

Love, Life, And Loss: The Juxtaposition of a Couple's Matrimonial Interrelations in Alice Walker's "The Temple of My Familiar"

¹Abbilash S R,²Dr. C.S. Robinson,³S. Sowmiya,⁴Silpa L B

¹Ph.D. Research Scholar

St. Peter's Institute of Higher Education and Research, Avadi, Chennai – 600 054.

abbilashnair2901@gmail.com

²Professor, Research Supervisor

St. Peter's Institute of Higher Education and Research, Avadi, Chennai – 600 054.

robinsonchel@gmail.com

³Ph.D. Research Scholar

St. Peter's Institute of Higher Education and Research, Avadi, Chennai – 600 054.

sowmiya20197@gmail.com

⁴L.L.M (Intellectual Property Rights)

Saveetha School of Law, Seneerkuppam, Poonamallee, Chennai – 600 077.

silpalal107@gmail.com

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Abstract

African-American literature, its culture, and its heritage reached their pinnacle during the 1980s. Numerous Women writers engendered dominant masterpieces that lured enormous acclamation and criticism. Alice Walker had already dejected and dissociated the audience's persuasion with the publication of *The Color Purple* in 1982. Walker elected and pursued some of the characters' tales in *The Temple of My Familiar* from *The Color Purple*, seven years after the novel's publication. *The Temple of My Familiar*, published in 1989, is contemplated as Walker's most preeminent work, on account of the novel's plot, themes and leitmotifs, character evolution, and setting. This fiction was criticized for its intellectualism and discrepancy, or it failed to pique the attention of critics and readers, whereas these days, its predecessor still has the majority of the reminiscence and prominence. The pivotal aim of this paper is to target the unaccustomed essence of love and human interrelations and retrace the literary ethics in the selected novel. Fanny and Suwelo, one of the prime couples in the fiction, exhibit diverse aspects to ponder before disclosing the relationship between existence and love. This paper is a component of a broader comparison of the themes of love and relationships in the narratives of Alice Walker.

Keywords: culture, heritage, acclamation, criticism, intellectualism, literary ethics, existence, love, human interrelations.

In the early 1980s at 20th century, Alice Walker became one of the most recognizable and successful personalities in the United States. With her novel *The Color Purple* and its subsequent adaptation by Steven Spielberg, she gained fame, literary awards, wealth, and nuanced public attention. It took her eight years to finish her next manuscript and published it under the title *The Temple of My Familiar* in 1989. The work turned out to be the most ambitious project of Alice Walker so far, it presents many characters with different motivations and goals and gives each of them a voice and an opportunity to express themselves. In addition, between all these characters, in one way or another, there is kinship, neither friendly nor romantic relationship, which also contributes to the complement of the plot and the setting in the novel. Last but not least, it should be noted that the geographical location of events on four continents with their characteristic traditions and

identifications provides a broad view of private and universal human issues. The long and precise work of the author on the text becomes a kind of challenge to the reader, who is expected to approach with attention and patience. To this day, it remains her longest and most layered novel that, discussing the problems of memory, community as well as history, criticizes the Western world for destroying Africa's identity and subjugation of the female sex, as well as expressing admiration for the natural world and animal species. Each of the six parts of the story offers different aspects suitable for analysis because they all exist within the framework of love.

The novel is like a multi-layered, multicolored blanket, combining concrete relationships in search of identity, integrity, and a cure for the pains of the world. Despite its scale, the novel didn't receive positive criticism at its publication, and minimal studies were written about it. Walker has not been able to reach the zenith of success with her fiction to this day. Therefore, the analysis of the novel, *The Temple of My Familiar* is necessary because of the new view, which can be offered thirty years after its release, on the problem of human relationships; A question of interest to all black writers. Central to this study is the consideration of the nuances of the romantic relationship between Fanny and Suelo, one of the key couples in the work, as well as the role of love in the context of external and internal factors influencing the development and change of their identities. By external factors, we will understand the surrounding world, society, community, and American reality, in whose sphere the professions exercised by the characters fall, and under internal ones – their self-realization and self-perception, dictated by personal experience built with the help of cultural belonging, family, personal struggle and suffering. This group also includes their marriage. This article is part of a larger comparative study of human relationships and love in the selected novel by Alice Walker.

Before proceeding to a deeper discussion of Fanny and Suelo's relationship, it is appropriate to look at the first reviews of the novel to clarify the need for a new reading. The reviews of the fiction, *The Temple of My Familiar* are not only negative, most of the critics congratulate the author for her tireless engagement in the field of gender equality and gender diversity, as well as for giving importance to the community, race, nature and the need for change of a better future. The American writer Ursula Le Guin, for example, said: "Every character in the book testifies that if we do not change, we will perish" (Le Guin. 1989: 12). Doris Davenport also shares that "the characters in *The Temple of My Familiar* function as a group of philosophers who tell stories and seek some kind of truth and knowledge" (Davenport. 1989: 13). In other words, the main richness of the book is the multi-layered characters who have embarked on their path to change and truth. This is largely undeniable to other critics. The problem is rooted in Walker's oft-discussed didacticism and her attempt to create a new Utopian historiography in connection to life in Africa before and after colonization. Through her character Lizzie, who remembers all her previous lives and can narrate about them, the author blames the Western world for the devastation of Africa and the subsequent subordination of the female sex. The Pre-colonial and Prehistoric period in the book is presented as a world that is close to paradise, in which there is harmony and understanding. John Michael Coetzee said, "Africa has a past that neither the white historian nor Miss Walker can simply invent." (Coetzee. 1989: 7).

Although fiction gives precedence to imagination and fiction, according to Coetzee, there are limits from which one cannot get out especially when the focus is on the history of an entire continent and the book itself strives for realism. Professor Dinah Birch in his review for the London Review of Books, on the other hand, argues that "novelists are not historians and when the author touches on familiar themes and characters, her writing is true, but when she suddenly starts commenting on England in the 19th century, shortcomings appear." (Birch. 1989: 19). In summary, critics acknowledge the ambition of Alice Walker's project, but are negative about free interpretation and change of history, as well as momentary lack of polishing language and declared didacticism. The reception of the novel overshadows the richness of the images, locations, and connections described by the author. The current study strives to capture the nuances of portraying the characters, in distinct, Fanny and Suelo, and their relationships to bring to the fore the love that underpins and drives the plot in this narrative.

The first aspect of Fanny and Suelo's relationship is the professional sphere and, more precisely, how their professions affect their lives together. First of all, the novel introduces Suelo, who turns out to be the heir to the house of a distant relative, and his walk through the rooms and memories of this home also provoke memories of his failed marriage to Fanny. In the course of the narrative, the reader learns that Fanny and Suelo worked at the same college. He served as an American history teacher and his wife was an administrator. The first stone of discord between them appears precisely because of the dissimilarity in their views. Fanny developed a keen interest in books written from a predominantly female personal perspective that describes the reality of past and modern Africa. She wants to share about the field of knowledge with her husband, but her attempts are not met with her soul. Suelo's view of her introspection in this subject is evident from the following passage: "He wanted American history, the things he taught, to always remain in the spotlight. but

now to have to take into account African-American writers and Bushmen from the Kalahari Desert. That was too much for him!" (Walker. 2004: 180). Suelo is reluctant to accept a view that is positioned beyond the boundaries of the perceived grand narrative about distribution and the state of the world. In the context of this narrative, only reason and science can offer an objective, reliable, and universal paradigm of knowledge (Flax. 1987: 624). Therefore, American history, existing in the imposed model of created textbooks, is the only truth that the hero is willing to believe and that builds his worldview. All personal narratives that contradict the accepted model fall outside the boundaries of the concept of truth. Fanny amazes and confuses Suelo further after she begins to claim to be possessed by human and animal spirits who connect her to history and past events. "They (the spirits, note. May, B. K.) They open doors inside me as if they were keys," she enthusiastically says, adding that they bring her happiness and love." (Walker. 2004: 187–188). The individual approach to returning to the past and, to a certain extent, rewriting it is completely contrary to the logic and reason of the constructed reality. Alice Walker aims to address precisely this conflict between two realities – the historical and the personal. In an interview with Jody Howe, she claimed that she wanted to return to prehistoric times with the help of consciousness and sleep/dreams (Walker. 2010: 311). The best way to show the truth of this experience/relearning of history is by contrasting it with the already accepted way of thinking and understanding the past in Suelo's person. To a large extent, this is in the spirit of the postfeminist theories that were popular in the 1980s. Jane Flax, one of the outstanding theorists, argues that women's stories and activities should be restored and fit into the overall picture of the narratives that cultures create about themselves (Flax. 1987: 641). Walker is ambitious enough to embark on such an endeavor. What she writes does not rely on facts but on spiritual experiences. Fanny's interest led to an ideological clash and a slow breakdown of her relationship with Suelo. Metaphorically, the author points out that the existence of love requires understanding and open-mindedness to new views. Fanny found a way out of academia and university with a change of profession – she became a masseuse. It took Suelo longer to conclude that truth is not one and then to review the learning process in which he was involved. At the end of the novel, the two manage to agree with the idea that the professional sphere should contribute to the strengthening of personal relationships and complement them, and not take away from them.

The second aspect of Fanny and Suelo's relationship is their cultural heritage and their commitment to their parents and ancestors and how this affects their worldview, self-esteem, and identity. Fanny, as the second part of the novel makes clear, is Celie's granddaughter from *The Color Purple*. *The Temple of My Familiar* continues the tale of all the characters in the narrative, concerning the popular writings of the author before the publication of this fiction. An experiment that culminated in her next book, *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, this trilogy, sometimes called the African trilogy, resembles the fictional Yoknapatawpha by William Faulkner, one of the most famous authors of the American South. When asked about the reason for such a continuation of the life threads of Silly, Shug, and Olivia from *The Color Purple*, the author says that the characters remained with her even after the completion of the book (Walker. 2010: 325) similar to the spirits of the past that haunt Fanny. The understanding and perception of cultural heritage for the heroine are both a reminder of the severe traumas in a family surrounded by violence, and an embarkation on the problems of Africa, where Fanny's father came from. The fifth part of the novel extensively depicts the disease of the South, which determined her childhood directly and indirectly. Only in her home did she find a safe harbour. She says, "I grew up believing that white people, in general, cannot bear the integrity and health of others just as they cannot bear someone other than them living among them" (Walker. 2004: 300). Her words are angry and worried. These negative emotions become an obstacle to her self-realization and also the discovery of solid ground upon which to stand and attain wholeness, and, concerning Suelo, to offer unencumbered love. Claudia Tate points out that the two characters must base their relationship on trust and acceptance of their past lives (Tate. 1993: 365). The individual perception of cultural heritage must be upgraded with reciprocity conditioned by constructive change. In other words, people involved in a relationship need to strive for personal improvement, which would lead to shared growth, predetermined by a return to the roots of community and family. As much as black women's problems belong to themselves, they are part of the world and experiences shared with their partners.

Suelo suffers a similar breakthrough when, at the end of the novel, he accepts the death of his parents. He recounts the conflicts in their marriage caused by his father's involvement in World War II and his mother's powerlessness to leave. It is "like a bird in a cage" (Walker. 2004: 405). His parents died after his drunk father crashed into a car. Suelo acquires a new self-knowledge when he realizes the possibility that he would do the same if he were in the position of his father, a man personally crippled by war and society. "His father is standing at the door. He is not old and drunk, but young and handsome. There are two hands" (Walker. 2004: 405). The father utters the following line: "And my name was Suelo once" (Walker. 2004: 405). The realization itself is the culmination of the character's personal growth but provokes a conflicting conclusion with his attempt to explain the causes of violence against women. There were probably many veterans who did not encroach on their partner and did not turn their inner pain into external pain. Despite the problematics

of conceptualization, such an attempt to justify violence is a common motif in Walker's novels. Suelo, faced with his potential to do good and bad deeds, (re)writes his worldview, changes, and is ready to start his relationship with Fanny anew. In this way, Alice Walker manages to create a pattern of "gender egalitarianism, unaffected by malice and submission" (Dieke. 1999: 134). According to the author, truly pure relationships, in which love is the center, are achievable only through change and bouncing back to heal the present. Personalities are always under construction. In a conversation between the two about the mistakes they made, Fanny says, "I'm not afraid to love you. I finally see you as you are [...] your sins are no greater than mine" (Walker. 2004: 322). This reciprocity, according to the author, is a prerequisite for a better future. The more liberated and secure in their identity the characters are, the more non-existent for them is the fear of venturing into love. Identity influences love, not the other way around. It should be noted, however, that this type of great development belongs more to utopian writing, while in real life few people are capable of such mutually affirming change.

The last nuance of analytical interest is marriage and how the author conceptualizes and contrasts it with love. Fanny asks for a divorce from Suelo because she begins to think that the whole idea behind the marriage is wrong. She tells him, "Look, I don't want to end our relationship; I want to change it. I don't want to be married. I don't feel free for you or anyone else" (Walker. 2004: 139). To Fanny, the institution of marriage resembles fetters, a kind of slavery or prison from which women have failed to free themselves. According to Alice Walker, love and freedom are synonymous terms (Walker. 2010: 335). One cannot exist without the other: if Fanny wants to experience real love, she must also experience real freedom. This mode of thinking is tied to the conflict discourses about the African-American family in the United States. E. Francis White, in her study on women, Africa, nationalism, and blacks commented on these discourses. She said: "African-Americans have often been considered a model of anomaly, in opposition to which nationalism was formed in the United States. moreover, the life of the black family has constantly served as a model of anomaly for the formation of the ideal family life" (White. 1990: 75). While the Black family was matriarchal in terms of the white family was dominated by the male sex. White summarizes that to escape this problematic discourse, African-Americans began to look for African models of family ties, and many of them began to argue that polygamy was the best model of marriage. Alice Walker is among the authors trying to find an alternative to the existing dominant model of the family. She accepts polygamy as something normal and to some extent necessary. On the occasion of the dissolution of the marriage, Suelo said, "Divorce was only our first shake-off of any immaterial bondage" (Walker. 2004: 284). He explains that after the exhaustion of spiritual closeness, marriage is a way to keep people together for the sake of common property or offspring. Detention without love he calls immaterial. In *The Temple of My Familiar*, love and marriage are not synonymous, and often, marriage is presented as a limitation of love. Despite all the foregoing, likening marriage to slavery is a very extreme proposition, because there are couples who are bound in this way and feel love for each other; They don't see themselves in chains, not even in the African-American community. However, the author's ideas are understandable in the context of her views and the theory of feminism created by her. Kornelia Slavova perfectly summarizes this theory, presented by Alice Walker in the collection of essays *In Search of Mother Gardens*: "Feminism is an aesthetic of black women that implies a position of resistance to all forms of domination, but at the same time insists on valuing women, female emotionality and power, music, dance, love, struggle" (Slavova. 2001: 129 – 130). Walker saw marriage as a form of dominion, and for that reason denied it; Love, struggle, and female self-awareness stand out as more important in a relationship.

In the polygamous world of the novel, we also find a commentary on infidelity, while Fanny and Suelo are still married. Suelo cheats on Fanny with Carlotta not so much out of desire as out of lack of direction and because of the growth of his identity issues. Fanny later told him, "I didn't feel particularly betrayed as a person by your affairs with other women, or Carlotta in particular. I felt betrayed as a woman." (Walker. 2004: 323). She feels cheated as a representative of the female profession because Suelo has repeatedly confirmed that the women he has affairs with mean nothing to him. They are entertainment and an attempt to achieve personal, not general satisfaction and happiness. In other words, even with infidelity, Fanny's views should be a shared feeling — happiness, love, pleasure — backed by mutual help and respect. According to Ana Jonasdottir, by using their capacity to love and be loved, people produce and reproduce others, themselves, and society as a whole (Jonasdottir. 2018: 16). In *The Temple of My Familiar*, Fanny feels betrayed because, according to her, Suelo's negative influence on the women she has an affair with leads to a lack of production if we follow Jonasdottir's term and growth due to a perceived lack of love. In other words, love still influences the identity of individuals, and neglected, meaningless relationships are not useful to anyone. The only point of contention in discussing infidelity, as presented in the novel, is about the role of jealousy and whether it can be avoided, as Walker tries to show. The existence of the characters is again positioned within the Utopia rather than the real world.

The novel *The Temple of My Familiar* is probably the most ambitious project of the African-American writer Alice Walker. It symbolically continues the story of Celie and Shug from the Pulitzer Prize-winning work *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker herself. *The Temple of My Familiar* is a tangle of characters, events, and experiences, spread across several continents and in several time threads. Alice Walker commented on topics including criticism of Western society, the treatment of animals, the subordination of women, and the truth of history and knowledge. In this article, the main focus was on the relationship of Fanny and Suelo, one of the three leading couples in the novel. With the analysis of the professional sphere, the relationship with cultural heritage, parents, ancestors, and marriage as nuances of interpersonal relationships, a new reading of this half-forgotten novel is realized and a deeper understanding of the woman in the context of love is attained.

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