

“Nature is My Temple”: Revisiting the contours of Ecofeminism in Alice Walker’s *The Temple of My Familiar*

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Abstract :

Alice Walker once in one of her iconic essays titled “Everything Is a Human Being” (1988) has mentioned: “We must begin to develop the consciousness that everything has equal rights because existence itself is equal. In other words, we are all here: trees, people, snakes, alike” (127). Again, in order to re-emphasise her interconnectedness with the natural world, Walker in one of her another essays titled “Am I Blue?” (1988) has pointed out that “I almost laughed (I felt too sad to cry) to think there are people who do not know that animals suffer. People like me who have forgotten, and daily forget, all that animals try to tell us” (7). These two excerpts from Walker’s literary oeuvre are copious enough to unambiguously hint at her concern and compassion towards the world of nature and animals, and while doing so, she has stationed herself as an intellectual thinker, thereby proposing ethics of moral behaviour and responsibility. It is in this context, this research paper aims to explore the contours of ecofeminism as projected by Walker especially in her novel *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989). In this regard, this paper considers Karen Warren’s theoretical interpretations of Ecological Feminism in order to investigate Walker’s conceptualisation of the non-human ‘other’. Furthermore, this paper follows the contention that, Walker while pointing out the intersections between the human and non-human also surpasses the stereotypical projections of women of color via opting to roister the belief that “to be Black is some-how to be close to nature” (Greenwood 166).

Keywords: *Ecology, Ecofeminism, nature, non-human*

Introduction :

Alice Walker is one of the important voices not only in terms of taking a stand against the ideas of racism and herosexism but also due to speaking up against the current popular discourses oriented towards speciesism and anthropocentrism. In this regard, one can specially refer to her non-fictional body-of-works such as “Am I Blue?” (1988), “Everything Is a Human Being” (1988), “Frida, the Perfect Familiar” (1998), and also her fictional works titled *The Color Purple* (1982), *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989), *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992) and so on, wherein Walker’s compassion towards the natural/animal/plant world is continually revealed. In all these mentioned works, if viewed from an Ecocritical perspective, one can identify with Walker’s firm conviction that those who are considerate towards the cause of social justice and social equity can never participate in the destruction of natural world. Again while referencing about the controlling meat-eating culture, Walker expresses disappointment about the exacerbating routine of consuming animal flesh on a daily basis. She writes: As we talked of freedom and justice one day for all, we sat down to steaks. I am eating misery, I thought, as I took the first bite. And spit it out. (“Am I Blue?” 7)

As Walker’s literary works invites a large group of readers, the need to take prompt steps against the cruelty upon the non-human ‘other’ is viewed as menacing by the ones who significantly prefers daily meat-eating. This as a result has led the way to immediately suppress Walker’s voice by imposing ban on her works that articulates dictums against the superior meat-eating culture. Nevertheless, amidst these debates, Walker has never stopped to be morally conscious herself. That is why her works have recurrently continued to bespeak her social justice missions, thereby highlighting her sheer belief on integrating the environment and the animal world together under “the sphere of moral consideration” (Peter Singer 97).

In Western metaphysics, the environmental movements which have sought to address the importance of animal rights, and also the Ecocritics who have constantly addressed ecological values, are often deemed to be comprised of ‘mainstream’ white activists. But this notion has been soon called into question, as Walker herself points out that black people irrespective of their proficient participation in different environmental movements, are either misrepresented or discriminated by the soi-disant ‘mainstream’ white activists. In fact in case of Walker herself, it is only with her benevolent consideration towards the non-human ‘other’ as well as to the natural world, that in the due course of time, probably in the late 1980s that she managed to gain a prominent position among many Ecofeminists. Like Walker, there are other black writers as well, such as Ben Okri, Imbolo Mbue, Kimberly N. Ruffin, Carolyn Finney etc. who in their works have tried to address and question this racial hierarchy which has been sustained in between the whites and the non-whites in relation to environmental

concerns. In this regard, Carolyn Finney's work titled *Black Faces, White Spaces* (2014) is significant where she has pointed out that how African Americans have always shared a strong filiation with the natural world, and this in consequence also serves the purpose of debunking this constructed racial binarism. Finney points out: "African Americans toiled, sang songs, wrote stories, and transformed the landscape with hard work, big dreams, and a belief that African Americans have and have always had an intimate, ever-changing and significant relationship with the natural environment" (xvi). This observation is quite crucial as it not only details how people of color perceive their connectedness to the natural world, but also defies the so-called entrenched white supremacy over 'the environment', and by that means also reasserts the idea that 'environment' is *not* "something (only) white people do" (7). Similarly in the context of Walker, she too through her works has explicitly shown her staunch solidarity with the animals and the natural world. This is rightly evident in one of her interviews with Pamela B. June titled "Alice Walker on Ecofeminist Issues in Her Fiction: An Interview," published in *Women's Studies: An inter-disciplinary journal* (2015), wherein she points out:

My interest is not so much in perfection, as I think some vegan and vegetarian people aim for; those are a very strict way of showing solidarity with animals. I am more interested in consciousness about interaction between humans and the other animals . . . I think that the emphasis that has come up in my work is about growing a feeling of solidarity with the other beings on the planet as common sufferers here. We all, some of us more gruesomely than others, are being eaten in one way or another, so there is a real intent on my part to share what I feel is an awareness of the way in which we are like the animals, that they are like us, and that we face a common end actually, death. (102)

The preceding excerpt clearly demonstrates Walker's efforts to speak for the less privileged, thereby compelling us to proceed towards a more good-natured and humanitarian society. Furthermore, as indicated in her writings, she has directed us towards a realm where both the human and the non-human worlds are seen to be intersecting on a more conscious level. So this particular trait of Walker's writings in a way empowers us not only to understand her philosophical stance and social vision but also at the same time allows us to navigate through her Ecofeminist insights.

Objectives :

Now getting back to the chief objectives of this research study is to offer a critical reading on Walker's Ecofeminist vision in *The Temple of My Familiar*, it is interesting to see how Walker in this particular novel has laid out her cognizance about the non-human world and its connection with the world of humans. *The Temple of My Familiar* which has been

Walker's own personal favourite, as the author claims herself, is highly self-reflexive as well as intertextual in nature. An in-depth reading of it will further highlight that the novel is also experimental in terms of its blending of multiple genres as well as multiple narratorial positions. But apart from these aspects, the novel to all its intents and purposes is an Ecofeminist work as it repeatedly vouches for an *inclusive ecosystem* via providing an intrinsic value to everything that constitutes it. However, in the quest to identify with the elements of Ecofeminism in this novel, one must need to be guided through its theoretical context.

Text Analysis :

The roots of Ecofeminism can be traced back to the critical mode of 'Ecocriticism'—a term first popularised by William Rueckert through his essay titled "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" (1978). Ecocriticism as a critical mode of inquiry investigates the characterisations of 'nature' in literary and cultural texts, or in simple terms, it examines the interrelation that resides betwixt environment and literature. In the context of Ecofeminism, however, one might call it to be an extended form of Ecocriticism that perceives the "forces of oppression" as being connected with one another (Pamela B. June 99). This indicates that the daunting task of Ecofeminist critics is to underscore the idea that there remains a dominant ideology which serves as the basis of different "forces of oppression" (such as racism, sexism, speciesism etc.), and this dominant ideology often operates via binary oppositions in order to subjugate the non-human 'other'. In this context, Karen Warren's understanding of this theoretical discourse is of vital significance. She describes Ecofeminism as a branch of learning that highlights "important connections between how one treats women, people of color, and the underclass on one hand and how one treats the non-human natural environment on the other" (xi). Again, Greta Gaard's observations are crucial as she mentions in her chapter titled "Living Interconnections with Animals and Nature" that, Ecofeminism calls for an end to all oppressions, arguing that no attempt to liberate women (or any other oppressed group) will be successful without an equal attempt to liberate nature. Its theoretical base is a sense of self most commonly expressed by women and various other nondominant groups—a self that is interconnected with all life. (1)

With reference to the varying observations on Ecofeminism, one may straightforwardly trace strong Ecofeminist resonances in *The Temple of My Familiar*. It is interesting to note that this novel was published during a time frame when Walker's other literary works, including *The Temple*, devotedly assigned 'animals' in prominent roles. For instance, to consider the essay "Am I Blue?" in this context, one might find out the analogous connection that Walker draws in between the abuse of women of color in relation to the abuse of animals. First of all, Blue in the essay refers to a 'white horse' whose undergoing

misery for separation from his beloved partner Brown is depicted as quite ‘human’: Blue was lonely . . . Blue was like a crazed person . . . He looked always and always toward the road down which his partner had gone . . . It was a look so piercing, so full of grief, a look so *human*, I almost laughed (I felt too sad to cry) to think that there are people who do not know that animals suffer. (7)

Again via Blue’s narrative, Walker persuasively encapsulates a vignette of intersectionality via conjointly bringing the ideas of speciesism, racism and Ecofeminism under one roof. She points out that in slavery, the children of white people are often reared by black ‘mammies’. As soon as these young ones become nearly around twelve, they are asked to completely erase off their deep emotional attachments with ‘mammies’ that they encounters, and in consequence, these young adults at later period of life would apathetically talk about their black ‘mammies’ as being sold out to other “good” white households (“Am I Blue?” 5). This similar reference to black ‘mammies’ can be correlated with Blue’s circumstances as he was placed with his female partner only to mate and conceive, and once the purpose is fulfilled, the female horse had been taken away by the respective owner. So the striking parallelism between *the use and abuse of animals* with that of *the use and abuse of women of color* is addressed by Walker, and while doing so, she not only speaks for the women of color but also advocates for animal rights and animal liberation.

In view of the literary works wherein Walker resisted against human ignorance towards the animal world, it is so far *The Temple of My Familiar* which seems to have effectively pronounced Walker’s concern for the species of the natural world. In the very beginning of this novel, we find Walker effectively expressing Little Zedé’s pain as she watches and hears the mournful cry of a peacock:

Little Zedé had stood waiting as the fat, perspiring woman who owned the peacocks held them in ashen, scratched hands and tore out the beautiful feathers one by one. It was then that Zedé began to understand the peacock’s mournful cry. It had puzzled her at first why a creature so beautiful . . . emitted a sound so like a soul in torment. Next she would visit the man who kept the parrots and cockatoos, and the painful plucking of feathers would be repeated. (1)

Little Zedé’s mother, also known by the same name Zedé, is a seamstress in an old country in South America, who earns her living by crafting capes and clothing from ‘found feathers’ collected by her daughter, not from the deplumed ones of the peacock/s as hinted in the above extract. As the narrative progresses, we find that many years later, the daughter too like her mother, in order to ward off their poor living conditions, starts making feathered capes from the ‘found feathers’ in a sweatshop which she retrieves while cleaning. This is a

powerful instance where painful act of plucking peacock feathers primarily indicates the sheer cruelty perpetrated against the animal world. In conjunction with this, the reference to sweatshop workers indicates the poverty-stricken conditions of the oppressed class where they are mostly victims of double marginalisation—for being both ‘women’ and ‘black identities’ at the same time. Another important perspective is that Walker in her projection of this mother-daughter duo, she completely unfastens them from a space where they are not shown partaking in the destruction of the species. But in a very constructive manner, she offers a projection of women of color (Zedé and her daughter) and their too much obsession in collecting feathers in order to articulate about how feathers constitutes a crucial part in preserving the indigenous identities of deterritorialised South American people.

In contrast to the belief wherein women being “close to nature” are viewed as potentially dangerous, Alice Walker too has been criticised for the same as she is found making strong alignment between ‘black’ women and the natural world. Her intrinsic belief which resonates in all her works, but strongly evident in *The Temple of My Familiar*, is that humans have so much to learn and inculcate from the non-human ‘others’. For instance, in this novel, there is an episode that records the experiences of a ‘white’ woman and about her visit to Africa. In her account, the ‘white’ woman expresses her failure to hear the singing of “the little serpent” (239) unlike the ‘black’ women who could hear it due to their “perceived closeness to nature—and specifically to primates” (Greenwood 167). This in a way indicates Walker’s *celebratory* Ecofeminist vision that aims for a harmonious reconciliation of both ‘human’ and the ‘non-human’ world together, and hence showcases Walker’s strong belief that “to be Black is some- how to be close to nature” (Greenwood 166).

One can further unravel Walker’s posthumanist ethos as she believes in the inextricable bond that links both human and animals; she believes that we, the human beings, are all animals in actuality and this is how we imbibe compassion for the non-human animals as we can identify with our own spirit within them. This notion is instantiated in *The Temple of My Familiar* through an African-American character called Lissie who in conversation with Suwelo, a History professor of same ethnicity, talks about her ‘dream memories’. Lissie profess to Suwelo about her experience of living multiple past lives at multiple times from remote past to present time via her ‘dream memories’; she explains to Suwelo that in each of her past lives, her gender (men/women), her racial identity (black/white), and even her species identity (human/non-human) are continually in a state of flux.

In one of her narratives, as Lissie narrates from her ‘dream memories’, she appears as a white boy and in her experience of this past life, she realises how both the human and the non-human animals are living in unison and are part of the same ecosystem. Lissie of this past

life explains to Suwelo who too appears as a white man in this dream vision that, In these days of which I am speaking, people met other animals in much the same way people today meet each other. You were sharing the same neighbourhood, after all. You used the same water, you ate the same foods, you sometimes found yourself peering out of the same cave waiting for a downpour to stop. (Walker 389)

Lissie, whose both gender and racial identification is transmuted to a white lad, points out that his mother and other women of this past life are companioned by ‘familiar’ which implies ‘pets’, or “companion animals of a special kind” (McKay 256). These ‘familiar’ live bondage free and independent lives, yet they share a sense of emotional belonging with their companions, who are referred to as their human friends. This is evident in the context of Lissie’s long description about his mother of this past life, and how his mother shared a strong bond with a lion named Husa, her ‘familiar’ and her only companion friend, “It was an elegant sight . . . my mother and Husa walking along the river, or swimming in it. He was gigantic, and so beautiful. I am talking now about his spirit, his soul . . .

“But this is all nonsense and grievous ignorance; as is most of what ‘mankind’ fancies it ‘knows.’ Just as my mother was queen because of her wisdom, experience, ability to soothe and to heal, because of her innate delicacy of thought and circumspection of action, and most of all because of her gentleness, so it was with Husa and his tribe. They were king of creation not because they were strong, but because they were strong and also gentle” (Walker 390)

Through Walker’s depiction of this particular ‘dream memory’, she refers to a primeval moment in history wherein human and the non-human animals coexisted with one another, and as it is depicted, the animals were seen as—‘free beings’, ‘unchained’ and ‘liberated’—as evident in the context of Husa, the lion. However, this representation is in sharp contrast to the contemporary times as Lissie in the present day context points out to Suwelo about the self- incurred human-animal difference for which the humans are only accountable:

This perhaps sounds strange to you, Suwelo. About the lions, I mean. But it is true. This was long, long ago, before the animals had any reason to fear us and none whatever to try to eat us, which—the thought of eating us—I’m sure would have made them sick. The human body has been recognized as toxic, by the animals, for a very long time . . . It is a great tragedy today that no one knows anymore what a lion is. They think a lion is some curiosity in a zoo, or some wild thing that cares about tasting their foul flesh if they get out of the car in Africa. (389-390)

Again, on an another occasion, Lissie comes to Suwelo to narrate one of her another

‘dream memories’ wherein Lissie retains her black identity and Suwelo again is a white man; the dream features Lissie’s temple, “a simple square-room structure”, and it also includes her own ‘familiar’—a mixed-breed creature of “part bird, for it was feathered, part fish, for it could swim . . . and part reptile, for it scooted about like geckoes do” (*The Temple* 132). In the dream, both Lissie and Suwelo get repeatedly distracted by the ‘familiar’ as it was skidding all over the place, and therefore Lissie aims to retain the possession of the flying creature in an enclosed space. But everytime Lissie tries to catch and trap the ‘familiar’, it would break free. Although Lissie describes her trapping adventures as “a stupid reflex of human pride”, yet she understands that “all of this activity on the familiar’s part was about freedom, and that by my actions I was destroying our relationship” (*The Temple* 133). Immediately there appears an unfathomable horde of ‘white’ folks that witnesses Lissie’s incessant futile attempts of imprisoning the ‘familiar’, but this time the tiny creature breaks through and flies away using its wings that it had never wielded before. As Lissie realises later on, she says to Suwelo that how she out of “pride and distraction” has been disloyal to her ‘familiar’ who was so “cheerful and loyal” to her (134). This particular dream imagery is highly symbolic on different grounds. Firstly it symbolises an unswerving loyal camaraderie between a creature from a non-human world and a human woman, particularly a black identity. But this friendship loses its essence immediately when Lissie, under the burden to make an overwhelming presence in front of the ‘white’ crowd, betrays her own ‘familiar’ via her constant acts of entrapment. This might further signify that Lissie could not move beyond the feeling of considering her ‘familiar’ as more than a ‘pet’, and only treated ‘it’ as only non-human ‘other’, and hence failed to give it a status of ‘being’. Secondly, this dream imagery also gives a hint at the power play that exists between the white and the blacks. For instance, the sudden appearance of an unknown white audience and an unaccustomed European milieu makes Lissie more conscious to assert her domination upon the non-human ‘other’; she might possibly think that her act of entrapment will rule out the assumptions of the ‘white’ people who are often tend to mockingly collates women of color with the animal world. But Walker establishes her Ecofeminist frame of mind as she makes the ‘familiar’ free from the enclosures, and also challenges the power relationships of society by making us see what happens when we fail to address the importance of other ‘beings’ in this world.

Another important incarnation of Lissie’s past life, as recorded in her ‘dream memory’, is that of a witch; she tells Suwelo of her dream visions as she enters into the history of medieval Europe where ‘witches’ are women of color (as designated by ‘white’ inquisitors) and they are closely connected with the animal world.

Woman ... kept alive some feeling for the other animals ... We never forgot it should

be possible to communicate with anything that had big enough eyes! So there we were, the dark women, muttering familiarly to every mouse or cow or goat about the place. (219)

Walker, through Lissie's incarnation as a witch, insinuates that women of color have placed equal value to animals like the way they give to their own human children. Walker also brings into light the strategy behind using the term "witches" against black women by Spanish Inquisitors, and the reason is that it is their agenda to gain the upper hand over the women of color, and also mark a distinction between the human and non-human world. In this context, Lissie declares, "the inquisitors, set in place to control us, declared 'consorting 'with animals a crime, punishable by being burned at the stake!'" (*The Temple* 220). From this instance, one can understand about 'white' male inquisitor's propaganda of considering human and animal human, for keeping company with animals. Furthermore, it is also indicated that how due to white male inquisitor's false propagandas, women of color and their association with animal world have failed to find a representation in the written history.

- Walker in *The Temple of My Familiar* also asserts her Ecofeminist stance when she provides her critique against the increasing meat consumption on a daily basis. One such instance is that of Lissie who in her actual reality gets exasperated when she sees Uncle Rafe consuming duck meat. Then again, another important character in this regard is Fanny who gets visions about being *consumed* by white men. When Robin, Fanny's therapist asks about her visions, she says: "white people ... very fat ... They are always eating, eating. Everywhere you go, they are sitting down eating. In Paris, they are eating. In London, they are eating. In Rome. They eat and eat. It makes me feel afraid" (341). Through frequent reference of 'eating', Fanny directs her critique against whites' self-proclaimed right to control over everything, such as, white supremacy have often resulted in the unchecked *consumption* of animals, *consumption* of women (in the form of sexual exploitation), and also *consumption* of oppressed groups (economically and socially). With reference to this metaphor of 'eating', or 'consumption', Alice Walker explicitly states: Europeans ... rape, pillage, and destroy most of Africa. They projected cannibalism onto Africans, while in fact they ate all of Africa. So the sense that many people have is that the Europeans basically have devoured Africans and everything they had. (105-106)

Conclusion :

From the discussion so far, one can thus primarily conclude that Walker's *The Temple of My Familiar* via various instances convincingly demonstrates her Ecofeminist insights by drawing connections between the subjugation of both women of color and the oppression of natural/non-human world. These connections, as Walker suggests, are imperative to discern out the reason behind viewing environment from a feminist perspective

or vice-versa. Furthermore, Walker by and large foregrounds her everlasting concern towards the animal world via her critique against the intersections of class oppression, sexism, and racism, but mostly on speciesist oppression. As a result, the novel has been able to serve the purpose for it readers to proceed towards an Ecofeminist understanding via celebrating faithful and compassionate convergence between human and the non-human, nevertheless, also emphasising the significance of animal ethics and protection of animal rights as its predominant theme.

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