CHAPTER V

The Temple of My Familiar:
Generational Continuity
Alice Walker’s latest and the fourth novel, *The Temple of My Familiar* is a romance of the last 500,000 years. The Temple’s solar plexus is a black woman who has lived many lives in many forms. It is also a romance of the development of the human psyche in which the human ego strives consciously and unconsciously for wholeness. In this novel Walker raises two controversial issues -- Black woman’s sexuality and animal liberation. Speaking about the first issue she says, “Our sensuality and our sexuality have been colonized.”1 She resents being a slave to a man. She supports people in affirming their true sexuality by creating Miss Lissie, the central character, who is everything and very much a goddess in the novel. And about the second issue, that of animal liberation, she says, “I think of this novel more in terms of its theme of animal liberation and the recognition of animals as equals than anything else, because it’s important that, in reconstructing the past, we affirm the connection between people and animals throughout our tenure on this planet.”2

Although *The Temple of My Familiar* has been criticized and chastised for its “lack of dramatic content” and has been characterized as a sort of “New Age nonsense.” Walker does not agree with this view. She supports her book saying “I come from tribal peoples. This is their form. If the tribal peoples of the earth wrote novels, this is what one would look like. It affirms the validity, the force and the health of the oral tradition. Our tradition.”3 Walker gives us here not only the history of Africa but also the history of the world. She deals with the idea of transmigration of souls, the violence done by white civilization
to the blacks, man’s cruelty to woman, man’s cruelty to animals and to the whole world around:

From the predominately Gothic vision in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, to the somewhat Camusian vision in *Meridian*, to the vision of the great gender divide-and-conquer in *The Color Purple*, Walker moves into *The Temple of My Familiar* and creates a salutary vision, which points toward a monistic idealism in which humans, animals, and the whole ecological order co-exist in a unique dynamic of pancosmic symbiosis.4

In *The Temple of My Familiar*, time for Walker is a process of growth inseparable from the notion of self and the self’s ineradicable link with the world outside. Especially crucial to each character’s quest for identity is the personal effort to recapture the past as a significant element in the present experience. Walker tries to reconnect the character’s past to the present both personally and collectively. Each individual’s story is a serious quest for oneness, unity, and wholeness. Almost all the characters are in a conflict struggling and striving to be bound together. Walker tries to reach back in time to retrieve and recreate life in the past. In an interview to Oprah Winfrey, responding to the question from where the novel came, she says, “from me wanting to know my mama, you know. I wanted to know the very first woman, our common mother from all those years ago, and I just ... thought and dreamed my way back to her.”5

In an interview with Claudia Dreifus, Walker reveals that she is literally trying to reconnect all of us to our ancestors. She says, “I’m really trying to do that because I see that ancient past as the future, that the connection that was original is a connection; if we can affirm it in the present, it will make a
different future. Throughout the novel there is a communion of recollective or historical consciousness which is at the very core of Walker's creative imagination. She says thus:

I think my whole program as a writer is to deal with history just so I know where I am. I can't move through time in any other way, since I have strong feelings about history and the need to bring it along. One of the scary things is how much of the past, especially our past, gets forgotten.

*The Temple of My Familiar* is constructed in six major parts, each consisting, rather beginning, with different vignettes that project iconographic narrative movement. Walker uses selected icons or mythic images not only to tell us a story in each movement but also to convey its underlying metaphysical meaning. The novel revolves round the lives of three couples: Aryveda, the popular musician who has a blend of mixed blood, and his wife Carlotta, Suwelo a history professor, and his wife Fanny, the elderly couple, Miss Lissie and Mr. Hal, who are the friends of uncle Rafe, Suwelo's uncle. The novel begins with the introduction of Zede, the grandmother of Carlotta, who had been a seamstress in the old country in South America. She was considered a sewing magician who created capes made of feathers worn by dancers, musicians, and priests at the traditional village festivals.

Carlotta's mother, also called Zede, grew up to become a teacher. She was then arrested for being a communist. She meets a person who was the protector of the sacred stones of his village. They called him 'indio loco' because everyone else from his tribe had run away, but he could not run away. Zede, and Jesus as he was called because of the difficulty in pronouncing his name,
become friendly and their relationship advances with love blossoming between them. They succeed in making love before the guards in charge came to know of their relationship. The guard who was attracted to and who longed for Zede kills Jesus and locks Zede along with his dead body. Later on Zede is released and saved by the men of Jesus' tribe. Zede gives birth to Carlotta during her stay with them. Zede works for a brief period as a maid-servant for the gringos. She meets Mary Ann, daughter of rich parents from New Jersey, who had become addicted to drugs and was leading a miserable life. Zede intimates Mary Ann's parents about their daughter's plight and her parents free her and takes her home. Mary Ann returns again to save and liberate Zede and her daughter. Zede and Carlotta reach onto the coast of North America and to San Francisco where they settle down and start their life afresh amidst strangers.

Zede unfolds her past and discloses her sad and pitiable story to her son-in-law Arveyda. Zede is a traveller in time who knows many generations of her own people. She narrates to Arveyda the situation of women in different centuries and continents. She recalls to her mind memories of her past, especially her childhood days. She recalls how mothers used to teach about love-making and babies when girls come of age. All along their mothers also used to teach them the history of their civilization. She also recalls a gigantic waterfall in her South American village, considered as a magical abode of the goddess Ixtaphtaphahex. The whole group of girls went to that place to bathe when they had their periods. Zede and her friends connect themselves up with their cultural heritage. They participate in rituals, preparing food, collecting
wood for fire, bathing, circling around the fire, nursing tattoo, and in the act of
telling stories of the past. It is through such stories that Zede learns about the
priests. The priests prayed and blessed the people of the village. They used to
wear resplendent costumes made from feathers, beads, and shells. Zede's mother
used to prepare such traditional garments for priests. She was an expert in
making them. She made capes and headdresses of great beauty as if by magic.
For Zede's mother it was like praying or doing a holy work.

Zede goes into further details and reveals the origin of priesthood. Long
before there were no priests, but it was men who made them so. The first men
were so new to each other that all they did was stare into each other's eyes for
centuries. Women were entirely content with their situation. However, men
were still infatuated with their relative newness. Women were already in
adornment and were already in high fashion. As Walker describes: "She was
more, you know, like playing with herself. Making interesting to herself and
other women what she already had. Woman was bored with it. And so she
began to play with how she looked. She used feathers, shells, stones, flowers.
She used leaves, bark, colored sand. She used mud. The toenails of birds! For
days she and her sisters hung over the edge of the reflecting pools in the jungle,
trying this and that. The rest of the time they spent gathering food. Occasionally
they were host to a man, whom they played with, especially sexually, until they
got tired of him; they then abandoned him."

Walker gives a clear picture of how priesthood was established. Initially
men both worshipped and feared women and kept themselves away from them.
The men, lacking centuries of clothing and adornment experience of the women, were able to make only the clumsiest imitations. Long time later they noticed that the children the women produced bore a striking resemblance to themselves. They made an important discovery about the woman’s ability to produce children. They became envious of her ability and tried to imitate her by operating on themselves. Walker suggests that the whole idea of priestliness/priesthood originated from the idea of celibacy. Men castrated themselves at a certain age, that is at the time of puberty, so that when they were chosen for priesthood they could sound like women and speak in woman’s voice.

Carlotta, Zede’s daughter, starts her life in San Francisco. She was a dark and serious child with almond-shaped eyes and glistening black hair. She was completely unaware of her father. There were just two of them living in a shabby, poorly lighted flat over a Thai grocery in an area of the city covered by the debris of the society. Although she was close to her mother, she never spoke of her miseries or the bad things that happened to her. Zede worked on peacock feathers and made beautiful capes, shawls, and headdresses which Carlotta delivered to the rock stars. It is during her visits that she happens to meet Arveyda, one of the famous rock stars. Arveyda gets attracted to Carlotta and both of them settle down into a happy married life with their children Cedrico and Angelita.

All was not well with Carlotta. She was very much attached to her mother Zede. The closeness and loving attachment that Carlotta had with her mother,
Zede, broke away as soon as she comes to know about the relationship between her husband and her mother. She moves away from them. “Taking her children away from Arveyda and Zede was the only way she could make them hurt as she was hurting” (20). Little did she realise that by her behaviour she was indeed hurting herself.

Among the black women attention is given to motherhood which has tended to be more positive. Instead of “matrophobia” described by Adrienne Rich, Gloria Joseph’s research has revealed that black daughters hold overwhelmingly positive attitudes toward their mothers. “The daughters showed tremendous respect, concern, and love for their mothers. The positive feelings that were expressed did not imply that all was sweet, kind, and loving between them. Rather, what was expressed was an undeniable respect and admiration for their mother’s accomplishments and struggles against overwhelming odds. ... The mothers were role models for their daughters.”

Black women writers like Walker, Toni Cade Bambara, and Gloria Naylor are themselves daughters whose works valorize the mother and affirm “the black woman writer’s sense of herself as part of a link in generations of women.” All three writers celebrate the maternal. Although their novels show the strained relationship between mother and daughter, each story ends with the affirmation of their closeness. Marjorie Pryse posits that the “heritage of separation” of children from their mothers under slavery has made black daughters value the matrilineal heritage with particular intensity.”
Later on when Arveyda meets Carlotta, he tells her about the painful experiences undergone by Zede and about Carlotta's birth and about her father. Carlotta realises her mother's love for her. She understands her mother and forgives her. She begins to see Zede as a woman, a person, and a sacred being and loves her more than ever. Carlotta tells Suwelo, her friend, that from the love between Arveyda and Zede she has learned many things, things which her mother could not tell her, things that were somehow or other bound up too tightly with her shame.

Arveyda acts as a medium between mother and daughter. He unravels Zede's painful memories and conveys them to Carlotta by his music. He feels that artists are simply messengers and on them fell the responsibility of uniting the world. An artist is the voice of the people and his strength lies in his courage to look at every old thing with fresh eyes. Arveyda realises that his faith must be that the pain he brought to others and himself would lead not to destruction but to transformation. Arveyda tries to reconnect Carlotta's past with her present. He creates an awareness in Carlotta which makes her consider the importance of her matriarchal culture and heritage.

_The Temple of My Familiar_ stresses the importance of recognizing and remembering one's past and listening to one's ancestors. "Rememberance is the key to Redemption" -- the inscription on a memorial to Jews who died in World War II serves as an epigraph to the novel. Each character in the novel learns that remembering one's past is the key to redemption. Journey into one's past reconnecting or linking with the past leads to the production of art, which makes
one's experience of the past accessible to others. Alice Walker's collection of essays *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* illustrates the importance of ancestry and heritage to her work and her life. Embracing her maiden name in tribute to one of her ancestors who walked through the continent, Walker reenters the garden of the past with a sense of reverence and wonder for places. She reinvents the lives of the women who call her from history. She creates her own garden, a blend of symbolic properties, peopled with ancient spirits, studded with images that capture the unique quality of her heritage as artist, as black, as woman, and as Southerner.

Zede remembers her past experiences and memories in a South American Indian village and narrates them to Arveyda, thereby redeeming herself of her past. Carlotta remembers the three precious stones and the sacred red feathers, the last remaining symbols of her father's tribe which were given to her by her mother. She encases the feathers in plastic and wears it round her neck like a necklace. Remembering her past enables Carlotta not only to redeem herself of the guilt of hating her mother but also to take up her grandmother's occupation of crafting the bells and music. Carlotta tells Suwelo, "There was one part of the story that" -- "rang a bell in me. It was the story about my grandmother, Zede the Elder, who created the capes made of feathers for the priests; the woman who taught my own mother how to make beautiful feathered things. She had been a great artist, and she had had little chime outside the door of her hut. She would strike it, and listen closely to it, and if the sound corresponded with the vibration of her soul at the time, she would nod, once -- and begin to
'create'' (398). Inspired by her grandmother, she says she became a bell chimist. Carlotta in the end succeeds in her quest for peace and tranquillity.

Like Carlotta and Arveyda, another couple, Fanny Nzingha, granddaughter of Celie of *The Color Purple*, a women's studies teacher, and her husband, Suwelo, a history professor, too project the problems existing between man and woman in the present era. Walker projects Fanny as an extremely independent woman who likes to live separately from her husband Suwelo. Her temperament is purely womanist. She dislikes the idea of marriage. She feels that she was more happy before they got married. She wishes to end her marriage and tries to break away from the legal bond that ties them together. Fanny proposes to divorce her husband. Nevertheless she does not wish to end their relationship. She tells Suwelo, "It isn't about not loving you, I will always love you. I don't want to end our relationship; I want to change it. I don't want to be married. Not to you, not to anybody. But I don't want to lose you either" (139). However, Fanny insists on staying with him but separately. She loves Suwelo but is not in love with marriage. Marriage for her means slavery. She believes that the wedding ring people wear on their fingers is nothing but a remnant of a chain. And chains have always been an enemy of freedom. She feels that marriage is a kind of enslavement, an institution where a woman becomes a slave to man. Fanny craves for freedom and defines freedom which means never having to embarrass anybody. She laments that she had never felt free in her life. Alice Walker projects her liberal ideas about marriage through Fanny. Talking about her relationship with Robert Allen, also a writer, she
says, "I don’t believe in marriage. It’s a patriarchal construct like all of these other horrible institutions."\textsuperscript{12}

Although Fanny disapproves of the notion of formal marriage, she approves of a fair and free sexual relationship between man and woman. She insists on living separately and also wishes to spend time with Suwelo. Fanny and Suwelo decide to build a house modelled on the prehistoric ceremonial household of MSukta people, the Ababa -- a house designed by the ancient matriarchal mind and the first heterosexual household ever created. They had designed a bird-shaped dwelling place which helped them live together without losing their freedom. Fanny’s and Suwelo’s house too was intended to be built on similar lines.

Although Suwelo dislikes the idea of breaking up his marriage, he is forced to accept it. He gets involved with Carlotta, but leaves her to her fate. Suwelo goes to Baltimore to inherit a house left to him by his uncle Rafe. Uncle Rafe had been a porter for fifty years carrying mainly white people’s bags. He got on well with small children and their pets. Young mothers who travelled alone always doted on him. He was helpful, modest, quick and definitely knew his place. Uncle Rafe was a big brown man who had lead his life laughing. Suwelo used to feel amused of how his bachelor uncle could be so happy. He not only laughed but had everybody else laughing too.

Suwelo plans to put the house on sale and settle his uncle’s affairs. As he surveys and cleans up the household things he comes across a series of
pictures around. Suwelo meets an old man called Jenkins. Harold D and an old woman called Lissie Lyles, wife of J. Harold D, who had been close to his uncle Rafe. Mr. Hal explains to Suwelo that most of the women in those pictures was Lissie. He says, “Lissie is a lot of women.” Lissie Lyles is a black woman who lives the life of different women of different races. Mr. Hal tells Suwelo about his childhood days with Lissie. Hal and Lissie had been childhood friends who lived on an island of Coast of Charleston in South Carolina. They fall in love and get married.

Suwelo learns many things from Lissie and Hal. He enjoys their company and listens to the many stories of Lissie. Her stories provoke Suwelo to think deeply of the true and real purpose in one’s life. Lissie’s story about the animal cousins moves him and he becomes more conscious of his own non-human relatives in the world. Lissie and Hal encourage Suwelo to recollect his past. They felt that Suwelo had closed a very important door against memory, against pain. They urge him to open up and speak about his dead parents to his wife Fanny. They pursue him to find a connection of spirit and heart with them. Lissie tells Suwelo, “if our parents are not present in us, consciously present, there is much, very much about ourselves we can never know. It is as if our very flesh is blind and dumb and cannot truly feel itself. Intuition is given little validation; instinct is feared” (354).

Talking about Carlotta, Lissie condemns Suwelo’s feelings towards Carlotta. She says, “it is a sin to behave as if a person whose body you use is a being without substance. ‘Sin’ being denial of another’s reality of who and what
she or he actually is" (354). Lissie tells Suwelo to go to Carlotta and seek her forgiveness. She asks him to express to her something of his own trauma which may have its origin in his mother’s abandoned and suffering face and the fear that gripped him in knowing too much of women’s pain. She tells him:

It is against blockage between ourselves and others — those who are alive and those who are dead — that we must work. In blocking off what hurts us, we think we are walling ourselves off from pain. But in the long run the wall, which prevents growth, hurts us more than the pain, which, if we will only bear it, soon passes over us. Washes over us and is gone. Long will we remember pain; but the pain itself, as it was at that point of intensity that made us feel as if we must die of it, eventually vanishes. Our memory of it becomes its only trace. Walls remain. They grow moss. They are difficult barriers to cross, to get to others, to get to closed-down parts of ourselves. (354)

Suwelo always thought, he had understood Carlotta. He later realises that he had probably understood nothing and it also occurs to him that sleeping with a person whom he did not really know was such a superficial and fraudulent act. He begins to appreciate not only the story, which was relentlessly told by Mr. Hal and Lissie, but also the people around. Suwelo realises his mistakes. He begins to understand that he had failed in his relationship with Carlotta. He is thoroughly cleansed and returns to California fully transformed body and soul. Encouraged by Lissie’s thought-provoking speech and the change in Carlotta’s behaviour, Suwelo attempts to trace back his memories. He at last opens his heart and speaks up to Carlotta about his parents’ tragic death in a car accident. He finally admits to himself that his mother was dead. He tell Carlotta, “My parents’ lives were so miserable, that I couldn’t let myself think about it” (401). In the end Suwelo acknowledges his parents’ ghosts.
Fanny Nzingha, wife of Suwelo, is the daughter of Olivia, daughter of Celie, the protagonist of the novel *The Color Purple*. Walker reintroduces her unforgettable and lovable characters, Celie and Shug, in *The Temple of My Familiar*. She not only touches upon these characters but also gives us a glimpse into the life of Olivia. Olivia reminisces her past recalling her childhood days. She tells Lance, her lover and later her husband, about how she was sold away to missionaries, how she was brought up by her aunt Nettie, and later on how she was reunited to her real mother Celie.

Walker feels that colour is a very important part of Olivia's life. Olivia owns a miraculous blue suit that works miracles in a certain shade of blue. A person wearing this blue would suddenly become more confident, more strong, more intense than ever before. Whenever Olivia wore her blue pantsuit, she would experience all those qualities. But it gets stained and becomes useless to be worn. Although Olivia gets another blue suit made for herself, it fails to give her the previous power and energy. Walker herself admits that colours are miraculous. She says, “We live in a universe that is extremely creative and magical. We become happier as we appreciate these things in nature.” She feels sorry that one learns life through books rather than perceiving it by itself. She says there is an inherent magic in creation. Talking about the idea that made her write about the blue suit episode, Walker says, “I just made it up. Because it just seemed perfectly logical. All of us have had at least one magical garment that someone gave us or that we bought. And when we put it on, we just felt very vivid. And then, if you lost that and you tried to replace it with
something else, it just wouldn’t work. There was just no way. Because, actually, you were trying to make a material thing function as a spiritual thing. The first one actually enspirited you because of the connection. It was made by someone who loved you. But then you get something off the rack, and it is not the same thing.”14

Olivia discloses to Lance about how she came into contact with Dahvid, known as Abajeralaszeola. Olivia gets involved with him and gives birth to Fanny. Fanny was christened by Celie. Fanny had been working in a university. She quits college and enrolls herself in the San Francisco School of Massage. Later she opens her own little parlour and attends to her clients, labouring under stress. Fanny speaks out her reasons to Carlotta for taking up such service-oriented, low prestige job in spite of her high academic credentials. She takes up the job in order to touch people, even those whom she does not like. She takes it up in order to be forced to acknowledge their bodily reality as people. Fanny is one of the victims of racism who is extremely sensitive and who grows extremely conscious of it. Racism has turned her thoughts to violence and violence had made her sick. So she starts working on people, massaging their bodies.

Walker gives us some interesting facts about Shug through Fanny. Fanny has a stack of pamphlets placed in her parlour containing the Gospel, according to Shug. Shug establishes her own religion and finds her own church. Shug’s spirituality is derived from a mystical experience. She experiences the feeling
of being part of every thing, not a separate entity. She develops the holistic
consciousness of the Christian mystics and that associated with African animism.
Shug realizes that God is present in every one and people come to church to
share, not to find, God.

Shug’s spiritual insight saves Celie from rejecting religion. She later
realizes that loving the world, herself, and other people is the way to love God.
This is also what the pamphlet speaks of. It says, “HELPED are those who
love the entire cosmos rather that their own tiny country, city or farm, for to
them will be shown the unbroken web of life and the meaning of infinity” (288).
Shug and Celie together form their own church, a tradition of some standing
among black women which they called a ‘band’. The band was sometimes a
prayer band, sometimes a band of angels, and some other times a band of devils.
“‘Band’ was what renegade black women’s churches were called traditionally;
it means a group of people who share a common bond and purpose and whose
notion of spiritual reality is radically at odds with mainstream or prevailing
ones” (299). As Shug was part of a musical band, she becomes part of the
spiritual band. Arveyda gets a chance to go through Shug’s pamphlets. On
reading them he recognizes the spiritual kin of his own mother. Any
remembrance of her pained him. So he never thought of her.

Fanny is a woman who periodically fell in love with the spirits. She feels
that they open the doors inside her. It is as if they are keys to rooms inside her.
If Lissie Lyles represents a spirit that has many bodies who travels through
time and space, Fanny is a body with many spirits who shoots off to different
realms almost everyday. Fanny tells Suwelo, “I find a door inside and it’s as if I hear a humming from behind it, and then I get inside somehow, with the key the old ones give me, and are, and as I stumble about in the darkness of the room, I begin to feel the stirring in myself, the humming of the room, and my heart starts to expand with the absolute feeling of bravery, or love, or audacity, or commitment. It becomes a light, and the light enters me, by osmosis, and a part of me that was not clear before is clarified. I radiate this expanded light. Happiness” (186).

Fanny, along with her mother Olivia visits her father Dahvid or Ola. There she learns many things from her father, a playwright and minister of culture. She meets her stepsister Anne Nzingha. She was Ola’s assistant at the Ministry of Culture. Anne confides in her about her past history, about her mother and herself. She also tells her about her father’s brief relationship with her mother. Anne’s mother was an illiterate, superstitious woman from a small village, the bush. During the struggle she had run away and joined the Mbeles, the African “underground”. There she gets married to Ola. After their country is freed, Ola is sent to Sweden for further studies. Even though it was Anne’s mother who had helped the government through immense risk and personal sacrifice, she was conveniently forgotten once the government came into power. Anne feels sorry for her mother. She angrily resents the way women are treated by men. Men feel that a woman is only for breeding, or otherwise a seed granary. After returning from Sweden, Ola visits his wife and daughter. He expresses his dissatisfaction with their way of living. He takes away Anne Nzingha, leaving
his wife to die in utter misery and loneliness. Later on he atones for his mistakes by writing a play and dedicating it to his wife and finally admitting their relationship in public. As Anne tells Fanny, “Our father made many, many blunders, out of ignorance, mainly, but in his heart of hearts he was fearless” (262). Although the government banned his plays, he performed it in the villages for which he was fired and put in jail. Anne tells Fanny that Ola was pitiless in depicting his own failures.

Fanny feels that racism of the world has infected her as a child even before she knew what it was. She hates to forgive the whites. Fanny harbours a kind of fear and hatred towards the whites right from her childhood. When Fanny was questioned about the reason for her fear by a psychiatrist she expresses herself by saying, “They are always eating, eating. Everywhere you go, they are sitting down eating. They eat and eat. It makes me feel afraid.” “When I see them eating, I feel myself to be very hungry. Skin and bones. And I feel their teeth on my leg. But when I look down, sometimes it is not their teeth on my leg, only a cold chain. I am relieved to see it is not their teeth, only a chain. I think that when they called us ‘cannibals’ they were projecting” (314). Olivia advises Fanny to forgive the whites. She says that the whites do not know what they are doing. She says, “Forgiveness is the true foundation of health and happiness, just as it is for any lasting progress. Without forgiveness there is no forgetfulness of evil; without forgetfulness there still remains the threat of violence. And violence does not solve anything; it only prolongs itself” (308).
Ola tells Fanny that the frustration with the whites is a natural reaction to what they have collectively done as a people, culture and race. He tells her, "You must harmonize your own heart," "Only you will know how you can do that; for each of us it is different. Then harmonize, as much as this is ever possible, your surroundings." "Whatever you do, stay away from people who pity themselves" (316). He advises her saying, "Make peace with those you love and that love you or with those you wish to love. Above all, resist the temptation to think what afflicts you is peculiar to you. Have faith that what is in your consciousness can be communicated to the consciousness of all" (317). "It is the nature of the oppressed to rise against oppression," says Walker, but she continues "racism is like that local creeping kudzu vine that swallows whole forests and abandoned houses; if you don't keep pulling up the roots it will grow back faster than you can destroy it."16

Finally Fanny, listening to her parents' advice, mends her ways with Suwelo. She realizes her mistakes and tells Suwelo, "I am not afraid of loving you. At last I see you for what you are. I see the child in you that became the man and is now fast becoming the person. Your sins are no graver than my own. I indulged in my fantasies of violence for years before I tried to change; as you indulged in sterile, exploitive relationships with other women" (320). Fanny taunts Suwelo for having treated Carlotta badly. She advises Carlotta to throw away her heels for they hurt her feet very badly. She feels that women wear things that hurt them to atone for the sin of loving someone they had rather not, some-one they may actually consider unworthy of them. It is true in the
case of Carlotta. She used to wear heels for the sake of Arveyda, her husband, who liked her wearing them. But she wore them with vengeance and hatred for Arveyda who left her for the sake of her mother Zede who always wore flats. Carlotta liked the way men look at her in high heels. The look in their eyes made her forget how lonely she was and how discarded. Carlotta gets attracted to Suwelo because of togetherness and closeness that seemed to exist between him and his wife Fanny. Carlotta refuses to reveal anything about her life or herself to Suwelo. Fanny tells Suwelo that Carlotta’s very substance was pain. She says, “Men must have mercy on women. They must feel women’s bodies as a masseuse feels them; not just caress them superficially and use them as if they’re calendar pinups, centerfolds, or paper dolls. What woman could trust a man who came back from another woman’s arms with a story such as yours” (321). Fanny says she was sick of everything. She laments over the ignorance of people saying, “In my women’s studies class and in the administration office at the college I had to explain about blacks; to you and other men I had to explain about women. None of you seemed capable of using your own eyes and feelings to try to comprehend things and people for yourselves” (321). Both Fanny and Suwelo open up their minds and realize their blunders. Fanny had always admired and wished to see Arveyda whose music she was in love with. She was afraid to see the person who created the beauty that was so much what her soul hungered for and made her weep. She tells Suwelo that she would wait until he or she dies so that she could meet his spirit. Later on at the end of the novel, when both families meet and become
close friends, Fanny finds talking to Arveyda very easy. She feels that it is like talking to one of her women friends. She discovers that he is very much like her, falling in love with people dead long ago, usually musicians whom he calls old buddies who help him to write a new song. Both Fanny and Arveyda share some of their thoughts and past experiences. Fanny tells Arveyda about her sister Anne Nzingha, the play they are about to present, and things about Africa. Carlotta too shares her thoughts with Suwelo. The two couples become close friends and they realize that they have a purpose in each other’s lives: “They are a collective means by which each of them will grow. They don’t discuss this, but it is felt strongly by all. There is a palpable trust” (394).

Walker deals not only with the relationship between black men and women but also with the relationship between white women and black men in her novel. Mary Ann Haverstock, later the playwright Mary Jane and founder of an art school M’Sukta, is a white American who liberated Zede and her daughter Carlotta. Mary Ann gets interested in African culture and settles down in Africa. Mary Jane’s great aunt had lived among the Olinka people and done many good works. She had educated a number of women who later became doctors, social workers and so on. Mary Jane’s great-great aunt Eleandra witnesses an Ababa woman, M’Sukta, the whole survivor of her race shut up in the British museum of Natural History for nearly fifteen years. So Mary Jane starts an art school called M’Sukta. When the whites were urged to emigrate, many of them found it very difficult to do so. People who had come into the country with nothing, when it was run by the white regime, later owned large plantations, nice houses,
and decent jobs. So when the whites were asked to leave, many of them wanted to stay back. If they wanted to stay, they had to make a formal legally binding commitment to assume all financial responsibilities for the health care, education and housing of their former workers and their children. The government wanted to confiscate the art school run by Mary Jane. Mary Jane spent all her money on the school and she was left with nothing. Being no longer young and with no desire to go back to America, she did not know what to do. In order to make Mary Jane a citizen of the country and in order to keep her school in Olinka, Ola had to marry her. This was much against the law, the law forbidding interracial marriages. But much against the disapproval of the lawmakers, Ola marries Mary Jane just to make her ineligible for deportation. Though the law forbade interracial marriages, polygamy was approved. Ola takes Mary Jane as his second wife. Barely knowing each other, Ola and Mary Jane become staunch friends and allies. Mary Jane continues to stay in Olinka with her school growing in the estimate of the people. Although Mary Jane was a white, she made an impact on the life of Ola and also on Fanny who, on meeting her, says, “I’d no idea a white person, especially a white woman, would touch upon my own life so -- meaningfully” (349).

Revision has been identified as an important element in black fiction. Barbara Christian views revision as a means of establishing connections among generations of black women writers. Her *Black Women Novelists* and *Black Feminist Criticism* discuss revision as a form of acknowledgement and as a dialogue among generations of women writers. Genevieve Fabre in her
"Genealogical Archaeology or the Quest for Legacy in Toni Morrison’s The Song of Solomon" says, "Contemporary black women are calling for a revision (an inversion of concepts, myths, images) and reexamination of important issues."  

Toni Morrison’s fiction evokes African-American folklore and African-American mythology. Her novels serve as recordings of the black oral tradition. They are powerful delineations of African-American life and culture. The idea of an everpresent past and continuous present is the foundation upon which Walker and Toni Morrison construct their ideas of dream memories and rememories. Dream memories are an extension of the collective conscious which bridges the gap between the collective and the individual. Lissie’s dreams are reflections of her personal desires. In The Temple of My Familiar, rememories and dream memories are stories told by Lissie. The Temple of My Familiar is basically an oral history written in the tradition of African griots. These griots were the living encyclopaedias of their culture who passed on the stories of their ancestors from one generation to the other, thus keeping their communal identity alive. The griot of this novel is Lissie Lyles whose life story is the story of thousands of lives. Lissie has been many women: an African peasant sold into slavery by her cruel uncle; one who is subjected to the horrors of the Atlantic crossing, raped and brutalized; a moorish witch burned by the inquisition; a lesbian woman living in a harem; a pygmy living in a prehistoric forest and so on. Lissie suspects that people are wrongly informed about her. She feels that, if they have lied about her, they have lied about everything. She
believes that without knowing the black woman's story, no story about the world could be complete and authentic.

Mr. Hal and Lissie were husband and wife. Lissie encourages Hal to do his paintings secretly for Hal's father hated his paintings. Once Hal is forced to attend on the delivery of his own child 'Lulu.' As a result of this traumatic experience he loses interest in the family way of life. He observes celibacy as there is too much of suffering implicit in child birth. Lissie, in order to satisfy her physical needs, runs off with a photographer who takes her pictures. Each picture shows a different form of Lissie. Later after a brief affair with him, Lissie returns to Hal who accepts her with love. Hal tells Suwelo, “how wonderful a feeling it give you when you know somebody love you and that's just the way it is. You can be good, you can be a devil, and still that somebody love you. You can be weak, you can be strong. You can know a heap or nearly nothing. That kind of love, when you think about it, just seems like some kind of puzzle, and you can spend a lifetime trying to figure it out. That was the love and still is the love between Lissie and me"(96-97). Lissie satisfies herself with a porter called Rafe who is the uncle of Suwelo. Rafe treats Lissie in a very special way. Lissie herself admits, “loving Rafe and being loved by Rafe was the experience of many a lifetime. And very different from being loved by Hal, ... , Hal loved me like a sister/mystic/warrior/woman/mother. Which was nice. But that was only part of who I was. Rafe, on the other hand, knowing me to contain everybody and everything, loved me wholeheartedly, as a goddess. Which I was” (371). She tells Suwelo, “Your Uncle Rafe was an incomparable
lover. And I have missed him so much, I have sometimes longed to meet up with him again, which I know is not likely; there is little need for him to come back. He loved the total me. None of my selves was hidden from him, and he feared none of them” (370).

Lissie’s life acquires a considerable mystery. She herself tells Suwelo, “Lissie means ‘the one who remembers everything’ ”(52). She says her brain is charged with memory, like a battery, and that the memory, like the mind, has the capacity to dream. Just as the memory exists at a deeper level of consciousness than thinking, the dream world of the memory is at a deeper level still. Dream memory is an encyclopaedia of stories and myths.

Although Lissie does not recall anything, she believes that she was born in Egypt and Atlantis. She also informs that in all the lives in the recent past upto a few thousand years, she was always a black woman. Like Lissie, Zede’s memory is a repository of the past experiences of her ancestors. It tells of how they were treated, imprisoned, and traded from Africa to Latin America and were later sold as slaves to the United States. As a black woman Lissie reveals that she was forced to undergo the most horrifying, painful and dehumanizing experiences.

Lissie unfolds her story, her life in Africa. Lissie’s father died of heart attack when she was only two years old. Lissie, her brother, two sisters and mother custom become her uncle’s responsibility. He mercilessly sells them off as slaves. Lissie describes her mother’s plight in moving words. Her mother’s
story illustrates the plight of every black mother who has lost her spouse. Once they were sold to white men, they were thoroughly tested for their physical fitness. Lissie reveals that there were a few other black men who were also sold into slavery along with them. They were sold by the "Mohametans" because these men and women used to carry on the ancient tradition of worship of the mother.

As a result of hundreds of years of the slave trade in Africa, this religion of mother worship was finally destroyed. The status of woman was invaded. There were raids on women's temples, which were situated in sacred groves of trees. Women and children were dragged out by the hair and forced to marry into male-dominated tribes. Walker describes, that the ones who were not forced to do this were either executed or sold into a tribe whose language was different. The men decided they would be the creator, and went about dethroning women systematically. To sell women and children for whom one no longer wished to assume responsibility or to sell those who were mentally infirm or who had in some way offended anyone, became a new tradition an accepted way of life. The Motherworshippers were the hardest of the Africans and were very much devoted to their Goddess. Consequently, they were heavily punished and assaulted. Lissie describes her mother's enormous agony when they were imprisoned:

After a week in the stockade, my mother fell sick. There was no room for any of us to lie down comfortably, but one of the Mother-worshippers forced a little extra space by the wall, toward which my mother could turn her head for air, and when the pains wracked her, she could kneel. She was sick with vomiting and dysentery, those sicknesses it is least possible to
hide. Her deeper sickness was over her shame at being filthy and exposed to strangers, in the embarrassed and helpless presence of her children. There never was a more fastidious or modest woman than my mother. She bathed at least once a day, and her cloths were spotless. I remember how sweet the oil always smelled in her hair! She could not accept so much filth on and about her person. On the seventh day she willed herself to die. (64-69)

On seeing her mother’s tragic plight, Lissie too felt helpless and wanted to die desperately. Walker brings out some more horrifying truths about the way women were treated. Lissie says that they were possessed by men, like any other commodity. They were forcibly pushed into slavery and branded with their master’s name. They were stripped, put into a ship and sold as slaves to the needy planters. Lissie, her sisters, and brother were sold to different planters, thus making them impossible to see each other in future. Trying to escape, Lissie steps into a large trap, and loses her left foot. Later she dies miserably. Lissie in her different births reveals different types of atrocities committed on women.

Lulu was the name Lissie had when she was in the harem in the Northern part of Africa. Her master was old and he had hundreds of women along with Lissie in his harem. Lissie had two lovers, one woman named Fadpa and the other eunuch named Habisu. They spent all their time completely cut off from society. When the old man died, some of his prettiest women were thrown into the fire along with the old man’s body. Luckily for Lissie, the granddaughter of the old man released the remaining women. Lissie and Fadpa led their life freely as fortune-tellers until their death.
The title of the novel *The Temple of My Familiar* comes from an experience Lissie had in one of her former lives. She lived in the South West as a native American in a temple. The temple was a simple, square, one-room structure painted with a rich coral dust. There were lots of designs in turquoise and deep blue like native American symbols for rain and storm. Lissie’s familiar, what we these days call a ‘pet,’ was a creature that was a small, incredibly beautiful creature that was part bird and part fish. Once, she took it up, put it on the ground, and placed a clear glass bowl over it. However, the familiar did not die. It was looking up at Lissie curiously. Then again she put a white bowl on top of it. It was then rushing furiously about in the snow. Unconsciously Lissie was trying to control the familiar. It was only after sometime that Lissie was able to understand the meaning of this kind of activity on the familiar’s part. Lissie was withholding her familiar and by her actions she was destroying their relationship. “A stupid reflex of a human pride” (119) makes Lissie disregard the symbol of heritage in order to give attention to Suwelo who was a white man, apparently in that life very polite, very well to do and seemingly very interested in their ways. In the end Lissie imprisoned her beautiful familiar under a metal washtub and never gave a thought to how cruel she was to her pet. To her surprise the familiar broke the bottom of the tub and came out in the open air and looked at Lissie and using wings it had never used before it flies away. Thus Lissie understands the primacy of freedom even among the most primitive creatures. She also feels very bad that she had betrayed her beautiful little familiar who was so cheerful and loyal to her out of sheer thoughtlessness, pride and distraction.
In the dream memory of Lissie, she was once a pygmy living with her mother and aunts. They lived in a forest which covered the whole earth. Lissie and the other children were left under the care of big trees when their mothers and aunts foraged for food. Sometimes they were sent to their cousins which were big, black hairy animals with big teeth and flat black faces and piercingly intelligent and gentle eyes. Lissie describes the close relationship they had with those giant animals. Lissie used to spend a lot of time with the cousins. She noticed that unlike them, “they lived together as a family; that is, the fathers and uncles lived with the mothers and aunts, and all of them played with and looked after the children” (84). “They seemed nearly unable to comprehend separateness; they lived and breathed as a family, then as a clan, then as a forest, and so on”(86). Lissie and her mate refuse to part according to their custom. They are punished and isolated from each other. But both of them run away and take shelter with their cousins. Then all of a sudden the men bigger in size started attacking the tree cousins striking them in their chest with their sticks, peeling off their skin, and eating them. Lissie describes the initial act of violence of men. Slowly the trust that existed between Lissie and their cousins soon disappears.

Lissie and her mate learn many things from their cousins. They learn to stay together and look after their children until death. The same way of living gradually takes hold in all the groups of people living in the forest, until the idea of ownership comes into existence. Lissie explains:
Then it was that men, because they were stronger, at least during those periods when women were weak from childbearing, began to think of owning women and children. This very thing had happened before, and our own parents had forgotten it, but their system of separating men and women was a consequence of an earlier period when women and men had tried to live together -- and it is interesting to see today that mothers and fathers are returning to the old way of only visiting each other and not wanting to live together. This is the pattern of freedom until man no longer wishes to dominate women and children or always have to prove his control. When man saw he could own one woman and her children, he became greedy and wanted as many as he could get. (87-89)

Walker believes that one of the chief reasons of women’s exploitation has been men’s greed for possession.

Lissie describes one of her lives, when she was a Moorish witch. During that period some families who worshiped the goddess of Africa were routinely killed, sold into slavery or converted to Islam at the point of the sword. The inquisitors slaughtered their fathers and took away their property. Lissie’s house was also confiscated and she was burnt at the stake. Lissie refuses to give up her essence for the simple reason that she does not share their vision of reality. But she cherishes her own. She tells Suwelo about her life when she lived with her mother at the edge of immense woods. She recalls growing up as the son of the queen of the female community. They lived in a house that was made of straw. The queen then meant a wise woman, a healer, a woman of experience and vision, a woman superbly trained by her mother. As a child Lissie had spent most of her time with her mother. Her mother also kept Lissie with her, always stroking, rubbing into the skin various ointments made from berries and nuts. Lissie’s mother had a familiar and enormous lion, and they used to go
together everywhere. However, this lion also had a family of his own. There
was a lot of exchange of visits between them, and Lissie was always welcome
in the lion's little family of cubs. During those days people used to meet other
animals in much the same way as people today meet each other. Lissie's mother
and her familiar Husa had known each other since their childhood. All the
women those days had their own familiars. Men used to live in separate tribes
and they didn't possess any pets. However, eventually in imitation of the women
and their familiars, men also learned to tame the forest dogs. But compared
with the lions, dogs were basically opportunistic and lazy, sorely lacking in
integrity, self-respect, and culture. Lissie along with her female friend goes
into the forest. There in the forest Lissie's friend makes her look at her reflection
in a nearby stream. Lissie is horrified to see her pale and white form which
appeared to be skinless. She feels ashamed and tries to cover herself with the
leaves. Although her friend tries to console and comfort her feelings, Lissie
drives her away. In her agony Lissie kills her lover's familiar, a snake, thereby
committing the first act of violence. Alienated from both the communities of
men and women as well as animals, Lissie lives a brief unhappy and lonely life as
a recluse.

Lissie continues to describe her birth in different races and in different
periods. She reveals that once she herself was a lion like Husa, her mother's
familiar. She was friendly with a young woman and her children. They grew up
together and frequently shared favourite spots in the forest. But that way of
life was rapidly ending. By the time Lissie grew up as a big lion, the men's
camp and the women’s had merged. And they had both lost their freedom. The men now took it on themselves to say what should be done by all. Lissie as a lion was able to see that this common commune of men and women was in for an eternity of strife and she wanted no part of it. In consorting with man, as he had become, woman was bound to lose her dignity and her integrity. It was a tragedy. But it was a fate that lions were not prepared to share. As a result, in subsequent periods lions moved farther and farther away from humans in search of peace.

Alice Walker’s treatment of nature in her novel reiterates a theosophical and animistic concept that man is indirectly connected to God through nature. Lissie had once told Hal, “Being a genius means you are connected to God” (335). Walker, speaking about her faith in God, says: “I don’t believe there is a God, although I would like to believe it. Certainly I don’t believe there is a God beyond nature. The world is God. Man is God. So is a leaf or a snake.”

Lissie’s and Hal’s nature paintings make one feel close to nature and dwell upon the mysteries and invisible forms of the universe. “The background of the paintings showed all the familiar things the two friends loved to paint. It was the center of the paintings that was different from anything Suwelo had ever seen. For instead of faces, as in a portrait, there were merely the outlines of their upper bodies, a man’s shape and a woman’s shape, and these outlines surrounded blue, infinite space, painted with such intensity, depth, and longing that it was as luminous and as inviting as the sky. On the back of Lissie Lyles’s
self-portrait were the words, in emerald lettering, "Painted by Hal Jenkins." On Hal's self-portrait, in bright red, were the words "Painted by Lissie Lyles" (193). Their paintings give a feeling of experiencing spiritual and imaginative growth, "for they had connected directly with life and not with its reflection; the mysteries they found themselves involved in, simply by being alive and knowing each other, carried them much deeper into reality than "society" often permits people to get. They had found themselves born into a fabulous, mysterious universe, filled with fabulous, mysterious others; they had never been distracted from the wonder of this gift. They had made the most of it" (192).

Walker, through a series of illustrations, suggests the bond that had existed between woman and the agencies of nature. Through the different lives of Lissie, Walker gives us a clear picture of the primeval world of matriarchy, a world in which woman was free and independent. Matriarchy was a self contained, autonomous and independent system in which women worked together in harmony and friendly relationship. But such integrity and togetherness was shattered by man's violence, greed and love for power. Thus Walker reveals that the position and status, power and strength that women enjoyed in the past is gradually taken away from them. Her history of the world as traced through both the novel's African and South American characters records the "pattern of freedom." In the novel women are depicted as risk takers and adventurers. Women force, instruct, and prevent men from colonizing sexuality. Fanny advocates a new sexual freedom. By the end of the novel
Fanny and Carlotta invent less constricting forms of marriage and the lovers achieve oppression-free happiness.

In the *The Temple of My Familiar*, the temple is equivalent to interior space and the image of interior space is a symbol of reintegration and wholeness, the wholeness of the female consciousness. Further, the temple is a loop, a functional circle which helps Lissie’s inner self transpose its own being, both on the subliminal plane and in the world of action. It transforms the woman/perceiver into a shared world of self/gender/racial identity, and thus helps her to illuminate the dark world outside. In the novel we see the aesthetic function of the imagination in its power of grasping in a single, firm vision the long course of African-American history. By enabling us to penetrate the magic circle of a past which is great in itself and vitally related to the confused present, Walker invites us into her own magic temple. In the novel every major narrative movement embodies a traditional convention of language, especially the art of conversation raised to a ritual act of phatic communion. Every movement offers an exposition of one character’s sharing his or her intimate thoughts, feelings, memories and recollections with other characters. The recurrent use of conversational and recollective art, despite its banalities, provides part of the emotional and social matrix that holds the characters and their world together. *The Temple of My Familiar* offers Alice Walker one more opportunity to consummate a momentary fusion of her own being with the souls of others brought into a psychic intimacy by some affinity of creative intellect and cultural palingenesis.
**REFERENCES**


15 Alice Walker, In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens, 275.

16 Alice Walker, In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens, 165.


17 Alice Walker, In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens, 265.