heterosexual household ever created” (TMF399). In BLFS,
Susannah has a conversation with dwarf Irene and she inadvertently asks Irene if the Europeans are actually from this planet earth as they don’t seem to like it much. She further maintains unabashedly that they must have come from some other planet: “A place where the artificial is natural” (184). Walker’s environmental ethics are closely related to her feminist ethics as her novels embody and reiterate both her concerns without privileging one over another.

One of the principal traits of Walker’s writings is her attempt to reconnect us to our ancient past in order to resurrect the lost meanings and reconstruct the present. In her words: “I’m really trying to do that because I see the 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” (TWC 85). In PSJ, Mzee (Tashi’s therapist) feels that the inexplicable suffering of Tashi has made him confront his own hidden self that he thinks has been hitherto unknown to him, hidden under his European skin: “An ancient self that thirsts for knowledge of the experiences of its ancient kin. Needs this knowledge, and the feelings that come with it, to be whole. A self that is horrified at what was done to Evelyn, but recognizes it as something that is also done to me. A truly universal self” (84). Walker weaves into the narrative of TMF multiple stories from the past to bring to the fore ancient matriarchal societies attuned to a life of balance and harmony, in contradistinction with the patriarchal set-up which ousted women from public as well as private sphere. Walker also asserts her identity as black by describing the elementary relationship of Africans with sun and reclaiming ‘blackness’ as a blessing, not as a curse. In TMF, Fanny tells Suwelo: “Our relationship to the sun is the bedrock of our security as black human beings. We have our melanin, we have our pads of woolly hair” (322) and explains further, “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” (322). Walker upholds her black ancestry as digs deep into the debris of oppression to recover the lost history of slavery, struggle, and survival. Walker maintains that:

Our own religions denied, forgotten; our own ancestral connections to All Creation something of which we are ashamed. I maintain that we are empty, lonely, without our pagan-heathen ancestors: that we must lively them up within ourselves . . . their
Earth-centered, female-reverencing religions, like their architecture, agriculture, and music, suited perfectly to the lives they led. (AWLS 25)

In TMF, Walker attempts to recover the suppressed African Goddesses and de-center the Western myths. While having a dialogue with her sister Fanny, Nzingha talks about the African roots of ‘Isis’: “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 Keeper of the earth” (269). She postulates how the Western civilization appropriated the Goddess Isis to establish its supremacy. She says, “...the reason Athena had sprung “full blown” from the mind of Zeus was because she was an idea, given by Greek men to their God; and that idea was the destruction of the African Goddess Isis into the Greek Goddess Athena” (272). Fanny Nzingha is sent to France for studies but she tries to uphold her ‘psychic connection’ with her African past. She says, “I knew that Notre-Dame was built on the site of a shrine to Isis, who was later called the Black Madonna. . . . There is no trace of Isis there, of course, nor anywhere in Paris; certainly not today in the souls of its people” (270). She is very critical of museums like Louvre which are instruments of colonial powers. According to Nzingha, Notre Dame had been built to colonize the spiritual remains of a Goddess, as the Louvre had been built to colonize the material remains of devastated cultures. Nzingha feels exasperated by the notion that the “Colored” Africa (Egypt) founded on the destruction of the black woman as Goddess was superior to “Negro” Africa and leaves France that very night. In NTH, Walker ropes in Kate who acknowledges and takes pride in her African ancestry and her relation to the African Goddess Isis. She muses that there are two ‘presents’- one is of the moment and the other is of a longer moment which includes the history and knowledge one knows. She muses: “So that if the tears shed by the mother of Isis are now part of this river then I am somehow connected to her in this longer ‘present’ that I am able to envision and that contains both of us” (31).

In TMF, Mama Shug (an old matriarch), who has always lived life on her own terms, decides to start her own ‘band’, which is unlike institutionalized churches because here people have the right to “their own path and journey” (170). The concept of the ‘Divine’ in this ‘band’ does not conform to the established ideals of the organized churches: “Some of these people worshiped Isis. Some worshiped trees. Some thought the air, because it alone is everywhere, is God” (170). Shug’s paganism finds full expression in the two novels CP and
“Band” was what renegade black women’s churches were called traditionally: it means a group of people who share a common bond and purpose and whose notion of spiritual reality is radically at odds with mainstream or prevailing ones” (301).

Walker’s redemptive zeal and predisposition to redress societal wrongs come across many a time in her novels when she tries to reinterpret the old myths and symbols in order to unveil the attempts of dominant ideology to consolidate patriarchal hold and suppress the Goddess worship. At the same time, she provides alternative ways of comprehending Western myth – ways which de-center and destabilize the notion of West as being the carrier of culture and civilization. In TMF, she reconstructs the old Perseus and Medusa story from a feminist perspective. Hélène Cixous in “The Laugh of the Medusa” has referred to the same story to drive home the point that women’s wisdom, knowledge, and creativity are crushed under patriarchy and denigrated as evil. Hélène Cixous comments on the attempts made by patriarchy to stifle women’s autonomy. Men equate women with the ‘dreadful’ Medusa. Cixous reveals further how women have been taught to fear the dark. She gives a subversive interpretation of ‘Medusa’, an alternative view of the ‘Medusa’ within as representative of a woman’s true inner self, without any patriarchal inhibitions and control. In Cixous’s terms, to embrace the Medusa means the women have metaphorically entered the “Dark Continent” and “[t]he Dark Continent is neither dark nor unexplorable. – It is still unexplored only because we’ve been made to believe that it was too dark to be explorable” (884-85). She exhorts women towards the liberational and unconventional reading of the Medusa myth. Cixous says about Medusa, “. . . she’s not deadly.She’s beautiful and she’s laughing” (885) and now women must learn to laugh with her. Walker makes Nzingha her mouthpiece who articulates her views regarding the distortion of the myth of Perseus slaying Medusa, which in Western tradition has been considered to be a victory of good over evil. In the novel, Nzingha, along with her sister Fanny, shares and discusses the “bottled-up, repressed anger of the African woman” (TMF268). She is critical of the degrading image of Africa as portrayed by her French professors including the slide depicting the Perseus-Medusa story. She considers Medusa as an “angel” when she says:

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 . . . she looks decidedly, if u
know how to read the carving differently from Westerners, like an angel. Because she is an angel. She is the *mother* of Christian angels. (*TMF* 269)

Nzingha expresses her sadness over the myth popularized by Westerners to stifle the wholeness and autonomy of the African women. She compares Medusa’s wings to the wings of Egypt and her head to the head of Africa. She takes this analogy further by maintaining that as an African, “[w]hat you realize is the Western memorialization of that period in prehistory when the white male world of Greece decapitated and destroyed the black female Goddess/Mother tradition and culture of Africa” (*TMF* 271). Her closeness with her African heritage makes Walker considers Africa as “the navel of the world” (*TWC* 192). She believes that the first people were Africans and the worship of Goddesses was innate in African culture. Walker further maintains that “Medusa—the Greeks . . . had a lot of interactions with Africans and learned a lot from Africa and wrote about their interaction with the Egyptians, who were Africans . . . that the African woman’s hair was the Medusa snakes and the fierceness of the African woman warrior turned these people to stone” (*TWC* 193).

At many places in her literary writings, Walker dissociates ‘snake’ from its evil and dark connotations (as is portrayed in the Christian mythology) and represents it as the life force. Though the symbolism associated with snake is ambiguous to some extent, yet Walker, in continuation with her subversive strategy attempts to relocate it in terms compatible with her eco-womanist stance. Gimbutas asserts:

>The snake is life force, a seminal symbol, epitome of the worship of life on this earth. It is not the body of the snake that was sacred, but the energy exuded by this spiralling or coiling creature which transcends its boundaries and influences the surrounding world. The snake was something primordial and mysterious. . . . Its seasonal renewal in sloughing off its old skin and hibernating made it a symbol of continuity of life and of the link with the underworld. (*Language* 121)

In *Language*, Gimbutas traces the role and significance of the prehistoric snake, chronicling its growth and worship since prehistoric times to the present times. She posits that there has been a widespread belief in snakes as household gods-guardians of the family as well as domestic animals. She testifies to their constant worship by referring to the snake
effigies and Snake Goddess figurines being found in house shrines in old Europe (Language 137). Every two years, Hopi Indians perform a snake dance in which they handle live rattlesnakes. Walker also seems to have a deep connection with serpent imagery which symbolizes unity with nature. Since the snake is immortal, Gimbutas maintains that “[i]t is a link between the dead and the living; snakes embody the energy of the ancestors” (Language 317).

In TMF, Walker portrays a character, Mary Ann Haverstock, who deliberately obliterates her own identity as a white woman and eventually decides to live in Africa as a playwright with a changed name, Mary Jane Briden. In the novel, she plays a key role in liberating Zédé and Carlotta from the prison. She rescues them by taking them in her boat Recuerdo. She leaves this boat later and takes a new one The Coming Age, much like her old boat “except for a small turquoise snake embroidered on her sails . . . this symbol had emerged as my personal emblem of spiritual expression” (209). Her diffused spirituality is at odds with her Christian upbringing and becomes a strategy of resistance against the established dogmas and codes.

In NTH, Walker makes Kate Talkingtree herspokesperson when she articulates the interlocking oppression faced by snakes as well as black people. While in Amazon, Kate notices a regular visitor (a serpent) to her hut. Though scared of it, she does not intend to harm him, nevertheless, keeps a distance from it. It leads her to contemplate the alienation faced by snake and the reason for keeping it completely outside the circle of goodwill: “Because of religious indoctrination, almost everyone feared and loathed the serpent. . . . Was this, the banning of the serpent from the circle, the beginning of separation? Was this the model for all the other banishments?” (NTH 214). Kate begins to acknowledge her deep kinship with snakes as she equates the ill-treatment of snakes with that of the black people. She postulates: “Black people had been cast outside the circle of goodwill for hundreds of years. . . . Many of them, like women who lived in culture that despised and wilfully obliterated the feminine, would never experience the connection to earth and to humanity that was their birthright” (NTH 214). In an interview, while replying how snake is represented in African culture, Walker said, “Well, yes, it represents us: it represents women, and it represents black people. That’s why it’s always put down. But that is also why- but that is also why – because it represents earth people and women in all earth cultures, and especially in societies of women—the snake is revered” (TWC 194). Charlene Spretnak describes a
planned strategy of Christianity to invert and demonize the old European sacred symbols. She writes:

Similarly, every element in the biblical story of Adam and Eve has been inverted from its earlier meaning: the serpent had been a positive symbol of renewal and regeneration in the old, Earth-based religion; the sacred trees were not forbidden but sites of worship and celebration; and the female was not the cause of a fall from grace but was a respected manifestation of the sacred cycles of life. (“Earthbody” 275)

It is clear that many critics and scholars have tried to reinterpret the old myths and symbols in a new light. Katharina Woodworth describes that millennia ago, the mortal woman Eve was the Mother/Creator Goddess and her consort was the Serpent, who was not an evil creature but a source of wholeness. Anne Baring and Jules Cashford explain, “The serpent first appears as a serpent mother Goddess in the Neolithic era, and is also drawn coiling around the womb and the phallus as the principle of regeneration” (qtd. in Woodworth). Spretnak realizes the significance of the relational function of myth and symbols rather than being fixed artifacts which “[s]uggests a shaping of our continuity and groundedness while evoking a sense of our larger self, the fullness of our being” (“Earthbody” 275). She also points out how the images of Goddesses of Greek Olympian mythology were downgraded by the later patriarchal Gods. Later on, the monotheistic Christian religion, in order to consolidate its hold over and displace the ancient religions, twisted and toppled the old primordial myths and symbols suggestive of the era of Goddess. Spretnak explains how the procreative power of Virgin Mary was inverted by the patriarchal culture: “The Virgin Mary, chaste and docile, is actually a direct descendant of the Goddess, producing her child parthenogenetically (that is, by herself, a son born with the coming of light at winter solstice and renewed, even after death, at the vernal equinox” (“Earthbody” 274). Alice Walker reveals how she discovered the actual meaning and significance of Christmas as she says:

That it is the day of the winter solstice and was originally celebrated on the twenty-first or twenty-second of December, the day when the sun, having gone as far south as it ever gets, begins to move back north. . . The birth of the Jesus has been affixed to the seeming rebirth of the sun, but the rebirth of the sun has been worshiped since
many millennia before Christ . . . since the very beginning of the planet’s life.

(AWLS88)

According to Spretnak, the serpent-like dragon slain in the legend of St. George was actually ‘the Old Religion’ (i.e. the pagan religions) being destroyed by “the one true Church” (“Earthbody” 275). However, she affirms that the ancient religion was so powerfully rooted that the dragon’s head often grew back in the folk tellings of the tale. She further informs that on many women’s altars can be seen “[t]he little snake Goddesses of Crete” (“Earthbody” 276). With its ability to regenerate by sloughing off its skin every few months, its cyclical pattern of hibernation, and its ability to carry venom (power) yet not poison itself, the serpent has long been a symbol for the healing, regenerative force. By turning inward to such spiritual disciplines as yoga, tantra, tai chi or martial arts, by dancing, swimming or practicing healing arts such as Reiki and shamanism, or by growing closer to the earth, one can awaken the serpent within (Woodworth). In Chinese mythology, dragons are originally snakes and considered very beneficial and benevolent creatures.

Walker seems to have a close kinship with snakes as she reconstructs snake myths and symbols to show her affinity with them. In NTH, the second chapter deals with Kate’s dream about Anaconda. Kate is experiencing spiritual vacuum in her life at this junction and the dream of Anaconda seems to have definitive meaning for her as she decides later to fill up the void in her life and to experience ‘wholeness’. She dreams that she finds a perfectly frozen anaconda while emptying her freezer. She runs to others for help but “[t]hey were busy with their own lives. Their own anacondas” (NTH 5). When all outside help is refused, she realizes that “dealing with the anacondas is an inside job. Whether to kill it or let it thaw and live was entirely up to her” (NTH 5).Here, anaconda seems to mean one’s creativity, potential and inner self, and it is upon an individual to create meaning and value in one’s life. To kill our inner cravings or to let one’s potential alive is an existential problem confronting all human beings. Kate is reminded of a teaching of ‘Grandmother Yagé’: “We are all on the back of a giant anaconda. It is slithering and sliding, darting and diving, like anacondas do. That is the reality of the world” (NTH 5). According to Woodworth, in South America, white anacondas are shamanic helpers who appear in visions and dreams as spirit guides that swallow and give birth to the initiate. As Kate decides to embark on a spiritual journey amidst thick Amazon Rainforest, the anaconda of her dream appears to be a spirit guide, propelling her to journey into the heartlands of Amazon to recover her ‘lost self’. Kate, after waking up from her
dream, is reminded of a story from her days in the Black Freedom Movement narrated by an old lady whom she and her companions had visited to encourage voting. She narrates how a man takes pity on a snake nearly frozen to death and saves him by warming him up inside his bosom but the snake bites him. The lady is unwilling to join their crusade for freedom, equality, and justice. She says that she has “learned to live without picking up any snakes” (NTH 8). From her attitude, she seems happy to stay complacent and passive. Hence, picking up snakes may mean zeal or an initiative to realize one’s potential and work in the same direction. Later in the novel, one of the ritual participants, Rick finds it difficult to immerse fully into the world of ‘Grandmother’ (the Shamanic practice of healing through medicinal herbs such as ayahuasca – here also called ‘Grandmother’). He cannot reconcile himself to the unity and interconnectedness of the cosmic web of life and has dislike for various creatures including iguana and moths. He does not try to open out his heart to show cohesion with humans as well as non-humans: “Instead of submitting, finding the ‘brick’ or ‘scale of the serpent’ that opened like a door into the experience, Rick turned inside” (NTH 148). Here, finding the ‘scale of the serpent’ again means awakening one’s ‘inner self’ which lies dormant deep within. Once Rick learns to submit before it, he will be able to come out of “limbo” (NTH 148). After having undergone spiritual regeneration through her experiences at Colorado and Amazon, Kate again dreams of a snake. By this time, she seems to have a greater understanding of the mysteries of life. In the dream, she sprays poison on a toiling pile of ants living in one corner of her house. However, instead of getting rid of ants, she sees the individual ant growing larger. She asks the snake: “How are we to deal with fear?” (NTH221). The snake here becomes a symbol of profound wisdom when it answers: “Make friends with it” and Kate is astounded to hear the snake echoing the wisdom of the Buddha and muses, “That’s what the Buddha taught!” (NTH221). Therefore, to encounter one’s fears is the way to get rid of them too. Kate seems to have learnt this valuable lesson when in the concluding lines, the readers are told: “Finally she went to her bedroom and got the anaconda clock. Giving the anaconda a kiss and not looking at the time, she placed it in Buddha’s lap” (NTH 223).

The theme of healing and regeneration takes many forms in Walker’s fiction. One of the pathways to rejuvenation and healing is the motif of community and circles. Susan Willis expresses her views about Walker in these words: “The strength of Alice Walker’s writing derives from the author’s inexorable recognition of her place in history; the sensitivity of her work Les Guerilleres, from her profound sense of community; its beauty, from her
commitment to the future” (110). Community and circles form significant illuminants as consideration of oneself as a part of entire community. They inspire compassionate solutions to the pressing problems of an individual or society in large, and are a means of empowerment and consciousness-raising. Circles have been an important factor in Walker’s life as she postulates, “One reason the circle is so powerful is that it is informed, in fact shaped by, the Grandmother Spirit. The spirit of impartiality, equality, equanimity. Of nurturing but also of fierceness. It has no use for hierarchy. Or patriarchy” (WOWF 213-14). Walker believes that the healing circles and women’s councils may not be a solution to the problems but they can help us connect with one another as “loving, compassionate earthlings” (TWC 204). In her words, “I see the circles and councils as ways to share consciousness” (TWC 204). In the words of bell hooks:

. . . many hurt and exploited women used the consciousness-raising group therapeutically. It was the site where they uncovered and openly revealed the depths of their intimate wounds. This confessional aspect served as a healing ritual. Through consciousness-raising women gained the strength to challenge patriarchal forces at work and at home. (Feminism 8)

In many of her novels, circles prove to be a source of renewed vigor and empowerment, and help the people to reach out to the labyrinths of others’ minds. The protagonist, Kate Talkingtree in NTHis a transformed person after taking a trip to the Colorado river with only women as her companions. For Kate, “it felt luxurious to be out camping with a band of mature women” and she “revealed in the intimacy engendered by their distance from everything and everyone they knew” (NTH 39). After day’s adventure, all the women form circles around the campfire and talk their hearts out without any inhibition and reservation, discussing topics as varied as ageing, coloring of hair, sex and so on. The discussions fill them with a purpose and sense of unanimity with one another. One story leads to another forming a chain and “Every woman’s choices honored as her own” (NTH 40). Kate, who has been experiencing spiritual vacuum in her life before taking recourse to Colorado river trip, feels energized and rejuvenated from within after forming a strong bond with other women. According to Walker, sharing one’s truths and experiences in circles is an effective way of expressing camaraderie and acknowledging the power of sisterhood. In a conversation with Marianne Schnall, Walker emphasizes the importance of forming
circlesand says: “And you can talk to each other about the world and about your lives. In a circle of trust and safety. It’s crucial. It is crucial for our psychological health and our spiritual growth—it’s essential” (TWC 290). In similar vein, bell hooks also maintains:

Importantly, communication and dialogue was a central at the consciousness-raising sessions. In many groups a policy in place which honored everyone's voice. Women took turns speaking to make sure everyone would be heard. This attempt to create a non-hierarchal model for discussion positively gave every woman a chance to speak but often did not create a context for engaged dialogue. (Feminism 8)

In the novel *NTH*, to complete her spiritual journey, Kate later goes deep into the Amazon Rainforest to reclaim her lost self. The motif of circles recurs in the novel. Kate’s lover, Yolo, also regains his severed self by connecting himself with the pain of others during his trip to Hawaii in the absence of Kate. He comes in contact with two young aborigines from Australia during a circle headed by Aunty Pearlua and becomes cognizant of the dismal state of affairs in Australia, where the number of young men who are driven to depression and suicides, is distressing. Through their narration, Yolo becomes aware of the sacred connection of indigenous people with the land: “We learned what the land and the waters loved: to be cared for, to be interacted with, to be sung to. We did not map the land as the English did, on paper, we mapped the land by singing it” (*NTH* 142). They also share their addiction to petrol sniffing and one young man narrates his sister’s efforts to mend him. His story commands respect and invokes thoughtfulness among all the listeners. Circles, hence, become a pathway to healing and regeneration. Walker portrays Aunty Pearlua and Aunty Alma as ‘Mahus’, commonly mean to be cross-gender persons in Hawaii. James Neill explains, “Mahus were found among Polynesian cultures from New Zealand to Hawaii. Linguistic evidence from Polynesian languages suggests that Mahus may at one time have been shamans . . . mahu means “to heal”’ and further explains, “Also like the two spirits, mahus are devoted to their families, and are usually the ones who care for aging parents” (*NTH* 40). However, Walker refrains herself from associating them with the ‘gender stereotypes’ formulated by the society. She does not think of hetero-normativity to be the only acceptable gender norm rather dwells on the healing potential which the two-spirited mahus may embody. In the circle, Aunty Pearlua asks all the participants to take a vow to refrain from any sort of addiction including addiction for coffee and black tea which leads to
“depression of spirits” (NTH180), as drug and alcohol abuse have cost the lives of many young men on the island. However, Aunty Pearlua stays composed and tries to convince them that ‘abstinence’ is a strategy for survival. She tells them the reason to dress up and live as a woman:

Ah, anyone can be a man, that is the problem. It takes much more to be a woman. But we have managed it. And why? Because we could see the plan men were laying out for woman and her children, a plan that enslaved and humiliated them before eradicating the divine in them entirely. Well, we Mahus were not going to have it. (NTH 180)

Walker’s counter-discursive ideas can be seen in the description of Mahus. The common perception about Mahus does not match with the picture presented by her in the novel. Walker challenges the commonly held disparaging notion about Mahus by portraying them not as ‘effeminate’ men rather they are portrayed as carrying forward the special charge assigned to them by their ancestors. Walker tries to debunk the myths associated with the Mahus and restore their dignified position. Aunty Pearlua also talks about the existence of matriarchal societies to be the existing order in ancient times, and affirms that it was not such a stretch for them as until recent times Hawaiians had a queen, Queen Lili’uokalani. Walker’s writings do not deal much with abstract issues, rather she juxtaposes her ‘revisioning’ of myths and history with the current issues –the issues of women subjugation and ecological degradation. In an interview by Frank Barat, Walker posits:

I also admire Liliu’okalani. She was Hawaii’s queen [from 1891 to 1893]. She was deposed and her government overthrown by the US military to make Hawaii safe for the sons of missionaries who planted the island with pineapples and sugar cane. In everything she wrote, and in the many songs she created, her love for her people is only equalled by her love of the land, the Aina, itself.

Walker further explains the story of Mahus: “The story goes that we were in a position to see the overthrow and enslavement of woman, and the consequent ruination of her children,
which was so horrible to us that we decided that until woman was restored to her rightful place we would . . . live openly as women” (*NTH* 129).

In Amazon, Kate and other ritual participants undergoing healing through shamanic practices find one member, Rick, disturbing the entire circle, yet Armando and Cosmi do not exclude him for the circle and try to ease Rick along his journey - a journey he was afraid to make. Walker says, “They did not wish to exclude him from the circle because, as they had explained to the group, what makes a circle sacred is that those who show up for it are the ones who belong in it” (*NTH* 155). The celebration of circles and community comes full circle in the novel towards the end when Kate and Yolo decide to begin their life afresh, and they want blessings and presence of their friends at the threshold of a new beginning of their relationship; a bond which has survived all oddities so far. Kate invites Armando, a shaman from Amazon to a small gathering: “Yolo and I are calling a circle to celebrate sharing our life together. . . . We’d really love it if you could come” (*NTH* 220).

Walker’s shift from orthodox Christianity has not been a sudden transition rather a natural inclination since childhood. Her understanding of the principles of Goddess-based religions subsume her eco-womanist thought. Fanny, Celie’s grand-daughter in *TMF* tells of her bringing up in a matriarchal household occupied by her grandmother Celie, Mama Shug, and Miss Sofia. She was not brought up as a docile and submissive girl, rather she says that “[i]n our house, however, it paid to be a girl, and all my womanish ways were approved” (*TMF* 155). In Walker’s novels, Goddess may be any woman who is assertive, speaks her mind, and is not subdued by patriarchal authorities. She does not believe in inflicting suffering upon oneself. Mama Shug creates a new gospel in tune with her radical ideas: “Helped are those who learn that the deliberate invocation of suffering is as much a boomerang as the deliberate invocation of joy” (*TMF* 144).

Tanya, Fanny’s childhood white friend is much impressed with the liveliness, vivacity, and creativity of Fanny’s matriarchal household. She recalls while talking to Fanny years after: “I thought all black people lived more or less like the people did in your house. Where there was always something lively going on. Music or parties or sun worship or something. . . . And folks at your house were always kissing” (*TMF* 330). Walker presents Celie and Shug as representatives of her pagan beliefs. Talking about Shug’s notion of spirituality, Fanny laughs. Walker writes, “She felt that spirituality was, above all, too precious to be left to the perverted interpretations of men” (*TMF* 302). Fanny turns into a
radical; her dislike of white people turns into hatred; and she fears she would end up murdering some white man. She considers their avarice responsible for ecological degradation as well as the woes of oppressed people. She tells her husband Suwelo, “I hate white people. I visualize them sliding off the planet, and the planet saying, ‘Ah, I can breathe again’” (TMF 303)! Fanny’s mother, Olivia, advises her to forgive white folks but Fanny unlocks her heart in a letter to Suwelo asking, “Do you think they know what they are doing when they suck all the oil out of the earth on one side of the world and complain about earthquakes on the other? Do you think they know what they are doing when they fill the sky with space junk and rockets whose important ‘missions’ to spy on other planets are meaningless to ninety-nine percent of the people and to absolutely all of the plants and animals on earth?” (TMF 309)

In the beginning of Part Five of AWLS, Walker uses a very profound illustration of a ‘broom’ by a photographer Sue Sellars, along with a written text beneath it: “The broom, the pen, and one’s body can be used to stir things up. This is their connection to and kinship with Nature. With the wind, especially. Which stirs, blows away what is useless and dead, and cleanses to make new.” Walker’s indomitable and ardent activist spirit shapes her entire literary corpus as she takes up the formidable challenge of critiquing the controversial practice of female circumcision. She believes in the power of pen to ‘stir things up’. In PSJ, it is through the searing story of a tribal African woman, Tashi (first appeared in CP) that Walker describes in detail the millennia-old inhumane and misogynistic practice of female genital mutilation carried out in many parts of Africa and the Middle East countries. Though proud of her African heritage, she detests any practice which alienates women from their bodies, leaving permanent scars on their bodies as well as psyche. In the novel, Walker highlights the distinction between Africans and African-Americans, and how Tashi is deluded into believing that Olivia (or African-Americans) is black but culturally very different from Africans. She refuses to listen to her childhood African-American friend, Olivia and sarcastically challenges her religious perceptions, “You don’t even know what you’ve lost! And the nerve of you, to bring us a God someone else chose for you!” (PSJ 23). It is ironical that to uphold the Olinkan heritage and to posit it as distinct from dominant Western culture, Tashi takes the extreme step of undergoing circumcision, little aware of its long term repercussions. Walker’s womanist concern is discernible in her attempt to map the territory of shattered female self as a result of the magnitude of the mutilation (physical as well as mental) to which these women are subjected to. Walker is against any religion which
legitimates oppression of women. Walker attempts not just dismantling the master’s house but constructing a new edifice cemented upon black woman’s way of knowing and perceiving things. This transformational epistemology involves black women’s voices to speak for themselves. Raye, Tashi’s doctor declares it bitterly in the novel: “Religion is an elaborate excuse for what man has done to women and to the earth” (PSJ 229). Evelyn (Tashi) develops a strong bond of trust with her psychologist Raye. Tashi is touched by her gesture of empathizing with the kind of pain and trauma Tashi must have gone through at the time of ritual circumcision. Tashi admits, “My own body was a mystery to me, as was the female body, beyond the function of the breasts, to almost everyone I knew” (PSJ 119). Raye identifies with Tashi’s pain by undergoing ‘Gum mutilation’ because of several pockets of gum disease. Tashi realizes that though Raye is physically distanced from Africa because her ancestors had moved to America hundreds of years before, yet Tashi thinks: “My psychologist was a witch, not the warty kind American children imitate on Halloween, but a spiritual descendant of the ancient healers who taught our witch doctors and were famous for their compassionate skill” (PSJ 131-132). Before Raye took over as Tashi’s doctor, Walker brings in a ‘white witch doctor’ who tries to replicate Jung. The imitation is visible in his dark hair and beard, keeping stone and clay figures of African gods and Goddesses from ancient Egypt, the tribal-rug-covered couch and the cigar. However, he is unable to cure her, as his understanding of and identification with African heritage is superficial.

Tashi is convicted of murder of a Tsunga (Walker’s neologism for the women involved in practicing female genital mutilation [FGM]), M’Lissa. After she has been sentenced to death, she permits visitors other than her family in the jail. Olivia, Tashi’s friend and sister-in-law, brings in the potters who replicate the ancient fertility dolls. One of the women informs Tashi that “the word “doll” is derived from the word “idol.” The figures that have come down to us as mere dolls were once revered as symbols of the Creator, Goddess, the Life Force Itself” (PSJ 196). Walker’s fervency in rewriting history from an ecofeminist standpoint is implicit as well as explicit. Here, the woman proffers a stack of photographs of paintings she discovers among caves and rocks depicting the time when women were not made to feel guilty or ashamed of their sexuality; photographs with explicit images of women rejoicing and dancing freely, copulating with men, interacting with animals, and giving birth. She reveals the subjugation of women when these ancient images were purposely sent literally underground and many stone and clay figures depicting a woman’s genitals and her
contented face were destroyed. She laments the fact that these idols have been turned into ‘dolls’ and “every little girl is given a doll to drag around” (PSJ 197).

Walker has introduced Jungian archetypes in many of her novels including PSJ. Her love for Jungian theories is explicit in her statement:

. . . I spent like years studying Jung, and I love Jung, and I was actually able then to understand his theories and his way. . . . I feel that the people like Jung give us new ways of understanding our behavior when they help us to see the shadow that we just don’t want to face . . . helping us to see the light . . . of who we really are. (TWC 259)

Katie R. Levy also describes Walker’s love for Jungian archetypes:

In the novel, Pierre describes the specific archetypal image of the feminine unconscious as relating to the termite hill and the initial excision of the female. Possessing draws parallels between women in all cultures, time periods, and societies describing the fundamental experience amongst all such women. In so doing, Walker invokes the Jungian collective unconscious. (25)

The idea of ‘underground rivers’ in NTH seems to be inspired from Jungian idea of ‘shadow’ and ‘self’. The self is an archetype that represents the unification of the unconsciousness and consciousness of an individual. According to Jung, the creation of the self occurs through a process known as individuation, in which the various aspects of personality are integrated. The shadow exists as part of the unconscious mind and is composed of repressed ideas, weaknesses, desires, instincts and shortcomings. This archetype is often described as the darker side of the psyche, representing wildness, chaos and the unknown. These latent dispositions are present in all of us, Jung believed, although people sometimes deny this element of their own psyche and instead project it onto others. Kate liked the idea that rivers dry up or go underground during summer season, but do not disappear: “She was beginning to think that human beings had underground selves, always running, limpid, clear, even when everything in the personality appeared used up, dusty, and dry” (NTH132).

Walker’s belief in the innate goodness of all life on this planet is discernible when she says, “I do not believe the people of the world are naturally my enemies, or that animals,
including snakes, are, or that Nature is” (AWLS xxv). Her pan-religious and pantheistic sensibilities are interspersed across much of her writing including her poems, short stories, essays and novels. Walker’s notion of ‘Divine’ is essentially different from what is taught as a part of “sky-god religion” (TWC 226). Her paganism propels her to rebut any religion which alienates us from earth:“It is about understanding that people may well need to have religions in order to further their social programs and their political agendas or even their spiritual desires, but essentially what is divine is in front of you all the time. You cannot separate yourself ever from the earth” (TWC 226). Manuelito (who becomes an angel after death) is optimistic about the fate of the Earth when he tells Señor Robinson (also an angel): “The cathedral of the future will be nature. In the end, people will be driven back to trees. To streams” (BLFS 193). In CP, Walker describes that for the Olinka people, the roofleaf is not simply a thing but an embodiment of the very essence of life. She asks rhetorically, “A roofleaf is not Jesus Christ but in its own humble way, is it not God?” (139).

Since Walker’s spiritual growth is eclectic, it has always allowed her to explore the spirituality of other traditions including Buddhism. Considering the havoc and devastation wreaked upon nature as well as on the physical and psychological health of women, her hybridity can prove to be an antidote for the reparation of environmental and societal wrongs. Stephanie Kaza talking about the intersection of Buddhism, Feminism, and environmental work explains:

In the two decades between Earth Day 1970 and Earth Day 1990, Buddhism, feminism, and concern for the environment in America grew and changed tremendously, reflecting a period of serious questioning of values, and social structures. . . . Retreats and conferences were a regular feature on Western meditation calendars.(52)

Apart from being a Christian and pagan, Walker has opened the doors of mind for Buddhism too, though she admits that she has not studied and practiced Buddhism “[t]o become a Buddhist”and calls Buddha “an enlightened being” (WOWF 94), just as Jesus Christ was not a Christian, but a Christ, an enlightened being. She explains her understanding of the meaning of both the Christ and the Buddha:
The challenge for me is not to be a follower of Something but to embody it; I am willing to try for that. . . . When the Buddha, dying, entreated his followers to “be a lamp unto your self,” I understood he was willing to free his followers even from his own teachings. . . . He was also warning them not to claim him as the sole route to their salvation, thereby robbing themselves of responsibility for their own choices, behaviour, and lives. (“Suffering Too Insignificant” 94)

Walker has embraced the ideas of Buddhism as part of her spiritual odyssey, but she adopts ‘this-worldly’ approach as part of her spiritual practice which is expressed in the acts of compassion, grassroots movements, and nonviolence. Carolyn M. Jones Medine observes that Walker’s spirituality might incorporate Buddhism and especially the activist movement of “Engaged Buddhism”. The architect of Engaged Buddhism is Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Buddhist monk and this off-shoot of Buddhism is founded on the belief that genuine spiritual practice requires an active involvement in the social, political, and environmental issues. Judith Simmer-Brown suggests that the keystone for Engaged Buddhism is “the interdependence of all things so that the suffering of others is also one’s own suffering, and the violence of others is also one’s own violence” (qtd. in Medine 25).

Walker’s writings are exemplary of her ideas of Engaged Buddhism since her compassionate and empathetic self is in sync with this school of Buddhism. In “Suffering Too Insignificant for the Majority to See”, Walker explains thus:

This compassionate, generous, life-affirming nature of ours, that can be heard in so much of our music, is our Buddha nature. It is how we innately are. It is too precious to lose, even to disappointment and grief. . . . many of us have discovered in the teachings of the Buddha wise, true, beautiful guidance on the treacherous path life and history set us upon.

Hence, Walker’s own belief in goodness of people and love for nature seems close to the ideas of Buddhism. She has always believed that this rootedness in earth and respect for life is an essential part of her legacy. Walker upholds her ancestral heritage by saying, “We are a people who have always loved life and loved the earth. . . . We are a nation of creators and
farmers who adored the Earth even when we were not permitted to own any part of it larger than our graves” (*WOWF* 92).

Walker’s novels embody the principles of Buddhist thought but she does not want to be labeled as a Buddhist. Walker affirms, “My novel *The Color Purple* was actually my Buddha novel without Buddhism. In the face of unbearable suffering following the assassinations and betrayals of the Civil Rights Movement, I too sat down upon the Earth and asked its permission to posit a different way from that in which it was raised” (*WOWF* 99). She accepts the teachings of Buddha but does not believe in institutionalized Buddhism which like other organized religions devalues earth and consequently, denigrates the self-esteem of women by not permitting them to enter the religious order fully. Walker brings to light the ecological thinking of the Buddha when she says: “Though Buddhist monks would spend millennia pretending all wisdom evolves from the masculine and would consequently treat Buddhist nuns abominably, the Buddha clearly placed himself in the lap of the Earth Mother and affirmed Her wisdom and her support” (*WOWF* 99).

Walker’s inclination towards Buddhism is implicit in the beginning chapters of *NTH* when Kate Talkingtree is shown meditating in a large hall. Walker writes: “Up and down the path that led to the front door they did a walking meditation that had been taught them by a lot of different Buddhist teachers, some from America and some from Asia” (1). The meditation practice here is influenced by the Zen school of Buddhism. Coomaraswamy explains:

Ch’an or Zen Buddhism, though in a practical and more or less intimate way associated with the cult of Amitabha, represents the more philosophical and mystical aspect of the Mahayana, and is essentially indifferent to iconolatory and to scriptural authority. This phase of Mahayana is little determined by special forms, and can scarcely be said to have any other creed than that the kingdom of heaven is in the heart of man. (254)

Like Walker, bell hooks also felt inclined towards Buddhism. Her interest in Buddhism endured and blossomed into a full-fledged commitment because, she says, “Buddhism allows us to embrace the complexity of the shadow self, the self that is not all smiley and have-a-nice-day, that is sorrowful, anguished, at times demonic. You get to work
with that” (qtd. in Barry Boyce). Walker and hooks seem to share confluence of beliefs regarding their Buddhist leanings. hooks says she is a “Buddhist nomad” (qtd. in Boyce) not a part of any group. She also notes that Buddhism in the West has largely been white and very cerebral, and in any case, she says, “I don’t care about the label. I care whether I can do the work of the dharma. I seem to be able to talk about mind and body and love and healing, and integrate Buddhism into places where Buddhism doesn’t normally go” (qtd. in Boyce). Walker expresses her drift away from the appropriated forms of Buddhism as practiced by the whites. In \textit{NTH}, Kate Talkingtree begins to feel hollowness even in her Buddhist meditation practice. Some statements given by her well-fed, middle-aged Buddhist teacher of southern European descent do not cut ice with her, especially his discourse on the non-violent ‘cool’ path introduced by the Lord Buddha. She does not agree with him when he maintains that a ‘hot’ revolution with guns and violence, such as the ones attempted in Africa, Cuba, and the Caribbean, could never succeed. He being educated and belonging to an upper-middle-class family could never understand the plight of the people “[w]ho worried constantly where their next meal was coming from” \textit{(NTH} 3). Kate becomes disillusioned when she realizes: “He seemed unaware that these revolutions had been undermined not only by their own shortcomings but also by military interference from the United States” \textit{(NTH} 2). Though she respected her teacher and knew that ‘hot’ revolutions defeated themselves, yet his lack of empathy made her feel “… she had reached an impasse on the Buddhist road” \textit{(NTH} 3).

Her inner spiritual vacuum resulting from unrequited and unsatisfactory relationships make her dismantle her altar. Walker writes: “Her imposing poster of the languid and regal Quan Yin was rolled up and secured with a blue string, her classical Buddha . . . she had draped with a purple cloth” \textit{(NTH} 9). Towards the end of the novel as she reclaims her lost self through literal as well as symbolic spiritual journeys down the Colorado river and Amazon Rainforest, she realizes the true meaning of the ‘Divine’, not as mere figurines or statues to be placed on the altar, rather their true essence of interconnectedness and synchronicity with the entire web of life. As she understands the principles of immanence, interconnection and community in their true spirit, the statues and pictures including the rolled up poster of Quan Yin and photograph of Buddha find their place again in her altar room. The illuminated candles in the altar room are metaphorically suggestive of her inner enlightenment as well as that of her lover, Yolo: “Feeling connected and at peace, they fell into meditation without signal or plan” \textit{(NTH} 223).
According to Stephanie Kaza, Quan Yin represents a feminine form of a realized Boddhisattva, known to many people for thousands of years as the embodiment of compassion for all beings in the vast interdependent mutually causal web (50). The feminine compassionate presence has long been addressed by Buddhists of many cultures to relieve human sickness, grief, and poverty of spirit. In the current sweep of environmental destruction, it is Kanzeon and Tara who see and experience with us the pain and suffering of deserts, forests, soils, groundwater, oceans, and skies (51). Identification with the ‘Divine feminine’ is an unparalleled act of empowerment. Miranda Shaw, discussing the gynocentric view of Tantric Buddhism in *Passionate Enlightenment*, says:

Women must discover the divine female essence within themselves. This should inspire self-respect, confidence, and the ‘divine pride’ that is necessary to traverse the tantric path. This pride is an antidote to self-doubt and discouragement. . . . When a woman reclaims her divine identity, she does not need to seek outer sources of approval, for a bottomless reservoir of self-esteem emanates from the depths of her own being.(41)

Shaw’s views find a parallel in *CP* where Celie is able to discover the Divine female essence in herself and comes out of the reservoir of self-abnegation. Yoshinobu Hakutani discovers Buddhist enlightenment behind Celie’s self-creation:

Zen teaches that divinity exists in nature only if the person is intuitively conscious of divinity in the self. Shug says, “Don’t look like nothing . . . It ain’t a picture show. It. It ain’t something you can look at apart from anything else, including yourself. I believe God is everything. . . . Everything that is or ever was or ever will be”.(175)

According to Hakutani, Shug’s use of the word ‘nothing’ is reminiscent of the Zen doctrine of ‘mu’ and ‘satori’. This state of mind is absolutely free of materialistic and egotistic thought and emotion; it is so completely free that such a consciousness corresponds to that of nature (Hakutani 175). Hakutani calls Celie’s and Shug’s enlightenment as “Zen-like Enlightenment” (175).

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As already discussed before, Walker has a unique capacity of holistic approach towards life which is remarkably evident in her readiness to assimilate ideas and teachings of different religions like Buddhism. In an interview, Evelyn C. White asked Walker about her Buddhist practice, and she replied, “Buddhism has been especially helpful to me because it affirms the necessity for quiet; compassion over anger; being over doing. It encourages people to accept life in its totality, not just the good parts” (TWC 205). Though a follower of some teachings of Buddha, she impugns whatever needs to be expunged from any institutionalized religion and does not want to circumscribe herself to any particular school of thought. David Swick, in an interview exchanges the following conversation with Walker:

David Swick: You meditate, you read Pema Chödrön and Thich Nhat Hanh, you have praised the work of Jack Kornfield, you go on retreats, and yet you say in the book that you’re no Buddhist.

Alice Walker: I’m not. The whole point of anything that is really, truly valuable to your soul, and to your own growth, is not to attach to a teacher, but rather to find out what the real deal is in the world itself. You become your own guide. The teachings can help you, but really, we’re all here with the opportunity to experience the reality of hereness. We all have that. I trust that. (TWC305-06)

To encapsulate, the chapter has dealt with Walker’s attempt to recover the stolen African Goddesses such as Isis and Medusa and invoked their power to assist in creating a synergistic world view of healing and connectedness. Walker traces how ancient African Goddesses are an embodiment of earth-based spirituality. Besides, her inclination towards paganism, earth-based religions, and Buddhism has been discussed in detail. Walker’s syncretism can become a concrete foundational stone in the direction of healing nature as well as women. However, at the same time, it is important to analyze whether Walker falls into the trap of ‘essentialism’ while trying to work for the betterment of women as well as nature; whether she belongs to the category of cultural ecofeminists who try to uphold a closer relationship between women as well as nature. Her ‘essentialism’ will be discussed in the conclusive chapter.