



Racism in Alice Walker's The Temple of My Familiar

KEYWORDS

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ABSTRACT African-American literature is the writing by the people of Africa and they descended to America. Alice Walker, like the other writers in the African American literature wrote about their sufferings as slaves in America. In the novel *The Temple of My Familiar*, racism in the society is depicted. It makes the reader, to travel through the countries of Africa and also into the streets of America. Racism and slave trade made the black people depressed. Mostly all the characters in the novel experience slavery in one form or the other. The experience of their ancestors like that of Jesus, Carlotta's father, Ola – Fanny's father too gives a clear picture of slavery. The women characters like Lissie, Zede, encountered racism and the cruelty meted out to them. Zede the seamstress, experienced loneliness and suffered a lot all her life. She was the woman who had no peace from her childhood. She was sold into slavery in her childhood. Even though she suffered a lot she was able to overcome all the sufferings. Her parents also worked as slaves in plantations. She spent her entire life in poverty and her life was comfortable only after Arvedya entered her life. Besides racism, a psychological study on the three pairs about their relationship is beautifully woven by the author. The link she brings for the 'thousands of incarnations' of Lissie makes the novel an 'Epic'. Miss Lissie's stories remind the readers of other stories, myths and fables. Many myths like the ancient goddess Isis, Zeus, the king of gods is also mentioned in the novel.

African American literature has its origin in the late 18th century. In the beginning, the writings of the Africans were not accepted as literary work. But the Harlem Renaissance nourished the writings in the early 19th century. The African American literature mainly focuses on racism, slavery, culture and tradition. Their experience as slaves formed their core theme and they were unable to come out of it. Their affected Psyche is brought out in almost all their works. In 1970, African American literature reached its mainstream. The writers got recognition and won many awards and the works were listed among the Best- Sellers. It promoted many writers like Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, James Emanuel and they got Pulitzer Prize besides many other awards.

Alice Walker won many awards and honours, got Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1983, for her work *The Colour Purple*. Her poetry collection was published as *Once*. Racism and slavery are the major themes in her novel. The novel, *The Temple of My Familiar*, is an exemplary work on racism. The novel has a hundred of themes and subjects. Ursula k. LeGuin points out, "The richness of *The Temple of My Familiar* is amazing, overwhelming. A hundred themes and subjects spin through it, dozens of characters....like Dostoyvesky's characters relentlessly raising the great moral questions and pushing one another toward self-knowledge, honesty, engagement" (San Franchico Review,22).

Racism and Slave trade is an aspect that is portrayed by Alice Walker. Racism is one of the biggest evils of modern age and it was the reason for superiority over the other ethnic group or religion. It denotes prejudice, oppression and atrocities against a certain section or group of people by other class people. The basic difference is the colour of the skin. The whites started to dominate blacks and suppressed them. The African Americans were those who were unwillingly brought by the Americans, from Africa. They suffered a lot in the hands of Americans in their plantations. They suffered physically and also mentally. They struggled to get their freedom and wanted their identity to be recognised in America. In the work, *The Temple of My Familiar*, Walker recorded various incidents of racism, through various characters' experiences, both in their past and present. But they believed that they

would get freedom in future.

There are three couples in *The Temple of My Familiar*, viz., the old man Hal, a painter and his estranged wife, Lissie, Arvedya, a musician, and his wife Carlotta, Women's literature professor, Suwelo a History professor and his wife Fanny, a Women's studies teacher. Mr.Hal and Lissie recollect many things from their past. The Blacks sufferings, struggle to overcome slavery, sufferings of women and children are few things they recall.

Carlotta's mother Zede's life is a fine example for slave trade. The black people were brought as slaves and they compelled to work in the fields of the white's banana plantation. They have to struggle a lot, for centuries to get their freedom. Almost all the characters in the novel experience suppression. Zede's account on the slave trade throws light on their suffering, "...a long chain connecting us by the feet along one row, inverting...there was no movement uncontested by one's neighbours, lack of sufficient food, lack of air and exercise-never had any of us been away from air and light." (Temple, 69).

Zede as a slave recalls "the guards forced the women to mate with them, and before long each guard were chosen his favourite slave "wife"...." (Temple73). Alice Walker presents the saga of a black woman Lissie Lyles, who has many births in different races, at various times. While talking about slave trade Lissie recounts how slavery was carried earlier. Lissie's father died of heart attack when she was two years old, her brothers and sisters along with their mothers were under the control of their uncle and, "... lived in a poor little hut off by itself and out of sight of my uncle's compound. There were four huge men squatting at the edge of the okra patch . . ." (61 - 62). He, practiced Mohametan, already had many wives and children and also slaves. He couldn't afford to keep them. So he sold them. Her mother sent Lissie to the Orka porch, while she returning the guards caught and punished. Her mother in order to protect begged and cried to him, "My mother was just begging and pleading and calling for mercy, because she knew about the slavers, but these brutes had no ears" (62).

The story of thousands of life, were represented through this character. Kasrinath Ranveer points out Lissie's thousands of life "... the story of her life is the story of thousands of lives, each one touched by the double concern of race and gender" (Black Feminist, 83). She recollects the horrors of the Atlantic crossing, rape and brutalisation. She believes that, no story in the world was completed and authentic, without a black woman's story. Lissie illustrates her mother's story to show how they were avoided by the Whites and suffered in the name of racism. In Walker's words, "To sell woman and children for whom you no longer wished to assume responsibility or to sell those who were mentally infirm or who had in some way offended you, became a new tradition, an accepted way of life." (Temple, 64).

Suwelo, the estranged husband of Fanny describes her as a victim of racism. He observes that, Fanny was able to see racism everywhere. But she had a hope to stop racial oppression, before it starts in her. When she explains about her dis-

liking of Whites to her therapist, says, "I won't be a racist....I won't be a murderer. I won't do to them what they've done to black people. I'll die first" (Temple, 302).

Black women suffered thrice fold when compared to their men. They were ill-treated by their own men in the family, and as a black suffered in the society and also particularly as black women. Their ill-treatment found no bounds.

It is after much struggle the African American struggle got their freedom. Fanny when visits Africa feels at home and the visit bring her peace. Suwelo too has a change of heart after listening to Lissie's stories. Lissie, the healer is able to bring peace and harmony in their lives. Though they are not completely changed they were able to bear each other and expect that their children would live in peace in the future. Suwelo hopes as, "we'd have a future, that our children would see freedom." (Temple, 304).

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