Chapter 5

Reinstating the Goddess

I am so glad
I can recognize
A goddess
When I see one.

Alice Walker (Absolute Trust 154).

Ecological theorists and activists are in pursuit of a non-dualistic spirituality as a feasible corrective to ecological imperilment. They insist on the need for formulating an earth-centred spirituality which promotes the immanence of God, the sacredness of this world and the wholeness of body, sensuality and sexuality. They hope that only such a spirituality would be able to "respond to their need for affirming the sacredness of the cosmos" (Ecotheology 176). Rosemary Radford Ruether, thinks that "a healed relation to each other and to the earth then calls for a new consciousness, a new symbolic culture and spirituality" (Gaia 40). The seed of this new consciousness lies in an "antiscience, antitechnology standpoint" which celebrates relationship between women and nature "through the revival of ancient rituals centred on goddess worship, the moon, animals and the female reproductive system" (Revolutions 269).

Ursula King in her book Women and Spirituality, examines the various dimensions of spirituality from women's perspective. She probes into
the motivations and stimulations of the new spirituality that women are trying to popularize. In a feminist context, spirituality is to be understood as inherent in all human experiences and activities and not something additional or external. It is a process of transformation and growth, an organic and dynamic part of individual and social development. While seeking a new way forward to a more integral and holistic way of thinking and acting, feminist critical thought “challenges traditional religions and spiritualities for their exclusiveness, their rejection and subordination of women” (Spirituality 6). King also explores the possible ways in which the themes of feminism and spirituality can be “woven together in a criss-cross pattern of search, promise and quest for wholeness and healing in a world torn asunder” (6). Drawing inferences from various definitions given to present day spirituality, King comes to the conclusion that it leads to a new becoming so desperately needed to prevent destruction of our planet and to ensure a better quality for all members of the human family. Hence the new spirituality functions as a universal code, “a word for the search of direction at a time of crisis”. In the present crisis faced by the planet, a spiritual upheaval which emphasizes “choice for life, for the earth, for a future of mankind” is to be constituted (8). This is powerfully articulated in feminist thought and practice, especially by women in the ecology and peace movements.

Jennifer Barker Woolger and Roger J. Woolger, in a path breaking study of the goddess religion point out that radical commentators have called such a spiritual awakening “the return of the Goddess”, because it seems to
“suggest the very antithesis of patriarchal society” (The Goddess Within 3).

As the term “goddess” lends itself to a variety of explanations, it needs to be defined in this specific context. The Woolgers describe the goddess as “a psychological description of a complex female character type that we intuitively recognize both in ourselves and in the women around us, as well as in the images and icons that are everywhere in our culture” (7). They explain that each woman is the living embodiment of a particular goddess type possessing a fundamental dynamic that is partly socially acquired and partly innate. They pay credit to Jung for observing that “dynamic types of this sort are to be found in their purest forms in mythology and literature and that they show up in disguise, in everyone’s dream and fantasy life” (8). Viewed in this light, a goddess is “the form that a feminine archetype may take in the context of a mythological story or epic” (8). Accordingly six goddess types are identified on the basis of the characteristics possessed by six Greek goddesses: Athena, Aphrodite, Persephone, Artemis, Demeter and Hera. The Athena woman is ruled by the goddess of wisdom and civilization and is concerned with achievement, career and intellectual culture. The Aphrodite woman who is ruled by the love goddess gives importance to relationships, sexuality, romance, beauty and the inspiration of arts. The Persephone woman who is ruled by the goddess of the underworld tends to be mystical and visionary whereas the Artemis woman, being ruled by the goddess of the wilds, is adventurous and admires physical culture. She is in love with solitude, the outdoors, animals, and is concerned with the
protection of the environment, alternative lifestyles, and women's communities. The Demeter type is ruled by the corn goddess; she is an earth mother who loves bearing, nurturing and raising children and is concerned with women's reproductive cycles. The Hera woman is ruled by the queen of heaven, she is concerned with marriage, partnerships with men, and with issues of power wherever women are rulers and leaders (8-9).

An illustration of the goddess characteristics and areas of influences is offered in the diagram of the goddess wheel (figure 5). The figure shows how the goddesses are all connected with the Great Mother and also with one another.

![Goddess Wheel Illustration](image-url)

Fig. 5. The Goddess Wheel. Woolger Jennifer Barker, and Roger J. Woolger. The Goddess Within (New York: Ballantine, 1989).

The authors also speak about the all-pervading power of the Great Mother whose worship was at its zenith between 3000 and 1200 B.C in Sumer, Egypt.
and the Mediterranean basin. Known by many titles, the Great Goddess was the power manifest in all fertility and all its forms, whether human, animal or vegetable. They describe:

Reigning supreme as the Great Mother, she was honored with a glorious profusion of epithets: ‘Lady of plants,’ ‘Lady of Beasts,’ ‘Mother of All’, ‘Goddess of Love,’ ‘Protectress.’ This is why Graves refers to her as ‘many-titled’. What these worshipful designations tell us is that as the supreme divinity, she encompassed all the possibilities of being — life, death, power, youth, age, wisdom, as well as the masculine and the feminine.

(The Goddess 21)

Ursula King sees the Great Goddess as “a feminine symbol of Ultimate reality and reflects the great metaphysical truth that all is one at a higher level of existence” (Spirituality 92). King continues: “She is not so much a symbol of life as a symbol of spiritual plenitude, fullness of insight and understanding, a source of spiritual rather than physical birth and regeneration” (93). Alice Walker makes several references to the “many-titled” Goddess in The Temple. She speaks of Her as “The Black Madonna” whom she would like to see as the “Goddess of Africa”. Walker also refers to her as “The Black Lady”, “The Great Mother of All”, and even “Mother Africa”. The African woman, Nzingha, in The Temple, identifies this great Mother in Medusa. In her words:
... She is the 'mother of Christian angels.' She is 'Isis,' mother of Horus, sister and lover of Osiris, Goddess of Egypt. The Goddess, who long before she became Isis, was known all over Africa as simply the Great Mother, creator of all, Protector of all, the keeper of the Earth, 'The Goddess'. (The Temple 268)

Walker further reinforces the all-pervading power of the Great Goddess, Medusa in her words: "... if you are from Africa, you recognize Medusa's wings as the wings of Egypt, and you recognize the head of Medusa as the head of Africa" (270). All these prove beyond doubt that the "Goddess" she speaks of so fervently is none but the Great Mother Goddess.

An examination of the early goddess worshipping cultures shows the vitalizing power of the goddess image. Archaeological excavations have shown evidences of the universality of goddess worship. Ursula King speaks of the numerous goddess figures which were found in Northern Europe, Europe, Africa, India and the far East (Spirituality 93). Mary Daly also mentions that goddess worship was a nearly universal phenomenon. She elucidates:

In prehistoric and early historic sanctuaries and dwellings, in cultures in all parts of the globe, female deities were adored as healers and warriors, purveyors of wisdom and creators of the Earth... Behind the biblical polemic against 'abominations of the Canaanites', one discovers the Great Goddess who flourished and
ruled for thousands of years before the Hebrews settled in the area.

(WR 67)

In the article “When God was a Woman”, Merlin Stone assumes that this Great Goddess was actually Astarte “the Near Eastern Queen of Heaven”. Stone also brings to light the fact that this was none but Ashtoreth, the despised “pagan” deity of The Old Testament whose identity was disguised by the biblical scribes by repeatedly using the masculine gender to refer to her. Stone is even more astonished by the “archaeological evidence which proved that Her religion had existed and flourished in the Near and Middle East for thousands of years before the arrival of the patriarchal Abraham, first prophet of the male deity, Yahweh” (WR 124).

While tracing the religious history back to a woman-dominated one, Stone argues that much evidence suggests how women held more power and prestige in the Goddess-worshipping cultures of the ancient Near East than they did in the Hebrew culture that formed the basis of Judaism and Christianity. According to Stone, there were female deities everywhere in agreement with the vital role that women played in the development of agriculture and the food-gathering activities. In her own words: “In nearly all areas of the world female deities were extolled as healers, dispensers of curative herbs, roots, plants, and other medical aids, casting the priestesses who attended the shrines into the role of Physicians of those who worshipped there” (WR 122). Several archeological references are made which highlight the divine power possessed by these goddesses. The “Greek Demeter and the
Egyptian Isis were both invoked as law givers and sage dispensers of righteous wisdom, counsel, and justice” (123). Rosemary Ruether, while considering the various issues of theology, relates how the early “religious culture continued to reflect the more holistic view of society of the neolithic village, where the individual and the community, nature and society, male and female, earth Goddess and sky God were seen in a total perspective of world renewal” (WR 46). Elizabeth Gould Davis, whose book The First Sex lays theories of original matriarchy, glorifies the gynocentric world which had flourished before patriarchy set in. She points out that in this world, “women were in control of their own lives, bonded with each other and with the non human world of animals and the cosmos” (Gaia 148). Carol Christ also finds the gynocentric world as one of peace, gender equality and harmony with nature.

The early creation stories also emphasize the power of the Mother which was later usurped by the male. For example, the Babylonian creation story, which has emerged out of the earlier stories of the Sumerian world, begins with a “primal Mother who is the origin of both the cosmos and the Gods” (Gaia 16). The story is thus both cosmogonic and theogonic. Heaven and Earth emerged from the body of the primal mother, then the primal cosmic forces like water, air, and vegetation, and then the anthropomorphic gods and goddesses. The Babylonians never ignored the origin of a pre-city state world, less under human control and more under the control of nonhuman forces. In this matriarchal world, the female was dominant with
subordinate male consorts. Later on, this matriarchal world was taken over by Marduk, the Babylonian God who exercised military and architectonic power. Ruetherford explains: "Marduk extinguishes the life from Tiamat’s [the ancient mother Goddess] body, reducing it to dead ‘stuff’ from which he then fashions the cosmos" (Gaia 18). By shaping artifacts out of dead matter, creators assumed that they were owners of what they had created. In Ruether’s words: “Even though the new lords remember that they once were gestated out of the living body of the mother, they now stand astride her dead body and take possession of it as an object of their ownership and control” (18).

Some feminist thinkers, such as Matilda Joslyn Gage, picked upon the theme of original matriarchy, seeing it not as a primitive time, but a time of high culture in early Egyptian and Near Eastern civilization, when women were in the ascendancy in family, religion, and society. The worship of The Mother Goddess was the divine principle of this benevolent female rule. This period was considered to be the golden age of human society. The belief in the power of the female was instilled mainly by the great mystery of the Womb. Child-bearing was looked at with awe and wonder by ancient people, who believed in parthenogenesis which means reproduction from an ovum without fertilization. The tendency to worship whatever was incomprehensible gave rise to female deities and goddesses. Merlin Stone puts forward the observations made by Jacquetta Hawkes and S. G. F. Brandon in this regard. Hawkes wrote in 1963 that Australian and a few other
primitive peoples did not understand biological paternity or accept a necessary connection between sexual intercourse and conception. In the same year, Brandon made a similar observation: “How the infant came to be in the womb was undoubtedly a mystery to primitive man” (qtd. in WR 125). Stone further summarizes the findings by James Frazer, Margaret Mead and other anthropologists who all have established that “in the very early stages of man’s development, before the secret of human fecundity was understood . . . the female was revered as the giver of life” (WR 125).

Carolyn Merchant details how myths account for the origin of corn. According to her, “for most of the tribes of the eastern American woodlands, however, corn was the gift of the Corn Mother, a mythical female from whose body had come the corn plant, maize” (Revolutions 72). Some myths relate that corn came from the dead body of woman which was dragged through the forest. All these affirm the conclusion that the earliest model of generation was parthenogenetic gestation.

At the time of the Mother worship, human beings were very much in harmony with themselves and with the life force. In many places, she was worshipped as the very source of life itself—“the power manifest in all fertility and all its forms, whether human, animal or vegetable” (The Goddess 15). But The Great Goddess was seriously injured in her confrontation with the patriarchal cultures. This disfigurement is referred to as “the goddess wound” which Jennifer and Roger Woolger explain in the following manner: “These are wounds that have been sustained over the long history of the
psychological battle for supremacy waged by the masculine forces in Western culture" (The Goddess 17). The wound is caused by the harsh treatment they have received at the hands of patriarchal repression. The authors trace the various forces leading to this. When the patriarchal gods were imposed upon the older mother religions by the various northern and Aryan tribes, the Great Goddess and her powers were split up. They assume that this might have taken place between 1600 and 700 B.C. This resulted in the weakening of the goddesses. Borrowing a phrase from Jane E. Harrison, the Woolgers remark that the goddesses became “departmental goddesses” (The Goddess 22). They also point out the psychological impact of the division of goddesses in the following words: “Each of the departmental goddesses is now cut off from the original Mother and they are from this point onward divided against themselves” (23). The cults of the Mother Goddess survived and flourished right up until the Roman times. When the conflict between the patriarchal warrior gods and the Goddess became intense with the triumph of Christianity and a supreme Father God, the cults of the Mother have become scattered, suppressed, assimilated and distorted. As the Woolgers put it: “The mother herself is disempowered; her cults scattered, divided, unattended, persecuted” (The Goddess 16).

Several accounts of the dethroning of the “theriomorphic Mother” by the patriarchal religions are found in books by feminist ecologists. Rosemary Ruether makes an analysis of these religions in Gaia and God. She points out that in contrast to the mother-centred tales of creation, the Hebrew creation
story holds that the “creator coexists with the primal stuff of the cosmos and is in serene control of the process” (Gaia 19). The whole universe came into being through the six days’ work of the creator. Ruether points out the social message that can be inferred from this creation story; i.e. God is modelled after the priestly class, who call all things into being through ritual naming. The commanding “let there be” is the mode of God’s creative work. One interesting aspect inherent in the Hebrew creation story is the elimination of division between rulers and workers and between leisure and rest. God both works and rests, and envisages the same pattern for all humans and animals. Ruether, in her deliberations on the Hebrew creation story, dwells upon the impact of the dominant male pronouns used for God. She remarks:

While the text leaves open the equality of male and female ‘in the image of God’, the maleness of the pronouns for God and for Adam already suggests that males are the appropriate collective representatives of this God, females sharing in the benefits of corporate “human” sovereignty, but also falling under the rule of the male head of family” (Gaia 21).

Ruether also throws light on the hierarchical binaries mandated by the Greek creation story as mentioned in Timaeus by Plato. She describes how Plato starts by defining the primal dualism that underlies reality; its division into two realms, the invisible, eternal realm of thought and the visible realm of corporeality. The invisible realm of thought is primal and original (22). Ruether draws the following inference from the Platonic story of creation:
“Plato thinks of reality as divided between mind and body” (24). This has immense social and psychological impact because the “hierarchy of mind over body is duplicated in the hierarchy of male over female, human over animals” (24). In the words of Nzingha, Walker makes an interesting observation about the mind/body polarity in Greek philosophy. Nzingha says that she tried to argue that “there in the Sorbonne, in one of the foremost bastions of western civilization, that 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 and the metamorphosis of Isis into the Greek goddess Athena” (The Temple 271). Again Walker feels that the birth of Athena from Zeus’ head devalues the role of the mother and the bond between a mother and her child. Hence she says: “Athena was created to be a flanny of the male order that created her” (270). Ruether concludes that the Babylonian, the Hebrew and the Greek creation stories “were shaped in the patriarchal, slave-holding world of early urban civilizations in the eastern Mediterranean of the second and first millennia B.C.E” (Gaia 24).

Whereas the Hebrew religion “clung with particular tenacity to their tribal identity,” Yahwism which followed, repressed the feminine divine role integral to the tribal cult and “began to cut loose the festival itself from its natural base in the renewal of the earth” (WR 47). Ruether explains that Yahwists “took over the old earth festivals but reinterpreted them to refer to historical events in the Sinai journey which finally ended up in total
submergence of the feminine imagery of the cult. Christianity, being the heir of both Neo Platonism and apocalyptic Judaism, hoists the image of a male warrior God in the place of the divine feminine” (48). With the triumphant rise of Christianity the division of the goddess became complete. The primal power of the female was reduced to that of a secondary consort. Thus, the splendid matricentric society was overthrown by the regressive influence of patriarchal religion and social organization.

Francoise d’Eaubonne who is known for her coinage of the word “ecofeminism” examines the factors leading to the defeat of the female sex some five thousand years ago and comes to the conclusion that it was the male system and not capitalism or socialism, that gave men the power to control women and nature. It occurred as a result of two parallel discoveries: reproduction and their capability of sowing the earth as they do women. D’Eaubonne says: “Until that time, women alone possessed a monopoly on agriculture, and the men believed women were impregnated by the gods” (Key Concepts 177). Having discovered the two potential possibilities — agricultural and procreational — he exerted his control over the soil or fertility and also over woman’s womb or fecundity. Ultimately this resulted in overpopulation and destruction of the environment. Glotfelty quotes d’Eaubonne’s remark: “The iron age of the second sex began, women were caged, and the earth was appropriated by males. The male society built by males and for males that took over running the planet did so in terms of competition, aggression and sexual hierarchy . . .” (qtd. in Key Concepts 10).
Patriarchal power resulted in agricultural over-exploitation and industrial over-expansion.

Nelle Morton gives a factual account of this transition in the passage quoted below:

When the knowledge of paternity, which women must have discovered first, became known to men, the men tried to usurp women's part in the birthing process. They established themselves as sole parents reducing women to nurturing their seed—their minuscule babies—which they planted in wombs. Birth was separated from physical birth, first as an initiation rite into manhood, then sacralized into spiritual birth with men performing the functions of women. (WR 161-162)

Marija Gimbutas also describes similar assaults on matriarchal cultures which Rosemary Radford Ruether summarizes thus:

Gimbutas sees this prosperous, egalitarian (in terms of both gender and class), peaceful, and ecologically harmonious world as having been violently overthrown by a series of invasions from patriarchal pastoralists, who came from pontic steppes in successive waves between 4500 B.C.E. and 2800 B.C.E. This was a militaristic, horse riding society, ruled solely by males. (Gaia 151)

Gimbutas continues to say that unlike agriculture, where women enjoyed superior status as food producers, pastoral control of animals was vested entirely in the hands of men, and women enjoyed little power or role.
The “Kurgan invaders”, as they were called, subdued the peaceful agricultural settlements, “either destroying them or overlaying the earlier gynocentric culture with their patriarchal militarist one” (151). This loss of woman’s power is referred to as “the fall into patriarchy” (Gaia 143).

It is with a deep sense of loss that Walker narrates instances of the routine destruction of The Goddess. For example, The Temple is profusely punctuated with her reverence for the Pagan religions and her rage against cultural imperialism which has played a significant role in wiping away the earth worshipping communities. The priestesses described by Walker are recast on the line of ancient goddesses. She describes with her characteristic resourcefulness how the female deities are replaced by male priests as an attempt to usurp the mysterious power of the womb. Here again she makes Lissie her spokeswoman who alone has the power to retrace far into the early millennia. Lissie says:

As a first step to becoming priests, the men cut off ‘their maleness’ and tried to fashion a hole through which life could come. . . . Here is the origin of celibacy, of forfeiting children of one’s own. For to become a priest in the old days meant one must do without one’s very genitals! What they remembered was that they must be like women, and if they castrated themselves at a certain age – the time of puberty, when they chose or were chosen for the priesthood – they could sound like women and speak to the universe in woman’s voice. (The Temple 50-51)
Walker also finds occasions to speak about the “ancient tradition of worship of the mother” and how it was destroyed by the Mohametans who could not tolerate this. Lissie narrates:

It was during the hundreds of years of the slave trade in Africa that this religion was finally destroyed, although for hundreds of years previous to the slave trade it had been under attack. There were in the earliest days, raids on the women’s temples, which existed in sacred groves of trees, with the women and children dragged out by the hair and forced to marry into male-dominated tribes. The men had decided they would be creator, and they went about dethroning women systematically. (63)

Lissie adds proudly that these mother worshippers possessed unconquerable will power and it was hard to break them.

Roger and Jennifer Woolger present two diagrams, one showing the unity and universality of goddess worship and the other showing the division and dispersion of the same. They are reproduced on the next page because a comparison of the two clearly marks the transition from a matriarchate to the patriarchate. Figure-B shows that the primordial unity between the earth mother and a spirit father was lost.
Figure 6 A: The Unity and Universality of the Goddess. Woolger Jennifer Barker, and Roger J. Woolger. The Goddess Within (New York: Ballantine, 1989).

Fig. 6 B. The division and dispersion of the Goddess. Woolger Jennifer Barker, and Roger J. Woolger. The Goddess Within (New York: Ballantine, 1989).
The Woolgers make an interesting comment about the consequent situation:

Seen from the larger perspective of world religion, the cultures of western civilization are like the children of a family that has suffered a terrible divorce. The children now live only with the father and are forbidden to mention their mother’s name or remember those warm and happy times they once spent in her embrace. With only a father to guide us, despite his love, we have become hardened, relentlessly heroic, and grimly puritanical in our effort to forget the lost security and sensual trust in the earth the Mother once gave us . . . The Mother herself is disempowered; her cults scattered, divided, unattended, persecuted. (The Goddess 16)

Too much adoration of the father principle has resulted in the neglect or belittling of the feminine which has caused serious damage to the individual and collective psychic health. Feminist theologians take to task the classical western cultural traditions, particularly Judaism and Christianity, for their sexist dogmas which ultimately lead to sacralizing the relationships of domination. The image of the male god and traditions of male leadership have played a vital role in legitimating superiority of men in family and society. In Beyond God the Father, Mary Daly details the psychological and political ramifications of father religions for women. In her words: “The images and values of a given society have been projected into the realm of dogmas and ‘Articles of Faith,’ and these in turn justify the social structures
which have given rise to them and which sustain their plausibility” (13).

Simone de Beauvoir too mentions the significant effect of “patriarchal religion as legitimator of male power”. She remarks: “For the Jew, Mohammedans, and Christians, among others, man is master by divine right; the fear of God will therefore repress any impulse to revolt in the downtrodden female” (The Second Sex 632).

While explaining the powerful and pervasive effect of male religious symbols, Carol Christ points out that religions “centred on the worship of a male God create ‘moods’ and ‘motivations’ that keep women in a state of psychological dependence on men and male authority, while at the same time legitimating the political and social authority of fathers and sons in the institutions of society” (Key Concepts 310). This leads women to internalize that “female power can never be fully legitimate or wholly beneficent” (310).

Carol Christ feels that the language of Christian religion is gendered and this has influenced the thoughts and ways of the people. Phrases like “God of our fathers”, “God the Father”, “Son Of God”, “Man of God” have sown seeds of resistance among the Jewish women who are doubtful about their own position prescribed in The Bible. Rosemary Ruether, like many other feminist theologians, thinks that “the sexism of Christian tradition is integrally related to the dualistic and hierarchical mentality that Christianity inherited from the classical world” (WR 4) Chung Hyun King also states that many feminists reject the spirituality of traditional western Christianity, which is based on Greek and Hellenistic dualism, hierarchy of beings and an androcentric bias.
She explains: "God who is considered as ‘the transcendental Other’ has been used by men colonizers as an ideological weapon for domination, exploitation and oppression" (*Ecotheology* 176). Ruether elucidates this idea in *Gaia and God*:

In particular, the way these cultures have construed the idea of the male monotheistic God, and the relation of this God to the cosmos as its creator, have reinforced symbolically the relations of domination of men over women, masters over slaves, and (male ruling-class) humans over animals and over the earth. (3)

The restoration of the goddess seems to be an effective curative for the great damage caused by patriarchal sickness. Jennifer and Roger Woolger state the relevance of this in the following passage:

Patriarchal supremacy is manifesting symptoms of spiritual bankruptcy, and everywhere — in the arts, in literature, in politics, in the churches — there are signs of a huge resurgence of the feminine, of matriarchal consciousness. Such an auspicious ‘return of the goddess’ is surely under way. (*The Goddess* 17)

Hence feminists and ecologists are keen on effecting a unification of the Great Goddess who was “dis-membered” by the warrior cults of patriarchy. It needs an ecological healing which according to Ruether is a theological and psychic, spiritual process. The new goddess, unlike the earlier goddesses set up as a result of man’s awe and fear of the mysterious power of the womb, is
not a transcendental Other. Speaking about earlier matriarchy, Simone de Beauvoir remarks:

To say that woman was the “Other” is to say that there did not exist between the sexes a reciprocal relation: Earth, Mother, Goddess—she was no fellow creature in man’s eyes; it was “beyond” the human realm that her power was affirmed, and she was therefore “outside” of that realm. Society has always been male; political power has always been in the hands of men. (The Second Sex 102)

Nor is it the mother who is often made the other bestowing upon her characteristics that are dichotomized and defined by gender. In a critique of the maternal archetype in ecofeminist rhetoric, Lynn M. Stearney speaks about the strength and weakness of motherhood as the central metaphor of the ecofeminist movement. Stearney observes: “The strength of the mother archetype is that it is a universal and powerful image which communicates clearly the need for an unconditional commitment to protect and sustain the environment. Its weakness . . . is that our definition of “mother” rests on our received understanding of woman and confounds womanhood with motherhood” (Communication Quarterly 1). As the mother archetype reinforces the contemporary patriarchal ideal of motherhood as natural, limitless, and exploitable, it fails to serve as “an ungendered image that can function to motivate and unify the environmental movement” (1). The present state of the earth shows how violently she has been exploited on account of
her power of sustenance. The greed of the modern society has reduced the great mother to a mere "breast-giver" or "Stanadayini". The new goddess image elevates both woman and earth from the stance of sacrificial passivity to an active power which is creative and libertarian. It is the symbolic expression of the spiritual power possessed by the Earth, which transpires through every living form, whether male or female. It promotes mutuality, reciprocity and self expression and works on an ethics of partnership. As Carolyn Merchant says in her introduction: "Human beings are neither inferior to nature and dominated by it, as in premodern societies, nor superior to it through their science and technology, as in modern societies" (Key Concepts 20-21).

For women who seek a new spirituality the symbol of Goddess acts as a corrective to the power-abuse of patriarchal God symbolism. Carol Christ attempts a phenomenological discussion of the meaning of the goddess and elucidates four aspects of goddess symbolism: "the Goddess as affirmation of female power, the female body, the female will, and women’s bonds and heritage” (Key Concepts 311). Christ identifies the simplest and most basic meaning of the symbol of Goddess as “the acknowledgement of the legitimacy of female power as a beneficent and independent power” (312). Women like to look into themselves for the strong and creative female power. She believes that the woman embodies the divine principle, the saving and sustaining power and hence there is no need to look to men or male figures as saviours. According to Carol Christ, “[t]he affirmation of female power
contained in the Goddess symbol has both psychological and political consequences" (313). It helps in creating a positive, joyful affirmation of the female body which ultimately changes cultural attitudes toward the female body. This in the long run leads to a transcendence of the spirit-flesh, mind-body dualisms of western culture. The "mood" evoked by the Goddess symbol is "one of affirmation, awe and respect for the body and nature" and the "motivation" is to "respect the teachings of the body and the rights of all living beings" (316). Christ hopes that as "women struggle to create a new culture, in which women's power, bodies, will, and bonds are celebrated, it seems natural that the Goddess would emerge as symbol of the newfound beauty, strength, and power of women" (320).

In her works, Walker pays due credit to the goddesses who embody all that a "whole" woman is. Walker speaks in high appraisal of these goddess-worshipping religions. She constantly reminds her readers that the interaction with one's own pagan earth spirit proves to be exhilarating and enriching. In her words, "we begin to flow, again, with and into the universe. And out of this flowing comes the natural activism of wanting to survive, to be happy, to enjoy one another and Life, and to laugh ..." (Anything 26). Her explanation of the word "pagan" justifies the religious stance she has adopted:

'Pagan' means 'of the land, country dweller, peasant', all of which my family was. It also means a person whose primary spiritual relationship is with Nature and the Earth. And this, I could see, day to day, was true not only of me but of my parents; but there
was no way to ritually express the magical intimacy we felt with
Creation without being accused of, and ridiculed for, indulging in
‘heathenism’, that other word for paganism. (17)

In the poem “Pagan”, she says: “Pagan/I laugh to see/this was our religion/all
along/Hidden/even from ourselves/taught/earily/not to touch/the earth (Blue
Body 420). Walker believes that it is fatal to love a God who does not love
back in the same measure. She makes clear why she prefers an Earth religion
in the words: “All people deserve to worship a God who also worships them.
A God that made them, and likes them. That is why Nature, Mother Earth, is
such a good choice” (Anything 25).

Walker tries hard to reinstate three goddess types in particular;
Demeter, the Earth Goddess, Aphrodite, the Goddess of love and sexuality
and also Artemis, the goddess of the wilds who loves animals and the
environment. Symbolically Demeter stands for everything to do with earth
and vegetative nature; she was the Greek goddess of grains and the mystery
of planting the seed that will grow into new life and food. Hence the
Woolgers describe that a healthy Demeter woman is always in touch with
“physical reality, which is to say, the realities of the body and its needs, be
they food, warm clothing, getting enough sleep, illness or injury, ... She
seems to understand all the basic instincts that belong to our animal and
bodily nature” (The Goddess 272). Alice Walker’s overwhelming passion for
the earth bears witness to the fact that she adores the Demeter type woman.
Walker repeatedly states that the Earth Mother has been a perennial source of
sustenance for her. In The Same River Twice, she shares the ecstasy she has
experienced as a result of her relationship with this great mother: “It is my
habit as a born-again pagan to lie on the earth in worship. In this I am like my
pagan African and Native American ancestors, who were sustained by their
conscious inseparability from Nature” (10). Her mother too had maintained
such a bond with nature and Walker draws inspiration mainly from her
mother’s relationship with the Earth. In the previous chapter it is mentioned
how her mother once tired and worn out, had been refreshed and strengthened
by the protective shade of the tree. Walker firmly believes that her mother
had been rescued by the God of nonjudgmental Nature with the green
coolness of the tree and the comfortable warmth of the earth (Anything 13).
Her love and reverence for the earth is emphatically pronounced in her
statement: “In day-to-day life, I worship the Earth as God—representing
everything—and Nature as its spirit” (Anything 8). A Frostian love for the
earth echoes in the passage: “Now I know there are all those other beautiful
planets out there somewhere and they may be infinitely more exciting, but
earth is where I am, and the longer I relate to it, the more interesting and
exciting it becomes” (282).

In Walker’s recent novel By the Light of my Father’s Smile, she
idealizes the Mundo culture which is nature-centred. In a review of the novel
which appeared in the Hartford Courant, the critic says: “You won’t soon
forget the glorious Mundo, who live in harmony with nature, balance the
wants of the body with the needs of the soul and believe in dying with a song.
on their lips” (By the Light n. pag.). The novel expresses Walker’s idea of spirituality which is condensed in her remark about the song sung by June MacDoc. The song is praised because it contains “the carnal message of unity with creation and no credit to the creator” (22). There are several suggestions about Walker’s love and adoration for the planet. She speaks in favour of earth worship. Irene’s fondness for the Pigmies and Gypsies is mainly due to their love for the earth. Another reason is “their worship of the Dark Mother, who is none other than the human symbol for the dark earth” (66). The veneration for the Earth Mother was common to many indigenous societies. Ursula King observes that the widespread experience of mother earth forms an important aspect of woman’s spiritual heritage. In her opinion, it is “the matrix of all life”, the “Terra Mater” or cosmic mother widely worshipped throughout the world (Spirituality 92).

Donald Hughes in his exposition of the Native American ways, speaks of Mother Earth as Grandmother Earth, "a generous being who supported mankind, providing fruits, roots, fish and animals” (American Indian Ecology 20). He also describes how in the coming of age rites of native societies, the “young woman is seen as becoming one with the fruitful Earth Goddess” (20). Hughes continues to say that Mother Earth was respected as the continuing source of life for all living creatures, giving birth and sustenance. He quotes the words of Black Elk, a Sioux holy man, to substantiate the need for revering the Great Mother: “We are of earth, and belong to you. O Mother Earth from whom we receive our food, You care for our growth as do our
own mothers. Every step that we take upon You should be done in a sacred manner; each step should be as a prayer” (American Indian Ecology 20).

Hughes infers that the practical result of this perspective was care for the natural world. The native Indians could not imagine inflicting any sort of pain on earth. They conceived of the earth as being alive. They objected to “frontier miners who dug holes in the ground, or farmers who plowed, thus tearing the breast of Mother Earth. Indian farmers used a digging stick, an implement that symbolized the natural process of fertilization” (20).

Walker’s earth-centred spirituality is effectively transmitted through Shug who vigorously transforms Celie’s life in The Color Purple. Shug is the goddess who empowers Celie and helps her attain selfhood. In The Temple she reappears as a matriarch and a high priestess of Fanny’s womanist religion which takes its impetus from “The Gospel according to Shug” which consists of “a series of twenty seven macarisms, beatitudes”, which all begin like “Helped are those who...” (Crosscurrents 1). Most of the passages of this gospel are quoted in an earlier context. Yet it seems relevant to cite one or two here which highlight the earth as goddess or mother. For instance, Walker says that the meaning of infinity will be revealed to those who love the entire cosmos. In the following passage she instructs that willing sacrifice for the earth’s sake is highly rewarding and meaningful.

Helped are those who love the Earth, their mother and who willingly suffer that she may not die; in their grief over her pain
they will weep rivers of blood and in their joy in her lovely
response to love, they will converse with the trees . . .

Helped are those who are shown the existence of the Creator's
magic in the Universe; they shall experience delight and
astonishment without ceasing. (The Temple 287-288)

Walker subverts the patriarchal Mosaic laws that are codified as the
Ten Commandments in the Old Testament. Unlike the Ten Commandments
which begin with imperatives, Shug’s gospel is more in tune with the Sermon
on the Mount preached by Jesus which is more promising than authoritative.
The gospel is an adapted version of the sermon; the biblical phrase “Blessed
are” is reworded as “Helped are” which sounds more immanent and down-to-
earth. Whereas the Sermon on the Mount prescribes spiritual codes for
attaining heavenly bliss and strengthening man’s relationship with God and
other human beings, Shug’s gospel prescribes how man should treat the earth
and the nonhuman.

Pamela A. Smith speaks of the effect of this on Celie’s grand
daughter: “Fanny elaborates these maxims of “Mama Shug” into a womanist
ethics of inner strength, generosity, resistance, inclusiveness prayer, laughter,
and love of stranger, Earth, and cosmos” (Cross Currents 1). Several
arguments in favour of earth-centred spirituality are put forward through the
words of Lissie, Olivia and Nzingah. Olivia says:

The religion that one discovered on one’s own was a story of the
earth, the cosmos, creation itself; and whatever “Good” one
wanted could be found not down the long road of eternity, but right in one's own town, one’s home, one’s country... The God discovered on one's own speaks nothing of turning the other cheek. But only of the beauty and greatness of the earth, the universe, the cosmos, of creation. (The Temple 145)

Walker is full of admiration for Cuba just because of the fact that it gives much thought to geocentric values. While lavishing praise upon the country, Walker states that the US has to learn many things from Cuba:

I believe it [Cuba] has important lessons to teach our gadget-rich but spiritually bankrupt country: that the earth on which we live is the body of God. All people and living things are the body and soul of God. And that we serve God not by making the earth and its people suffer but by making the earth and its people whole.

(Anything 194)

And she thinks of Fidel Castro as a priest.

Walker celebrates sexual autonomy in almost all her works thereby bringing back the goddess Aphrodite who has been seriously damaged by the patriarchal codes of sexual behaviour. She was very much distressed by the way in which organized religion has systematically undermined and destroyed the sexual and spiritual beliefs of millions of indigenous people. In Possessing the Secret of Joy, Walker speaks about the fertility dolls which remind the reader of the several goddesses described by Frazer in The Golden Bough and Simone de Beauvoir in The Second Sex. Walker discloses through
M'Lissa, the 'tsunga' how women secretly prayed to these potent dolls. She once observed her mother enter a blighted forest and walk up to a hole in a rotting tree; take something out of it. She then kissed and replaced it. After her mother had left, M'Lissa, with a child's curiosity crept up to it and was surprised to find “a small smiling figure with one hand on her genitals” looking complacent and cheerful. Walker also relates the explanation given by the potters who used to replicate the ancient fertility dolls. One of the potters explains that the word “doll” is derived from the word “idol” and that the figures which have come down as mere dolls “were once revered as symbols of the creator, Goddess, the Life force itself” (188). These dolls symbolize the sexual autonomy enjoyed by women in the earliest societies.

Carolyn Merchant gives an account of how female sexuality was celebrated by the Pagans during the Middle Ages. She describes: “Throughout the British Isles, on churches and castle walls of the late Middle Ages are hundreds of striking remnants of pagan beliefs about female sexuality. Fertility symbols, known by their Irish name as 'sheela-na-gigs (nude frontal females) are reminders of the divinity accorded to procreation” (Revolutions 105).

In “A Conversation with Alice Walker” reprinted from an interview by Evelyn C. White, Walker discloses that the novel By The Light took birth from her realization that “sexuality is the place where life has definitely fallen into the pit for women” (By the Light n. pag.). She believes that the only way to change that “is by affirming, celebrating, and acknowledging sexuality in
our daily lives”. The celebration of Eros constitutes an important aspect of her womanist philosophy and this is made clear in one of her several definitions of womanist as a “woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually” and exultantly “Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the folk. Loves herself. Regardless” (Gardens xii). In this novel, she celebrates young love, lesbian love, new love, partnerships that last, marriages that mature and grow. Walker sums up her womanist theory in the words:

Men and their religions have tended to make love for anything and anybody other than themselves and their Gods an objectionable thing, a shame. But this is not the message of Nature, the Universe, the Earth, or of the unindoctrinated Human Heart where everything is profusion, chaos, multiplicity, but also creativity, containment and care. Love Wildness. And to me, Wildness means following the growth of love. Like a plant that reaches through stone toward the sun. (The Same River 171-172)

More than being a celebration of sexuality and sensuality, the erotic expression of Walker is “an embrace of life-force and Earth energies” (Crosscurrents 4). The erotic vision which Walker subscribes herself to is one which emphasizes a yearning for mutuality, a “unitive urge of beings, the powers and passions that move toward harmony”.
In almost all the women characters portrayed by Walker one can easily identify the Artemis type. Her women love solitude, their love is extended to the non-human and they are very much concerned about the protection of the environment. They love and try to adopt alternative lifestyles like Fanny in *The Temple* and believe in the bonding of women. Meridian, Sammy Lou, Mem, Lissie, Shug are all archetypes of this goddess in one way or the other.

Walker's spiritual consciousness which can be considered quite radical or revolutionary has evolved primarily out of her several disappointments and frustrations with the Judaeo Christian religion in her formative years. While introducing the essays, in *Anything We Love*, Walker gives vent to these frustrations:

> In it, I explore my awareness, beginning in childhood, of the limitations of the patriarchal Christianity into which I was born as well as my realization, over time, that my most cherished instinctual natural self, the pagan self, was in danger of dying from its oppression by an ideology that had been forced on my ancestors, under threat of punishment or death, and was for the most part alien to me. (xxi)

Walker is upset by the hypocrisy she notices in the teachings of the church and the people's behavior all made up for the church. She remarks: "We were all on our best behavior; even my incorrigibly raucous brothers, who only at church, managed to be both neat and quiet" (*Anything 11*). For
her, the only positive influence of the church is associated with the songs and the joy of singing together. The songs from the Hardshell Baptist church used to ring out as the freedom songs. In these songs, she could listen to “the connectedness that racist oppression and colonial destruction tried to keep hidden” and in her opinion, these freedom songs “show us the way home which is the whole earth” (Anything 54 – 55). She remembers very vividly the sojourns to the church every Saturday in the company of her mother to scrub the inside of the church. She recalls how her mother once resolved to redo the pulpit area. With the latent capability and resourcefulness of a black woman, she upholstered the chairs, laid new carpeting and the premises of the church were cleared by her father and brothers. Everything sparkled and Walker remembers how Sister Walker, as her mother was addressed by the priest, was thanked for making the church so beautiful. But she was very much upset by the fact that “this wise woman, who knew so many things about life and the mysteries of the heart, the spirit, and the soul, was never asked to speak to the congregation” (Anything 12). In this context, she raises a very meaningful question: “If she and other ‘mothers’ and ‘sisters’ of the church had been asked to speak, if it had been taken for granted that they had vision and insight to match their labor and their love, would the church be alive today?” (12). Her speculation over the nature of God that might have been described in their sermons throws light on many suppressed feelings about the church and the God of the Old Testament. She feels that for the
black woman in her church, “He was white, his son was white, and it truly was a white man’s world,…” (13).

Alice Walker renounces the sexist God in very strong terms and argues in favour of earth worship. The transition of this faith is traced systematically in The Color Purple in the description of “God” by Celie and Shug. Shug explains:

My first step from the old white man was trees. Then air. Then birds. Then other people. But one day when I was sitting quiet and feeling like a motherless child, which I was, it come to me; that feeling of being par. of everything, not separate at all. I knew that if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed. (167)

Walker’s renunciation of the patriarchal God is mainly due to the hostility to the “White God” that has been fixed in their minds by “the fathers of the church”. This is made clear in the discussion between Celie and Shug. Celie says: “… the God I been praying and writing to is a man, and act just like all the other men[s] I know. Trifling, forgitful and lowdown” (Purple 199).

When Shug asks to hush lest God should hear her, Celie retorts: “Let’im hear me, I say. If he ever listened to poor colored women the world would be a different place, I can tell you’’ (199-200). In response to Shug’s request to tell her what Celie’s God looks like, she answers quite embarassedly: “He big and old and tall and graybearded and white. He wear white robes and go barefooted with cool bluish- gray eyes” (201). Walker immediately makes it clear that rather than being an individual woman’s concept of God, this is a
collective experience. This is made clear in Shug’s response that this old
white man is the same God she used to see when she prayed. That is the only
God one can counter in church “cause that’s the one that’s in the white folk’s
white bible” (201). In Possessing the Secret also, Tashi reveals this in an
interjection: “Once upon a time there was a man with a very long and tough
beard . . .” (35). In the words of Tashi, Celie and Shug, Walker is trying to
express the image of God in her own mind which, she is trying in vain to
erase. But it is no easy task to break free from the imperial clutches of
western religions. She states her own predicament in the passage cited below:
“I am trying to rid my consciousness and my unconsciousness of the notion
of God as a white haired British man with big feet and a beard” (“Right on
Time” CLA 52). This image is fixed so firmly that it is hard to get rid of it.
Hence she feels the need to “decolonize the spirit” which in her opinion is a
“crucial act of empowerment, one that might return reverence to the Earth,
thereby saving it, in this fearful- of- Nature, spiritually colonized age” (44).
That is why Shug says: “Well, us talk and talk bout God, but I’m still adrift.
Trying to chase that old white man out of my head . . . But this hard work, let
me tell you. He been there so long he don’t want to budge. He threaten
lightning, floods and earthquakes. Us fight. I hardly pray at all” (The Purple
204).

Walker finds it difficult to show allegiance to a religion that is
exploitative and oppressive. She speaks of the timidity women feel about
getting rid of the conventional images of God. Lissie writes in her last letter
to Suwelo in invisible ink: “The religion I was taught as a child, growing up on the island is a thing that causes people to try to eat up the earth, since we were taught, ‘everything is for man’, . . .” (The Temple 194). The invisibility of the ink is suggestive of the timidity women feel about rejecting the religion on which they are brought up. It is quite evident that Lissie here gives vent to the unspoken thought of many a black woman. In The Temple, through Olivia’s narration of her childhood days, the missing links in The Purple and Joy are provided. She tells Lance about her stepfather, Samuel, whose faith in his religion has undergone a drastic change as a result of African influence:

My father, Samuel, was a missionary also, but by the time we [Olivia, Adam, Nettie and Samuel] returned to America he had long since lost his faith; not in the spiritual teachings of Jesus, the prophet and human being, but in Christianity as a religion of conquest and domination inflicted on other peoples. He and Aunt Nettie, whom he married after our adoptive mother’s death, spent many long evenings with my brother and me discussing ways we might best help our people discover their own power to communicate directly with “God”. We had all begun to see, in Africa—where people worshipped many things, including the roof leaf plant, which they used to cover their houses — that “God” was not a monolith, and not the property of Moses, as we’d been led to think, and not separate from us, or absent from whatever world one inhabited. Once this channel was cleared, so to speak,
much that our people had been taught about religion, much that diminished them and kept them in oppression, would naturally fall away. (The Temple 144)

Many feminist theologians have condemned traditional Christianity as a sexist religion which is quite blind and deaf to women’s suffering and experience. Sheila Collins dwells upon the politics of religion in the essay “Theology in the Politics of Appalachian women”. She observes:

If theology is to be meaningful for us, it must not start with abstractions, but with our stories — just as the early Hebrews and Christians of the Bible began with theirs. Somehow our churches got the order reversed . . . we cannot appreciate the meaning of another’s experience — especially if that experience occurred two and three thousand years ago until we have asked the right questions of our own. (WJ 151)

Walker too shares this feeling and that is why in Possessing the Secret of Joy, she makes Tashi articulate a vital question which is relevant in this context. Black men often dismiss the sufferings of the black woman as unimportant. Adam, though he is sympathetic and understanding, can never make Tashi’s suffering the subject of a sermon in spite of the several entreaties made by her. Each time he touches upon the sufferings of Jesus, she feels that constant focus on that lessens the gravity of suffering experienced by women and children. In Tashi’s letter to Lisette, she presents a meaningful rhetoric of these problems: “Was woman herself not the tree of life? And was she not
crucified? Not in some age no one even remembers, but right now, daily, in
many lands on earth?” (Joy 259). An accented version of this idea is put
forward by Collins when she raises the thought: “And if we have not been
able to name our pain, to see the collective parameters of our oppression, how
shall we be able to name the kingdom that lies past our suffering . . . By
telling our stories we must force our churches to hear what we have suffered
and the ways in which we have gotten through . . .” (WR 153). Only by means
of such a collective effort can women cease “to be defined by the men who
run our churches, by the corporations who project our images, or by the men
in Washington who seek to control our destinies” (153).

In Joy, Walker portrays a God who has deserted women, a God who is
blind to the suffering of women and children. When Tashi reflects on the
passages read out by Pierre from Marcel Griaule’s book, she feels that “even
so long ago God deserted woman, . . .” (167). Later the same idea is echoed
in M’Lissa’s words: “. . . there is no God known to man who cares about
children or about women” (207). In the voices of the village elders also, one
gets the impression of a God who oppresses women. Tashi, in her childhood
listens to them as they talk about women and determine their fate:

All: Woman is Queen.

Number one: She is Queen.

. . . . . . .

Number three: If left to herself the Queen would fly.

Number two: True.
Number three: And then where would we be?

Number four: But God is merciful.

Number one: He clips her wings.

Number two: She is inert. (220-221)

Walker severely censures the Judeo Christian religion for its conscious effort to suppress the Earth worshipping religions of the world. This is expressed in Anything: “In fact, millions of people were broken, physically and spiritually, literally destroyed, for nearly two millennia, as the orthodox Christian Church ‘saved’ them from their traditional worship of the Great Mystery they perceived in nature” (Anything 17). She has no patience with any force which tries to sever her bonds with Mother Earth. Perhaps her only grudge against her mother—“the very woman out of whose body [she] came” was that she “willingly indoctrinated [her] away from herself and the earth from which both of [them] received sustenance, and toward a frightful, jealous, cruel, murderous ‘God’ of another race and tribe of people, . . . (20). Her spite for the male leaders of the church seeks expression in the passage given below:

We know now with what absolute heartlessness the male leaders of the orthodox Christian church not unlike those of orthodox Judaism and Islam—stamped out, generally after robbing them of their land and enslaving them, pagans and heathens, our ancestors and theirs, around the globe: a campaign of such unspeakable cruelty, which has lasted for so long, and which still continues,
that few have had the heart to encounter it in art, politics, literature, or consciousness until the present era. (20)

She is scared to conceive of the emptiness and void one is going to experience in the absence of the "pagan-heathen ancestors". She exhorts to "lively them up within ourselves, and begin to see them as whole and necessary and correct: their Earth-centered, female-reverencing religions, like their architecture, agriculture, and music, suited perfectly to the lives they led" (25). Walker shows her impatience with attempts to 'imprison' the goddesses or to confine them to certain fixed enclosures. She is beyond all such confinements; Walker says: "That she—the spirit of Mothering, of Creating, of Blessing and Protecting all, — lives within us, and is confined neither to shrines nor to any particular age" (The Temple 269).

Walker is quite outraged by the way in which people misuse The Bible as a tool for this kind of victimization. She remarks:

It is chilling to think that the same people who persecuted the wise women and men of Europe, its midwives and healers, then crossed the oceans to Africa and the America and tortured and enslaved, raped, impoverished, and eradicated the peaceful, Christ like people they found. And that the blueprint from which they worked and still work was the Bible. (24)

Appropriation in the name of faith or religion invites very sharp criticism from Walker. Her rage against this kind of hypocrisy is vividly expressed in By the Light. In the novel the writer Susannah's parents were actually
anthropologists by profession. In the early forties no one would fund them on a serious expedition. They threw themselves at the mercy of the church and they were sent as spiritual advisers to Mexico to work among the Mundo Indians who were truly dying out. Senor Robinson appearing as a spirit, confesses to Manuelito:

   I was trained to be an anthropologist. I was an atheist. More accurately an agnostic. How was I to pretend to know whether God existed and in what form? And yet, once I took the church’s money to come and study you, and once I agreed to do what I could toward your salvation in exchange for the church’s help, it is as if I had died to myself. I was ‘sponsored’ by something I didn’t believe in. (154)

Walker also criticizes the missionaries for the zeal with which they transform the natives and the tribals. For instance in Joy, Tashi retorts vehemently to Olivia’s attempts to dissuade her from riding into the M’bele camp to get initiated. She declares loudly that the black missionaries are nothing but the white man’s wedge. Tashi continues her insult:

   We look at you and your people with pity, . . . You barely have your own black skin, and it is fading . . . You don’t even know what you’ve lost! And the nerve of you, to bring us a God someone else chose for you! (Joy 22)

Walker is never tolerant to the gospel of conversion.
In *The Color Purple*, Nettie, in one of her letters, relates how her own consciousness of God has undergone a change as a result of spending several years in Africa:

God is different to us now, after all these years in Africa. More spirit than ever before and more informal. Most people think he has to look like something or someone — a roof leaf or Christ— but we don’t. And not being tied to what God looks like, frees us.

*(Purple 264)*

She repeatedly states in her works: “God is inside you and inside everybody else” *(Purple 166)*. Walker feels that the witches were much sinned against by men who routinely destroyed women who proved themselves to be powerful and divinely gifted. Lissie, while recounting one of her earlier incarnations says: “The first witches to die at the stake were the daughters of the ‘Moors’”. The witches were persecuted and Walker speaks in defence of them through Lissie’s words:

We were witches; our word for healers. We brought their children into the world; we cured their sick; we washed and laid out the bodies of their dead. We were far from evil. We helped life and they did not like this at all. Whenever they saw our power it made them feel they had none . . . *(The Temple 196)*

Several feminist writers look at medieval witches from a very positive perspective by exploring legends and rituals of witchcraft as part of women’s spiritual heritage and by considering the witch of the past as an inspiring
image of female strength. But witchcraft has also emerged as a new
syncretistic religion which combines the insights of ancient folk religions
with Goddess worship and modern feminism (Spirituality 128). Carolyn
Merchant points out that witchcraft "as a form of popular consciousness
about nature was closely associated with women". She explains: "In its pagan
form, it was a natural religion that worshipped fertility and sexuality within
the regularity of the lunar cycle" (Revolutions 105). The Christians
condemned witches because in their opinion the witches "symbolized wild
and uncontrolled nature and witch trials persecuted women as the causes of
natural disasters and of evil" (105). Maria Mies reveals certain recent
findings about the witch hunt in Europe. She says: "... the holocaust of
women was not an "outcome of the dark, superstitious Middle Ages, but was
contemporaneous with the beginning of the New Age, of modernity, the era
of discoveries and inventions, of modern science and technology"
(Ecofeminism 145).

As the basis for a new ecological ethics, the ecologists have resurged
the very ancient idea of nature as a living organism which Lovelock develops
as the Gaia concept. Such an ethics based on "hylozoism" or aliveness as a
cosmology would encourage people to value life and would countervail the
prevalent trend to destroy the biosphere. Janet Biehl remarks in this
connection that "the idea of the 'aliveness' of nature is closely related to the
notion of the "immanence" of the goddess in nature. In Walker's belief in the
all-pervading spiritual presence in nature, one can easily discern a reflection
of African Animism as well which she has inherited as part of her tri-racial heritage. She states in The Gardens: “If there is one thing African Americans and Native Americans have retained of their African and ancient American heritage, it is probably the belief that every thing is inhabited by the spirit” (252). She repeatedly asserts her belief that there is no God beyond nature. According to her, the world is God, man is God and so is a leaf or a snake.

Ina Corinne Brown in Understanding Other Cultures gives a description of animism in the light of the definition given by Edward Taylor in Primitive Culture. According to Taylor, animism is “the belief in spiritual beings” (Cultures 120). People usually relate the term to the so-called primitives. Brown goes on explaining that it also implies the “personification of nonhuman aspects of nature either through attributing to them personal qualities of humans or by making them the dwelling place of spirits” (120). Certain societies hold that inanimate objects possess personal qualities or that such objects be the dwelling places of spirits. Walker is highly appreciative of the man of colour who admits spirit—“spirit in everything, not just in God or the Holy Ghost, who at one time was the Female in the Deity, or Jesus Christ” (The Temple 145). Her attitude to the physical environment is basically spiritual or religious like that of the American Indians which is described by Donald Hughes. For the native Indians, religion used to be an integral part of the rest of their life. There is no word for religion in their language, instead they convey the idea by means of a Pueblo term which
means "life-way" or "life-need". In their traditional way of life, they looked upon everything as sacred. Hughes observes:

Their actions in respect to nature were in harmony with their view of the world as a sacred place, so if we wish to understand why they practiced conservation and avoided destructive exploitation, we will find that it is just as important to study their religion as it is to study their economy. (American Indian Ecology 14)

In short, their religion was a religion of nature. Walker's idea of prayer is quite in tune with her nature religion. She reveals her new understanding of prayer as "the active affirmation in the physical world of our inseparableness from the divine; and everything, especially the physical world, is divine." (LBW 192). In the manner of the precepts dictated by Jesus, she lays certain maxims regarding peace, joy and love. In the concluding part of the book, she says:

War will stop when we no longer praise it, or give it any attention at all. Peace will come wherever it is sincerely invited. Love will overflow every sanctuary given it. Truth will grow where the fertilizer that nourishes it is also truth. Faith will be its own reward. (192)

She asserts that prayer becomes meaningful only if it is answered. In her opinion, "'God' answers prayers. Which is another way of saying, 'the Universe responds'" (193). This collection of essays is also resonant with expressions of her belief in spirits: "Now these people—our 'spirit helpers'
... always create opportunities that make a meeting with and recognition of them unavoidable” (LBW 97). In The Color Purple, she invokes the spirits without whose help she would not have been able to achieve anything.

In The Temple in Olivia’s words, Walker summarizes how one’s faith goes through a radical change with change in experience. She tells how Samuel, after spending many years as a missionary in a tribal village, changes his view on religion in the passage that has been quoted earlier. Moreover, the God image they have created was not at all a gendered one. In the Indian prayers, “the Great spirit is addressed with terms of relationship that are both masculine and feminine” (19). The tribes used words meaning The Great He—She. Walker favours such an ungendered God; that is why she says: “God is neither a ‘he’ nor ‘she’ but ‘it’”. This new concept of god obliterates all implications of dualism. Like Mary Daly, Walker too opts for the nonpersonal God concept. While speaking about “Female Language in a Jewish context”, Rita M. Gross states that “the exclusively male God language tells us nothing about God, but it tells us much about society and religion” (WR 171). Gross suggests two alternatives; one is that of an “impersonal, neuter, and abstract God language” and the other that of an “androgynous, bisexual God language” (171).

Commenting on Alice Walker’s spirituality, Gloria Steinem, a friend and critic of Walker, writes:

In the hands of this author, morality is not an external dictate, ... What matters is cruelty, violence, keeping the truth from others.
who need it, suppressing someone’s will or talent, taking more
than you need from people or nature, and failing to choose for
yourself. It’s the internal morality of dignity, autonomy and
balance. (BLC 1813)

The Great Goddess is the concrete expression of the spiritual power one
should possess within oneself, an expression of the self which is not
distanced from nature in anyway, the natural self. It also symbolizes the
vibrant sexuality of nature’s reproductive capacities. It affirms the “life-
loving be-ing of women and nature” in the words of Mary Daly
(Gyn/Ecology). Walker’s ecospirituality proposes what might be called a
“realizable eschatology” as Pamela Smith puts it (Crosscurrents 8). She
thinks of and advocates a religion that can further the green principle of post
patriarchal consciousness which highlights the idea that the Godhead must be
considered female as well as male. The goddess image epitomizes the hope of
wholeness. It suggests a shift in values, rather than an exclusive female
governance. It is a spirituality which values life, strengthens relationship and
promotes continuity and peace.