

## Suffering Silently: Alice Walker's The Temple Of My Familiar

Gulab Singh

Professor, Department of English and Foreign Languages  
Maharshi Dayanand University, Rohtak, Haryana, India.

### Abstract:

The world of Alice Walker's fiction is peopled with an amazing variety of men and women responding to the challenges of life in different ways. The present paper analyzes those characters, in Alice Walker's *The Temple of My Familiar*, who appear to be living at a low level of awareness and sensitivity, stumbling through the pains and pressures of life in a rather hopeless and hapless manner. Such characters find it too difficult to face the challenges posed by the conditions of their existence and succumb to their pressures by suffering silently and submitting passively to the forces of oppression.

Key words: Oppression, Degradation, Racism, Sexism, Submission, Helplessness, Sensitivity, Dispossession.

**Introduction:** A close scrutiny of Alice Walker's fiction shows that a number of her characters tend to survive by submitting themselves completely to conditions of oppression, degradation and injustice in their lives. They suffer silently the utter violence done to their bodies, minds and souls in the racist and sexiest structures of their society. The long history of their dehumanizing experiences seems to have reduced their existence to the level of no better than that of beasts. Such characters lack not only intellectual capacity to understand the issues before them but also the will and strength to resist forces of oppression and exploitation. They tend to benumb themselves to the pains of their slave like existence and do not seem to be in control of their lives and are treated by their oppressors as mere objects. They are just like shadows unable even to think of the possibilities of a better human life of freedom and dignity. Walker observes that "man only truly lives by knowing" one who only stumbles blindly through life,

according to her, “simply performs, coping the daily habits of others, but conceiving nothing of his creative possibilities as a man, and accepting someone else’s superiority and his own misery”(Walker 121-22).

Due to eternal sufferings, they tend to submit to it and accept it as something inevitable and unavoidable. Their resignation to the lot controlled by others, results in the perpetuation of sufferings. The utter submission of these men and women reduces them to the sub-human level. They are not the active participants in what happens in their life and just submit to whatever is done to them. Since they neither think much nor act adequately to bring about a change in their life, there seems to be no significant growth in them. The lack of ideas and sufficient responses to face the challenges and the absence of hope and faith in themselves render them almost incapable of any kind of articulation.

Deficient in self-confidence and power of communication these characters often fail to develop adequate social relationships in which they can “provide with something, and expect to receive something back in return”(Baron 366). In their case, there is not much of interaction and reciprocity because of their tendency to resign themselves to the situation. Thus, they tend to be reduced below the level of social beings as they neither seem to participate willingly and deliberately in their relationships nor do they cherish any hopes and expectations to get anything in return. They, in fact, live in a kind of vacuum of social relationships. Their assumption of “total helplessness and feeling no sense of responsibility for events” (Baron 516) reduces them to the level of social nullities. “Different though they may sometime seem, they all push against the same barbed wired wall of racism, sexism, ignorance and despair”(Parker 479). Their animal like existence marked by frustration makes them incapable of a higher form of action. Waldo Frank speaks of the lives of these men and women who adopt this response as “some form of life that has hardened but not grown and over which the world has passed. They led stunted and sterile live half conscious and inarticulate”(Frank 50).

Though people adopting this response of suffering silently may appear sometimes too simple and not fully developed human beings, they tend to become important and

interesting in the works of Walker as they offer illuminating insights into the complexities of this approach with all its human, social and historical dimensions. Their life and attitudes help the reader to understand not only various forms and institutions of oppression but also reveal their consequences on the life of the individual and society. The way Walker treats this approach and the characters adopting it enables one to appreciate her human sympathies with these silent sufferers on the one hand and her rejection of this approach in favour of a more enlightened and affirmative involvement in life on the other. This seems to provide a clearer and more balanced perspective on Walker's code of values as an artist. The qualities that distinguish her heroic figure are thrown into broader relief by the limitations inherent in the approach of suffering without any resistance. Though a majority of these characters occupy a minor position in her works, they certainly contribute to the unravelling of her themes and also enable the reader to understand different stages in the development of her protagonists.

This response with all its different aspects appears crystallized in a number of situations. Significant among them are the oppressions of slavery, restrictive role of community, degrading and dispossessing effects of the institutions of family, especially for women. A number of characters placed in these situations cope with the stresses by submitting to them without any significant resistance.

This suffering silently and passively is noticeable particularly when the black men and women find themselves pitted against the oppressive system of racism in the American society. The various forms of racist practices have been one of the most degrading and crippling forces which the blacks have been confronting since the day they landed on American shores. Racism, manifesting itself through discrimination between whites and blacks, is rooted in the concept of racial superiority of the white. This history of racism that has victimized the black in different parts of the world reveals that whites sought to rule the black and turn them into slaves. Whites used it as a means to establish their colonial domination over the black. To achieve this colonial purpose, they used every kind of coercive method to subjugate them to the control of white, physically as well as psychologically and subjected the black to the most barbarous, extremely cruel and inhuman atrocities. The

whites employed all the ways at their command to destroy their pride undermining their history and culture.

Most of these blacks found themselves helpless in the face of racist oppression and were unable to cope with it in anyway other than by numbing themselves to its pains and sufferings. They just became accustomed to the laceration of slavery and racial discrimination. Their powerlessness against the white bosses destroyed all their courage and strength and turned them into excessively submissive creatures.

Though it was the story of blacks in general dispossessed of their rights, dignity and equality, it created oppressive conditions for women in particular. These women had to face a system which sought to perpetuate violence not to their bodies but also to their minds and souls treating them as no better than chattels.

Walker, in fact, seems to regard this submission of woman to male authority as the main cause of her fall over centuries. Exploring the question of man-woman relationship like an archaeologist, she brings out how women in early times were free and happy living the life of their own in perfect harmony with nature. They were the embodiments of vitality, creativity and joy before man began to take control of their societies. She suggests that man gradually invented the institutions of marriage and family to pull woman down from her high pedestal of a goddess to the abyss of slavery to man. One of the factors which Walker appears to underline throughout the excavation into the history of woman's loss of power, freedom and dignity is their failure to fight against the designs of men. It is this lack of resistance on their part that has reduced them to the status of nothing more than a piece of property for men even in the African society where they were once worshipped. They become so helpless and totally dispossessed of their mind, body and soul that they could be bought and sold at will by their male masters. Their oppression by men killed in them the very spirit of life and they were thus accustomed to a life of inhuman sufferings and indignities. The pains of these dehumanizing conditions were too deep for most of them to bear without anaesthetizing their minds and hearts.

The Temple of My Familiar is a novel that recounts a number of incidents recalled by Lissie from her childhood memories. Several of the incidents remembered by Lissie, deal with the practice of racism and the system of taking the native Africans as slaves and transporting them to America. She relates how in one of her lives she was sold into slavery when she was only thirteen. She tells that she had been sent by her mother to fetch okras “that had been left on the stalks for seeds”(61) from the field. There she found “four huge men squatting at the edge of the okra patch”(61). Sensing evil in these four men who looked and smelled evil, she “turned to run back home” but was caught and tossed over like a “sack of grain”(62). “They then went on to the hut and grabbed”(62) her two sisters, mother and brother. Her mother pleaded and implored for “mercy because she knew about slavers, but these brutes had no ears”(62). They were dragged and carried to their uncle’s compound and he came out. Lissie’s mother tried to prostrate herself before him which was the custom there “but she was tied up in such a way she fell over on her side”(62).

They were sold into slavery by Lissie’s uncle just for some silver coins to buy a few tinklets for one of his child wives. The whole episode is a telling comment not only on the African system of family and the pathetically poor status of women in their patriarchal set up, but also reveals how it destroyed the very life spirit forcing these women to the level of non-thinking and non-feeling beings. Women in such a family structure were deprived of every human right and treated as mere commodities which men could trade in freely at his will. Alienated from their own self and left with no freedom to think and act independently their womanhood was defined in terms of their submission to male authority. The mother of Lissie had internalized it so much that trying to fall prostrate before Lissie’s uncle was her spontaneous gesture to please him. Moreover, she had no choice but to join the band of the slaves with her children as they were sold away to traders by the patriarch of the family.

Dumb and helpless, they are driven away like cattle in chains by their enslavers and are condemned to the pains of degradations of slavery. The way they have to go mechanically through the sufferings and indignities heaped

on them during the journey is another indication of how abjectly they have to surrender themselves to the forces of oppression and injustice. They are “forced to jog for almost fifteen days without stopping” until they reach “the big stone fort on the coast” (62). They, as women, can do nothing to protect their womanly honour and dignity. Their bodies are subjected to a thorough inspection by their white masters. “They looked at our ears, our genitals – you would not believe the thoroughness or the pitiful protestations of the women” (63). They make them hop up and down to test the strength in their legs. This completely destroys their spirits on the sense of self in them. Servile submission is the only way these women find themselves left with to cope with oppression. Lissie’s mother sinks into “a kind of walking slumber” and does all she is “told to do as if in a dream” (63). The children also imitated their mother. Thus they all found themselves helpless in the face of slavery. Their spirits were broken and the very notion of freedom, human identity and dignity ceased to exist for them. Lissie relates further the example of human helplessness and degradations, they were chained and packed like sardines. Their heads were in each other’s laps, their feet bound and heads turned towards wall, presenting a sight of chained and helpless animals. “The first few weeks of the trip,” in the words of Mannix and Cowely, “were the most traumatic, insane and many became despondent that they gave up the will to live.” This barbarous and extremely inhuman suffering so traumatised Lissie that she “regressed to babyhood, even to the thumb sucking stage” (68). Women and girls were frequently raped while in chains by white masters. Lissie was raped a number of times in the ship and she reminisces the second time “I was violated, they chained me so that my arms and legs were spread out and my thumb was beyond my reach” (68).

These women tried to survive all the tortures and degradations themselves as much as possible. They were so much scared that they lost all the hopes and even the will to retrieve their sense of human dignity and self worth. Unable to offer any resistance, they suffered silently and passively at the hands of their victimizer. The whole racist and sexist system was too much for their simple minds to comprehend and they succumbed to its pressure helplessly.

All of these incidents narrated by Lissie touch the hearts of Walker's readers by bringing home to them the unimaginable cruelties to women in the system of slavery. They present the history of slavery from the perspective of women. But the novelist's purpose is not limited only to giving us a peep into the painful chapters of African history but she also offers a critique of how the victims of slave trade tried to cope up with the most horrendous and traumatic experiences of their life when they were torn away from their land, people and even from themselves.

**Conclusion:** Walker's treatment of this approach of self negation and passive submission thus reveals some of the important aspects of her mind and art. It enables the readers to appreciate her deep understanding of the history, nature and dimensions of the human sufferings particularly that of black. Her sympathy for the oppressed and her protest against the instruments of oppression emerge clearly from her depiction of the helpless victims of injustice. Her insights into the damage done to the inner life of the oppressed and exploited in a system of racism and sexism become crystallized through the characters beaten into a wood like silence and numbness. But her sympathy for these helpless victims does not degenerate into mere sentimentality. The criticism of their failure to resist the machinery of oppression and the tendency to surrender mindlessly to their victimiser provides an ample proof of her ability to put this approach in a more balanced perspective. This imparts an element of greater human complexity even to those of her characters who appear to be simple and unidimensional. The way she hints subtly at the limitations inherent in their strategy of suffering silently and passively serves to underline Walker's commitment to the principles of enlightened and active participation in life.

### **Work Cited**

- Baron, Robert A., and Donn Byrne. "Social Exchange: Coming to Terms with Others." *Social Psychology: Understanding Human Interaction*. Prentice-Hall of India Pvt. Ltd., 1988.
- Blassingame, John. *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in Antebellum South*. OUP, 1972.
- Kent, George E. "Richard Wright: Blackness and the Adventure of Western Culture." *Richard Wright: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Richard Macksely and Frank E. Moorer, Prentice-Hall Inc., 1984.

Parker-Smith, Betty J. "Alice Walker's Women: In Search of Some Peace of Mind." *Black Women Writers (1950-1980): A Critical Evaluation*, edited by Mary Evans, Anchor-Doubleday, 1984.

Walker, Alice. "The Civil Rights Movement: What Good was it?" In *Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983, pp. 121-22.

---. *The Temple of My Familiar*. Washington Square, 1989.