Chapter 4

Animal Cousins and Uncle Trees

Heaven is my father and earth my mother and even such a small creature as I find an intimate place in its midst. That which extends throughout the universe, I regard as my body and that which directs the universe, I regard as my nature, all people are my brothers and sisters and all things are my companions.

(Earth Prayers)

The network of connections emphasized by ecofeminists and deep ecologists encompasses not only the human but also the non human world. Recognizing the imperative need to maintain a dialectical relation with nature, they extend a deep concern for the plight of the different species of animals and plants. Warwick Fox has identified two main tasks to be accomplished by philosophical deep ecology in order to restore the harmony that has been lost since the Age of Enlightenment:

A positive or constructive task of encouraging an egalitarian [or ecocentric] attitude on the part of humans towards all entities in the ecosphere, [and] a negative or critical task of dismantling anthropocentrism. (qtd. in Key Concepts 140)
It has already been mentioned that the etymological meaning of the word "ecology" implies a focus on species as "partners of a shared domain" (ER 73).

The primal societies were all centred around nature-oriented religions which upheld an ecocentric universe. Earth and all its inhabitants—whether human or nonhuman—were considered to be sacred. The description of the traditional American Indian philosophy of the "Sacred Circle of Life" given by anthropologist, Stan Steiner, is a very good exposition of the reciprocity of human-nonhuman relationship. According to him, "In the Circle of Life, every being is no more, or less, than any other. We are all sisters and brothers. Life is shared with the bird, bear, insects, plants, mountains, clouds, stars, sun" (qtd. in Key Concepts 140). The same thought is reflected in a multitude of primal cultures. The "Sanatan Dharma" of the Hindu philosophy which is roughly translated as the eternal essence of life also emphasizes the Sacred Circle. Rancho Prime, a religious philosopher brings out the idea in his explanation of the basic concept of this dharma as the "essential quality which unites all beings—human, animal and plant with the universe that surrounds them and ultimately with the original source of their existence, the Godhead" (Hinduism and Ecology 1).

The ecocentric cultures were all replaced by pastoral and later "civilized" cultures which caused a tremendous change in human attitude and response to natural surrounding. As a result of the conscious attempt to humanize the earth's surface, the western religious tradition distanced itself
from wild nature and gave rise to an anthropocentric universe. Later this was firmly anchored by Judaism and Athenian philosophy which continued to exert its influence on western scientific and religious thought for a long period. Though Aristotle envisaged an earth-centred universe, it was more a hierarchically structured one. Thus “The sacred Circle” of Life was replaced by the “Great Chain of Being” in which nature made plants for the use of animals, and animals were made for the sake of humans.

The Age of Enlightenment served to legitimate an exploitative view of the natural environment. Consequently there was disenchantment of the world, dissolution of myths and the substitution of knowledge for fancy. This marked the extirpation of animism. With the mind/body dualism propounded by Descartes, man’s superiority as masters and possessors of nature was asserted. Kate Soper explains the impact of Cartesian philosophy on Ecology. The Cartesian contention is that “animals being deprived of a soul are in effect no more sentient than plants, and therefore lack the capacity of feeling pleasure and pain in any subjective sense” (What is Nature? 53). Without language no thought is possible. As thought is essential to the experience of selfhood, Descartes concludes that animals are in effect like machines.

Human beings, whose essential being lies in thinking, are placed outside the order of nature (53). This engendered a tendency to maintain a dichotomy between the human beings and other animals.

George Sessions points out how in the seventeenth century, Baruch Spinoza, a Dutch philosopher tried to “resanctify the world by identifying
God with nature, which was conceived of as each and every existing entity—human and non human” (Key Concepts 145). Sessions explains how Spinoza developed this new philosophy: “Through criticism of Hobbes and Descartes, Spinoza developed a philosophy that would channel the new scientific understanding of nature” (145). George Sessions and Arne Naess also point out that the philosopher Spinoza has provided “a unique fusion of an integrated man/nature metaphysics with modern European science”. Bill Devall remarks: “Spinoza’s ethics is most naturally interpreted as implying biospheric egalitarianism, and science is endorsed by Spinoza as valuable primarily for contemplation of a pantheistic, sacred universe and for spiritual discipline and development” (130). Though his argument was received with much eulogy it could not derail the anthropocentric trends of the west. The rise of mechanistic outlook aggravated the exploitative assault on the environment. Large scale destruction of land and thoughtless devastation of non-renewable resources like coal, gas or petroleum endangered the environment. This engendered a deep concern for the environment in the late 1960s and early 70s which later gained strength and popularity as a distinct school known as deep ecology. It recognizes the need for reordering the Great Chain and as a result, the hierarchical chain was replaced by a chain of connections.

As described in the first chapter of this thesis, deep ecologists believe that all forms affect and sustain one another within a web of radical interdependence and maintain an organic interconnectedness. As against
western anthropocentrism which attributed superior status to mankind, deep ecology pronounces very emphatically that humans are neither the rulers nor the centre of the universe. They are embedded in a vast living matrix and subject to its laws of reciprocity. There is a reordering of the Great Chain in favour of the chain of connections. The “Biospherical egalitarianism” advocated by deep ecology subverts ways of perception and confers greater value for life other than that of human beings. Humans are not outside or above nature, but part of ongoing creation. As diversity enhances the potentialities for survival, living beings are supposed to “coexist and cooperate in complex relationships” rather than suppressing, exploiting and killing. Bill Devall’s clarification of the nature of deep ecology highlights the ethics of care to be maintained:

The person cares for and about nature, shows reverence toward and respect for non human nature, loves and lives with non human nature, is a person in the “earth household” and lets being be, lets nonhuman nature follow separate evolutionary destinies. (Key Concepts 126)

Lynda Birke, a famous biologist, offers a trajectory of the development of feminist concern for the non human which in many ways is similar to the deep ecological awareness. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, many physiological experiments were conducted on living animals. Birke describes: “The screams and howls of the tortured
animals were assimilated to the concept of mechanism: the howls were merely the grinding of machinery" (Women, Feminism and Biology 120).

Birke also points out that the biological/social as well as animal/human dichotomies have led to the treatment of the animals as "other" which permeates the western thought. This underscores the differences between humans and animals and projects an alter ego on to animals. It tends to legitimate the exploitation of nature and human mastery over it (Feminism, Animals and Science 12). In the face of such blatant cruelty there arose strong opposition to vivisection and other forms of cruelty towards animals. Thinking people were not able to view this in isolation, they felt that it was linked to other forms of oppression, such as slavery and the oppression of women. Thus due consideration for animal rights became an explicit concern of feminism in the 19th century. Birke quotes an observation made by Jeremy Bentham, the utilitarian philosopher, in which he speaks about the need for extending the protection of law to all sensitive beings. As the law has taken care of the condition of slaves, it should attend to the needs of all the animals which assist man's labours or supply his wants. Feminists too see "connections between the ways in which women and animals are subordinated in their proximity with nature" (Women, Feminism 120). Feminist writers suggest that the sympathy is a "means of recognition of the mutual victimization of both women and animals by men" (121). They hold the view that the concept of liberty becomes meaningful only if it takes up the cause of all the oppressed and exploited creatures on the planet. Birke
concludes: “The concern for animal rights is thus seen as a logical extension of the more general feminist concern for nature or for less privileged human groups, all of whom are seen to share some features of oppression within patriarchal society” (Women, Feminism 121). So when feminists aim at the overthrow of patriarchy they have all such oppressions in their mind.

Alice Walker takes the stance of both a deep ecologist and an ecofeminist in her recognition and promotion of an ecocentric world view. As pointed out in the first chapter of this thesis, she combines the essence of both these philosophies in developing the concept of womanism. While discrediting the western world view which she considers oppressive, she celebrates the unity of women with nature as against an anthropocentric/androcentric life view. This is more in tune with the biocentrism of deep ecology which shares many values with ecofeminism. In short, Walker’s ecological consciousness is moulded by a wider vision, which aims at bringing about a reconciliation between the points of divergence of the principal tenets of deep ecology and ecofeminism. Like Freya Mathews, Walker tries to strike a balance between the holistic view of the world as an extended “self-writ-large” advocated by deep ecology and eco feminism’s emphasis on the world as a community of beings with which one has a compassionate, caring relationship. Though she respects each being in the community, she also sees it as part of the cosmic whole with which she identifies and often attempts to merge with. She adheres to the conclusion drawn by Mathews that “through its ethic of compassion ecofeminism can
humanise deep ecology, which has become embittered toward human
rapaciousness, seeing human species as a species bent on destroying other
species” (Key Concepts 13).

Walker places herself within the Sacred Circle of Life and looks at the
other entities from within. She does not consider the non human as the
“other”, but maintains a dialectical interaction with nature and everything in
it. More than being images or metaphors, the animals and plants are attributed
selfhood in Walker’s works. Overtones of ecocentrism are markedly traceable
in her works. It is not only woman’s body that is being heard in her oeuvre
but also that of animals and plants. As ecofeminists do, she draws her
resources for struggle from more egalitarian, body-affirming, nature-
respecting religions, cultures and ideologies. With a new awareness, she
reads the painful look in the eyes of the horse named Blue, listens to the
mournful cries of the peacocks and the chimpanzees and also to the message
conveyed by the trees. This awareness is shaped mainly by her partial
inheritance of the American Indian heritage. Walker has stressed her triracial
origin — American, African and American Indian in the words: “We are the
mestizos of North America. We are black, yes, but we are ‘white’ too, and we
are red” (LBW 82). She is influenced by the American Indians in formulating
her religious beliefs and also her attitude to the natural environment. The
holistic view that she develops is purely American Indian. She has
acknowledged her fascination for the Native American view that “all of
Donald Hughes in his seminal book, *American Indian Ecology*, describes how the early American Indians treated the plants and animals with much reverence and the earth as sacred. According to Hughes, the American Indians had learned to live with nature, to survive and indeed prosper in each kind of environment, the vast land offered in seemingly infinite variety (1). They took care that they did all this without destroying, without polluting, without using up the living resources of the natural world. They never did anything which disrupted the harmony with Mother Earth. They always regarded nature as a community of living beings, which man must share with animals, plants, and trees. The Indians never considered themselves to be superior to the other beings but as relatives. Hughes goes on explaining that there is “an impressive underlying agreement in their expressions of reverence for earth, kinship with all forms of life, and harmony with nature” (6). Nature was considered as the larger whole of which mankind was just a part. Many American Indians held on to the belief that all living things are one, and people are joined with birds and trees, predators and prey, rocks and rain in a vast powerful, inter-relationship (14 -15). Hughes quotes the words of a person belonging to the Hopi tribe of the native Americans: “The whole universe is enhanced with the same breath, rocks, trees, grass, earth, all animals and men. We are in one nest” (qtd. in *American Indian* 15). These people saw everything in the universe as alive, conscious and sentient not just
"animate". There was a constant attempt to maintain an intense kinship with nature. Hughes makes this clear in his observation: "The Indian did not define himself or herself as primarily an autonomous individual, but as part of a whole; a member of the tribe, a living being like the other living beings, a part of nature" (16). Because of this deep kinship, Indians accorded to every form of life the right to live, perpetuate its species and follow the way of its own being as a conscious fellow creature. Animals were treated with the same consideration and respect ascribed to human beings. In the essay "Ecology, Feminism and African and Asian Spirituality", Chung Hyun Kyung emphasizes such a relationship when she observes: "They [ecologists] call us to a new pattern of relations with all beings in the cosmos based on mutuality, interdependence and life giving values" (Ecotheology 175).

It is this vision of peaceful coexistence of all the beings on earth that finds its best manifestation in Walker's account of the "animal cousins" in The Temple of My Familiar. Lissie, her spokesperson, with her unique capacity to delve into a remote past traces the several phases of affinity between the human and the non human. In a tone of nostalgia, Lissie narrates the idyllic past when there was strong bond between the two. While explaining the genesis of this novel, Walker discloses how she comes to the realization that she is writing a "romance" which according to her is nothing less than a "wisdom tale", memory or adventure. She emphasizes that the novel is "less about the relationships of human beings to each other than about the relationship of humans (women in particular) to animals, who in the
outer world, symbolize woman's inner spirit” (Anything 118). After spending a year or so in San Francisco where she could “dream, meditate and write”, she “reconnected with the world of animals and spirits—in trees, old abandoned orchards, undisturbed riverbanks” she had known and loved as a child. She narrates the experience: “I became aware that there is a very thin membrane, human-adult-made, that separates us from this seemingly vanished world, where plants and animals still speak a language we humans understand, and I began to write about the exhilarating experience of regaining my childhood empathy” (129).

The strength of the kinship with the animal world that Walker highlights in The Temple is clearly suggested by the manner in which she refers to them. She addresses them as “animal cousins”. The reader gets a vivid picture of the bond in Lissie’s narration of the bygone days:

“Sometimes all of us would be out there watching. Children, grown ups, the hunted dogs, the cats, even the goats . . . looking at the sunset together with the animals and slobbering all over one another’s face” (The Temple 42). The idea of peaceful coexistence is further highlighted in Lissie’s description to Suwelo, the history professor: “They [the animal cousins] seemed nearly unable to comprehend separateness; they lived and breathed as a family, then as a clan, then as a forest and so on. If I hurt myself and cried, they cried with me, as if my pain was magically transposed to their bodies” (85). The cousins lived together in harmony until death. This togetherness was spoiled by the emergence of the idea of ownership. Then the forest “began to be
viewed as something cut into pieces that belonged to this tribe or that” (86). Later this idea of ownership was extended to the family, and men, because they were stronger, “began to think of owning women and children”. Lissie’s story inspires Suwelo so much that he becomes intensely conscious of his non-human “relatives” in the world (88). He also points out after examining several photographs of Lissie that she looks very happy when she is in the company of her animal cousins.

Lissie’s account also reveals how the African mothers get estranged from the animals as a result of man’s jealousy at the happiness and satisfaction women and animals enjoy in each other’s company. The woman, whose world consists solely of animals and children, is reduced to the caring and feeding of one small cat. Even though they hoped to retain the care of at least a single pet, it too was taken away from them. Walker relates how the inquisitors put an iron hand on them by declaring that “consorting” with animals is a crime. Lissie mentions how they make it “seem not only natural but also righteous to kill, as brutally as possible, without any feeling but lustful self-justification any animal or dark creature” (198 -199). Lissie strongly believes that animals can remember as memory is renewed at every birth.

Walker also shares the American Indian thought that the animals are able to communicate with one another and also with the human beings. While describing the relationship maintained between the Indians and the animals, Donald Hughes observes: “All animals, fish, and birds were believed to be
related to each other, able to understand one another’s languages and the languages of human beings. Once, people could talk with the animals, and a few individuals, it was held, still received the ability to understand them” (American Indian 24). Lissie has a vivid memory of an archaic habitat—a time and a place where the humans could communicate with animals. Walker regards herself as one who possesses this ability to understand the speech of animals. The story of the horse named Blue reveals her power to probe into the mute world of animals. Blue is a large white horse ambling about the fenced in meadow of her neighbour. Walker and her companion are in the habit of giving him apples to eat. But she feels very uneasy when she looks into the eyes of Blue where she can read loneliness and boredom. She feels guilty that she has failed to notice the expression in the horse’s eyes at once. Walker says: “No, I was shocked that I had forgotten that human animals and non human animals can communicate quite well; if we are brought up around animals as children we take this for granted” (LBW 5). Human beings change their attitude as they become adults, but animals do not. Walker’s contention is that animals are more “complete” than human beings who are prone to change because they are not “complete”. She says: “They [the animals] are in fact ‘completed’ creations (at least they seem to be, so much more than we) who are not likely to change; it is their nature to express themselves” (5). When she reflects more on the confinement of the horse, it evokes in her mind a chain of thoughts about slavery, about white children who are raised by Blacks and later forced to “forget” the deep levels of communication
between themselves and the "mammy" who brings them up, about the Indians considered to be "like animals" by the "settlers".

Later on, the horse is joined by a companion, a brown mare who is brought to the farm to be "put with him". Walker easily discerns a visible change of expression in Blue's eyes: "a look of independence, of self possession, of unalienable horseness" (LBW 6). While she feeds both the horses with apples, she enjoys heartily the perfect bliss experienced by Blue. When she looks into his eyes, they seem to tell her with content: "This is it." The feeling of justice and peace reflected in the eyes is not missed by her. But this does not last long. Brown is taken away and Walker confesses that she dreads looking into Blue's eyes. Her empathy finds a unique expression here: "If I had been born into slavery, and my partner had been sold or killed, my eyes would have looked like that" (LBW 7). Thus she claims a legacy in the lonely and enslaved horse who teaches her the value of freedom for all of God's creatures. The marvellous skill with which she associates Blue's pain to that of a miserable slave is highly commendable. Lynda Birke commends Walker's ability to touch on her sense of common suffering with the horse.

Birke remarks:

It is not the (culturally accepted) sense of humans as different from other animals that moves her, but her awareness that Blue is suffering just as she would do, and just as her people did in slavery. It is similarity, not difference that matters here.

(Feminism, Animals 4).
Walker cannot bear the look in the horse’s eyes, “a look so piercing, so full of grief, a look so human” (LBW 7). She feels contempt for the people who fail to understand that animals suffer. Nazareno Fabbretti, in Animals Write... Dear Humans while criticizing human behavior towards animals from the horse’s point of view, imagines that it is the craving for freedom and a sense of equality that the horse pronounces in his letter. The horse writes: “I don’t want a tamer. I want an equal, a human who can equal me in ability, discipline and freedom” (134).

Walker shows a deep interest in horses which is mainly due to her American Indian heritage. The Indians considered the horse as a strong spiritual influence. Donald Hughes documents that the horse was seen as a creature of great power, and thus regarded with respect and religious awe. He draws attention to the fact that the Sioux word for horse is “shonka wakan” which is variously rendered in English as “power dog”, “mystery dog” or “spirit dog” (American Indian 43). In the collection of poems Horses Make a Landscape Look More Beautiful, after the dedication Walker quotes Lame Deer which forms an epigram. It stresses the superiority of horses. It says: “We had no word for the strange animal we got from the white man—the horse. So we called it sunka wakan, [which is a slight adaptation of the Sioux word] holy dog.” The quotation makes it quite clear that Walker has a keen awareness of the Indians’ special passion for certain animals.

Another instance of this knowledge occurs in the story “Strong Horse Tea” in which old Sarah prescribes good strong horse tea for Rannie
Toomer's dying child. Donald Hughes mentions that horse medicine received through visions of horses was regarded as very powerful by the American Indians. Walker not only favours indigenous knowledge and natural remedies, but also expresses her anger at the maltreatment of animals for clinical purposes. The feeling of empathy leads to a vehement appeal for the protection of animal rights and an upsurge against the human tendency to use and abuse animals. Her letter to People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals reveals the intensity of her concern. In this she speaks about the victimization involved in imprisoning pregnant mares to collect their urine to make premarin, an estrogen-replacement drug for menopausal women. She considers this as an "outrage against nature and beauty that will inevitably be felt by the women to whom this drug is administered" (Anything 168). This assumption is based on her belief that "we are not spiritually unconnected from the drugs we take, nor from the pain and suffering that goes into their making..." (169). The alternative she suggests is quite interesting as well as thought-provoking: "Remember that the horse grows large and strong by eating plants. Menopausal women can get all the estrogen they need from the same source" (Anything 169). This is a clear instance of Walker's protest against the denial of the basic rights of the non human to maintain the youth and health of human beings.

According to Lynda Birke, the renewed interest in "animal minds" which comes to be known as "cognitive ethology" has "revealed a wealth of ways in which non human animals use complex mental concepts, or have
consciousness, ways in which they might have a moral sense, or ways in which they can ‘lie’ and so manipulate the behavior of others” (Feminism, Animals 93). This holds proof to the fact that animals feel pain and that is what Walker too is trying to drive home. A recurring idea conveyed by her is the similarity between the expressions of the human and the non-human. In The Temple, young Zede notices striking similarity between the peacock’s mournful cry and the cry of a tormented soul: In Possessing also, Walker reinforces the human semblance in the agony of the dying chimpanzees. Hartford, the AIDS patient says before he dies: “The screaming of monkeys ... is really unlike the scream of the peacock, which as you know, is very human. But somehow, because of the chimps’ and monkeys’ faces, their screaming is even more human. Everything they fear, everything they feel, is as clear as if you’d known them all your life” (Joy 248). By projecting the similarity between the agonized voices of the human and the non-human, Walker discredits the idea of “beast machines” associated with Cartes who states that animals may behave as if they feel pain, but without experiencing its mental sensation. Birke explains that “this doctrine appears to have been used as justification for the use of animals in physiological experiments ...” (Feminism, Animals 117). The message which Walker tries to convey through the horse or the chimpanzee or the peacock is the same, a warning to human beings; i.e. “Everything you do to us will happen to you; we are your teachers, as you are ours. We are one lesson” (LBW 7).
Another interesting thought provoked by Walker is that human beings have learned a lot from their animal relatives. She points out how most of the human actions are imitations of animal behavior. In The Temple, she illustrates that human beings learned from the great apes how to express sorrow by beating the breast. In Lissie’s words: “For we learned mourning from the giant apes, who taught us to feel grief anywhere around us, and to reflect it back to the sufferer and to act it out” (Temple 362).

In The Temple, Lissie explains that the only feature that differentiates the animals from human beings is the inability to speak due to a different construction of the speaking apparatus. So she argues that in the world of man someone must speak for them and that is why goddesses and witches existed. Alice Walker assumes herself as an advocate of the mute beings and holds her pen as a microphone to them. She makes this clear in the essay “Why did the Balinese chicken cross the road?” She says that she cannot ignore the insistent tone in the chicken’s question: “Why do you keep putting off writing about me?” This prompts her to reconsider the function of writing and helps to come to a deeper understanding which is expressed as follows:

I learn that the writer’s pen is a microphone held up to the mouths of ancestors and even stones of long ago. That once given permission by the writer... horses, dogs, rivers, and yes, chickens can step forward and expound on their lives. The magic of this is not so much in the power of the microphone as in the ability of the
nonhuman object or animal to be and the human animal to perceive its being. (*BW* 170)

So in the first poem “Glimpses From a Tiger’s Back” itself, the reader comes across a pageant of animals. The lines offer glimpses of a “shy gazelle” “an elephant who knows his rights”, “a fat crocodile”, “the spinning cobra”, Hippopotamus and a water buffalo. She is quite impressed by the sight of a “giraffe munching his dinner” which seen through the trees looks like “a leopard in the branches”. The zebra in the valley of Uganda and the red headed Marabou storks — all find their abode in her poetic habitat. She doesn’t miss the “soft wings of cranes sifting through the salt sea air” (*Her Blue Body* 10-31). Her love and concern for the non human friends projected in her later works bears evidence to the fact that these references are not just casual or random. These glimpses form a prologue to the egalitarian view that is to be developed later. William Reuckert expresses a valuable thought on this score:

> The idea that nature should also be protected by human law, that trees (dolphins and whales, hawks and whooping cranes) should have lawyers to articulate and defend their rights is one of the most marvelous and characteristic part of the ecological vision. (*ER* 107)

In the literature of the Black women writers there is an overwhelming concern for the care and rights of animals. This may be due to the proximity they feel towards the oppressed. Moreover, the oppressor very often uses the
names of animals to abuse the oppressed. The black woman is often spoken in terms of cattle and the mules. In *The Gardens* Walker says: “Black women are called, in the folklore that so aptly identifies one’s status in society, “the mule of the world” because we have been handed the burdens that everyone else refused to carry” (236). Hence it is quite natural that the black woman finds a homologous relationship between her plight and the plight of the animals. Lynda Birke’s observation made in this regard fully justifies Alice Walker’s enthusiasm as an apostle of the non human. According to Birke, “. . . non-white people are associated with proximity to animals and to nature, an association all too frequently made in contemporary racist writing . . . the proximity of black people to animals/nature is forcibly underlined, by the stress placed on slave breeding in antebellum America” (*Women, Feminism* 111).

Vera Norwood, another feminist critic, traces connections drawn between instances of such abuse with the experience of the slaves. She explains that Toni Morrison while building up *Beloved* from stories of slaves’ lives, proposes that slavery forms an important quotient in blacks’ attitude toward nature. Norwood also refers to Harriet Jacob’s slave narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* sprinkled with “references to whites’ images of blacks as animals or even as less than animals” (*Made From This Earth* 184). In the introduction, Jacobs has acknowledged that black women “are considered of no value, unless they continually increase their owner’s stock. They are put on a par with animals” (185). Commenting on Zora Neale
Hurston's use of animal imagery, Norwood remarks: "Black men, internalizing the slave master's images of women as animals, themselves use such metaphors to justify various types of abuse" (187). Hence in the sympathy that many women feel towards animals, Feminist writers identify recognition of the mutual victimization of both women and animals.

In her discourse on Uncle Remus stories, Walker speaks about a letter written by the author's daughter-in-law. In this letter, she quotes a paragraph of the introduction in which the author comments on the depiction of "the prowess of the hero Brer Rabbit, proceeding to link up his salient characteristics with the psychology of the negro" (LBW 28). The author says: "It needs no scientific investigation to show why he, the negro, selects as his hero the weakest and the most harmless of all animals and brings him out victorious in contests with the bear, the wolf, and the fox. It is not virtue that triumphs, but helplessness" (LBW 28). In the plight of the animals Walker too reads the history of slavery and captivity. Sometimes she uses the themes of human oppression to comment on the great imperilment of animal life. She observes: "I think I am telling you that the animals of the planet are in desperate peril, and that they are fully aware of this. No less than human beings are doing in all parts of the world, animals are 'seeking sanctuary'" (LBW 191).

Walker the ecologist is at her best when she enters into an imaginary dialogue with the trees and animals which creates a new awareness by looking at matters from a non human perspective. An instance of human-
nonhuman transposition occurs in *The Temple*. Lissie, in one of her reincarnations takes the ‘avatar’ of a lion and reinforces the insistence on harmony: “For I was a lion. To whom harmony, above everything, is sacred... It is our nature to be non violent, to be peaceful, to be calm” (*The Temple* 367). The lion feels pity for the woman who has been deprived of the company of animals. Walker gives vent to her feelings through the words of Lissie, the lion:

> I did not know at the time that man would begin, in his rage and jealousy of us, to hunt us down, to kill and eat us, to wear our hides, our teeth and our bones. No, not even the most cynical animal would have dreamed of that. Soon we would forget the welcome of woman’s fire. Forget her language. Forget her feisty friendliness. Forget the yeasty smell of her and the warm grubbiness of her children. All of this friendship would be lost, and she, poor thing, would be left with just man, screaming for his dinner and forever murdering her friends... (367)

In Fabbretti’s book very sharp criticism is levelled against man by the lion: “You weren’t just content to hunt me down all over the world until I almost became extinct. You have also given me a starring role in your celebrative literature which seems to please human adults so much and, as a result, is also enjoyed by your children” (*Animals Write* 20). The lion cannot tolerate the pride and glory attributed to him by humans. He rebukes: “I have
become a symbol, an analogy, an emblem of strength and nobility” (21). The lion discloses man’s hypocrisy and secret intentions:

The thing that does bother me, however, is that you always bring up the matter of my strength and cruelty to give yourselves prestige and honor. It is quite true that I am strong, but the bit about my cruelty is slanderous folklore. I hunt and kill and shed blood only when I am hungry. I am never the first to attack other animals or humans, and especially not without good reason like hunger or fear. (21-22)

The lion is highly resentful about being humiliated at the circus or safaris. The lion says: “To be quite honest, the circus is even more humiliating than the safari. Better to die than be endlessly piled up, precariously balanced, performing cruel and stupid tricks to entertain you and your children” (22). The lion complains that the animal loses its identity in a circus where it becomes morally subjugated and tamed, a “victim of collective alienation”. The lion concludes with a piece of advice which is resonant with a note of harmonious relationship:

Go back to nature, live more simply, don’t overindulge in images and brutal myths of power. Go back, spontaneously and gradually, as friends not as hunters and tyrants, go back to the countries and places where we still survive. You can save our species by rehumanising your own. In time you will see your children playing
with our cubs, imitating our god, your god and mine, who at the
beginning as the bible says, played on earth himself. (24)

The lion willingly gives up the crown—the “useless, undeserved
symbol of power” which man has given him. It makes a thought provoking
comment: “All symbols of power—before during and after they have been
used by humans and beasts—signify struggle, blood massacre and death”
(24). Walker also refers to man’s thoughtless behaviour towards animals;
instead of allowing the wild animals to roam freely in the forest, which is
their natural habitat, humans keep them in the zoo and the “gaze” of the
visitors is highly irritating. Walker describes:

The lions were always in cages too small for them. And it had
never occurred to anyone that, cut off from life year upon year, as
they were, with nothing whatever to do, the least that could be
done was to build them a fire. It was heartbreaking—to watch
them pace, to smell the sour staleness of their coats and of their
cells, to hear the hysteria in their roar. . . . (The Temple 371)

In “Everything is A Human Being”, written to celebrate the birth of
Martin Luther King Junior, with considerable success she attempts to imagine
how she would feel about human beings if she were a tree. Lying across the
path in a grove of trees, Walker enters into an intensive dialogue with the
trees. The “faces” of the western conifers choked by ground and air pollution
cast the picture of sick people—“irritable, angry and, growing old in pain”.
She imagines that she is able to hear the accusations made by them against the humans. The trees seem to whisper:

We find you without grace, without dignity, without serenity and there is no generosity in you either—just ask any tree. You butcher us, you burn us, you grow us only to destroy us. Even when we grow ourselves, you kill us, or cut off our limbs. That we are alive and have feelings means nothing to you. (142)

The essay is a very good exposition of the biophilial kinship which prompts her to think of the large scale logging in the northern hills of California. She describes it thus: "I saw the loggers’ trucks, like enormous hearses, carrying the battered bodies of the old sisters and brothers, as I thought of them, down to the lumberyards in the valley" (LBW 138). Walker underscores the message that our treatment of all life forms will eventually be judged by the Earth, and judgment will be based on “our worst collective behavior” (143).

By making the trees speak, Walker makes an attempt at re-mything nature as a speaking “bodied subject” to use a phrase by Karen J. Warren (Ecological Feminism 230).

An exploration of Walker’s works reveals a great attraction for trees and horses. It has already been mentioned how she views the tree as a symbol of wholeness. In developing this passion for trees, she is surely influenced by the native Indians. The Indians considered the trees as the most powerful and impressive of all the “plant people”. Donald Hughes says: “Like animals, trees were seen as having immortal spirits and the power to help or hurt.
Their rustling leaves were voices that could speak to the Great Spirit, and if they were harmed unwillingly, they could cry out and seek revenge” (American Indian 52).

Hughes continues to say that trees were regarded as sentient beings, sacred in their own right and entitled to great respect from human beings. Trees and people once could speak to each other, and although human beings had forgotten the language of trees, trees still understand human speech.

Chung Hyun Kyung points out the deep reverence attributed to the trees by ecofeminists. The tree is the most inspiring symbol for their spirituality. Kyung observes: “The tree captures the life thrust and power of the ecofeminist movement. Its roots go deep into the soil of mother earth, strengthening it against erosion . . .” (Ecotheology 178).

Apart from the American Indian influence, her fascination for trees might have been stimulated by her own experience. On the day of her disfigurement caused by the pellet shot which is described at length in the second chapter, the last thing she saw before she became blind was a tree which she vividly remembers and she shares her memory in “Beauty: When the Other Dancer is the Self”:

There is a tree growing from underneath the porch that climbs past the railing to the roof. It is the last thing my right eye sees. I watch as its trunk, its branches, and then its leaves are blotted out by the rising blood. (Gardens 387)
Being the last thing that remained on her retina for a long while it is only natural that the tree is very dear to her. Walker believes that “the planting of trees demonstrates a clear intention to have a future and a definite disinterest in war.” (LBW 101). In *The Temple of My Familiar* she expresses her love for green trees in Lissie’s words to Suwelo. Lissie admires the nonfiniteness of the forest in her remark: “We are in a forest that, for all we know, covers the whole earth. There is no concept of finiteness, in any sense. The trees then were like cathedrals, and each one was an apartment building at night” (*The Temple* 83). Lissie goes on with her account of the sheltering care of trees:

> During the day we played under the trees as urban children today play on the streets. Our aunts and mothers foraged for food, sometimes taking us with them and sometimes leaving us in the care of the big trees. When you knew every branch, every hollow, and every crevice of a tree there was nothing safer; you could quickly hide from whatever might be pursuing you. (83)

In *Possessing the Secret of Joy* also Walker highlights the shelter provided to the Olinkans by the roof leaf trees. The large leaves of the trees were used as roofs and they worshipped the tree as their God.

Zede in her description of North America reveals her ecstasy at the sight of lush vegetation and calls it a little paradise. Olivia’s memory of her childhood in Olinka is so sweet on account of the presence of too many trees — “of magnificent fecundity, density, mystery” (147). In the first part of
Anything We Love, Walker relates how her mother has experienced the nourishing power of trees. She was “hugely pregnant and had an enormous field of cotton, twenty-five or thirty acres, to chop”. She felt so ill and alone. Walker says: “Coming to the end of a row, she lay down under a tree and asked to die. Instead she fell into a deep sleep, and when she awakened, she was fully restored. In fact, she felt wonderful, as if a healing breeze had touched her soul” (13). Walker believes that it was “the God of nonjudgmental Nature, calming and soothing her with the green coolness of the tree she slept under and the warm earth she lay upon.” (13) Walker herself has found the tree as a source of inspiration. She acknowledges that all of the poems in her first collection Once “were written in Africa, while sitting underneath a tree facing Mount Kenya” (Blue Body 3). All through her works one can notice the desire to “keep up a passionate courtship” with trees (Blue Body 145). In Anything also she discloses her urge to take a walk, to put her feet on the earth, “to see late flowering shrubs, and to stand among tall trees” (111). This brings to her mind many black men she has known “who are flexible like the grass and sheltering like the trees” (111). In the preface to her latest collection of poems Absolute Trust in the Goodness of the Earth Walker relates her enthusiasm in her mid fifties to learn more about plants. She says: “In the mid fifties I devoted a year to the study of plant allies, seeking to understand their wisdom and to avail myself of the insightful living that I believe the earth provides as surely as do meditation centres” (xii).
While discussing the creative power of natural symbols, Larry Rasmussen speaks about trees as religious symbols of a sturdy, renewed, and upright way of life. Throughout Hebrew scripture, the tree is a metaphor for fidelity and righteousness as well as healing and new life. He also mentions the strong influence of trees on life in his statement: “Trees speak and tell stories, stories of life, resistance, death, and new life. Trees breathe of human imagination and history as well as their own” (*Earth Community, Earth Ethics* 196).

Walker tries to reinforce the idea that the individual is organically identified with the universe and the infinite in a vast community. All creatures together belong, modestly, to a harmony grander than what one imagines. Walker’s address in the last letter in *The Purple* shows how the human beings turn to the contours of sustainable earth community: “Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God” (292). It is the right disposition to be taken towards configuring society and nature together as our immediate world. In *Earth Community, Earth Ethics*, Larry Rasmussen makes an interesting suggestion that the requisite for sustainability is “comm-unity” which is nature’s way. He adds, “all that exists co-exists . . . We are consigned to the wonder of a universe whose tapestry is whole” (324).

Walker reinforces the need for peaceful coexistence when she proclaims with the vigour of an apostle of the universe: “Our primary connection is to the earth, our mother and father regardless of who ‘owns’
pieces and parts, we are sister and brother beings to ‘four-leggeds (and the fishes) and the wings of the air’ share the whole.” (LBW 148) In this, one can discern a reflection of the American Indian ethics of sharing — where the community is taken care of and not the individual. She conveys a very powerful message in the following words:

Our thoughts must be on how to restore to the earth its dignity as a living being, how to stop raping and plundering it as a matter of course, we must begin to develop the consciousness that everything has equal rights because existence itself is equal. In other words, we are all here . . . trees, people, snakes alike. (148)

While she condemns the Wasichus for their profound unnaturalness, their lack of harmony with other peoples and places, and with the very environment to which they owe their life, she euologizes the practice of the original inhabitants, asking pardon of slain or offended animals. In spite of the several flaws the American Indians have, Walker admires them: “It is their light step upon the earth that I admire and would have us emulate . . . everything to the Indian was a relative. Everything was a human being” (LBW 150-151). She is driven by a desire to travel to “those realms from which might come, new (or ancient) visions of how humans might live peacefully and more lovingly upon the earth” (Absolute Truth xiii). She lays a new law, i.e. “we should be allowed to destroy only what we ourselves can re-create . . . we cannot re-create this world. We cannot re-create the “wilderness”, we cannot even truly re-create ourselves . . .” (LBW 148). In
short, as Donald Hughes says “Mankind should hold a reciprocating, mutually beneficial relationship with each type of being” (*American Indian* 17). This poses a challenge on modern science which is disastrously destructive.

Another remarkable condensation of the idea of peaceful coexistence occurs in “The Gospel according to Shug” which forms a major thought in *The Temple*. Phrased like the “Sermon on the Mount” in The Gospel According to Matthew, Shug’s gospel sets new codes of conduct for maintaining biophilial relationship between the human and the environment. “Biophilia” is a term used by the biologist, E. O. Wilson, who defines it as “the innate (human) tendency to focus on life and lifelike processes; the impulse of fascination and affection that inspires our bonds with the non human natural world” (*Reading The Earth* xiii-xiv). The Gospel which commences with an exhortation to give up racism pinpoints the need to love and venerate the entire cosmos. The Biblical phrase “Blessed are” is reworded as “Helped are”. Each tenet of this gospel is loaded with her obsessive ecological consciousness: “Helped are those who love the entire cosmos rather than their own tiny country, city or farm, for to them will be shown the unbroken web of life and the meaning of infinity” (*The Temple* 288). The predominant instruction is to love the Earth with the whole heart: “Helped are those who love the Earth, their mother, and who willingly suffer that she may not die . . .” The gospel insists on peace and harmony; “Helped are those whose every act is a prayer for harmony in the universe, for they are
the restorers of balance to our planet. To them will be given the insight that
every good act done anywhere in the cosmos welcomes the life of an animal
or a child... (288). Walker exhorts human beings to act so as to facilitate the
existence of others. The concluding verses very loudly propagate this
message:

Helped are those who love all the colors of all the human beings,
as they love all the colors of animals and plants;...

Helped are those who find the courage to do at least one small
thing each day to help the existence of another—plant, animal,
river or human being. (289)

The final sentence expresses an admiration for biodiversity which is
an important aspect of Ecological balance: “Helped are those who love and
actively support the diversity of life, they shall be secure in their
differentness” (289). Thus the Gospel according to Shug is formulated in
such a manner that it can function as the new gospel which alone can save the
universe from utter peril.

While explaining the religious consciousness of Grange Copeland,
Walker says: “To him, the greatest value a person can attain is full humanity
which is a state of oneness with all things” (Gardens 265). She envisages an
environment in which the humans converse with the snakes and the horses,
the wild flowers, the squirrels and the raccoons which can lead to the
realization of her vision of the earth in its fullness. It is this dream that she
shares with her readers in “The Universe Responds”: 
What I have noticed in my small world is that if I praise the wild flowers growing on the hill in front of my house, the following year they double in profusion and brilliance. If I admire the squirrel that swings from branch to branch outside my window, pretty soon I have three or four squirrels to admire. (LBW 189)

The thrust on reciprocity and mutual care is strong when she says that “we are connected to them [animals] at least as intimately as we are connected to trees. Without plant life human beings could not breathe. Plants produce oxygen. Without free animal life I believe we will lose the spiritual equivalent of oxygen” (192).

The greatest insight she has gained from the Indian heritage and which she imparts to her readers is reverence for earth and life. She imbibes the Indians’ sense of reciprocity with life, of spiritual resonance with the natural environment. She believes that “the biosphere is truly alive and does interact with human beings in ways of its own” (American Indian 140). Apart from an instrumental value, everything in nature possesses an intrinsic value also. Walker is intent on giving proper consideration to the intrinsic value of the earth and all its inhabitants. That is why she says: “Well, wood comes from trees. Trees are alive. They have a purpose separate from becoming houseboats, firewood, and decks” (The Temple 380). She expects her readers to participate in the biophilia kinship and thereby retrieve the re-enchantment of nature.