The World as a Community: The Communal Voice in The Temple of My Familiar

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Published in 1989, The Temple of My Familiar by Alice Walker was not as much favorably accepted by readers as her Pulitzer Prize winning novel, The Color Purple, due to her ambition for an all-encompassing theme and complicated narrative techniques. The present studies of the novel are mainly on narrative techniques and themes.

From the perspective of narrative techniques, Patricia Durso explores how Walker introduces the private texts such as letters and diaries into the public text, the novel, which blurs the lines between public and private in both literature and society (139). Bonnie Braendlin regards The Temple of Familiar as a postmodern pastiche with multi-voices, which rewrites the traditional Buildungsroman (118). Through the study of the dialectic relationship between writing and reading, Roland Walter analyzes how the writer, reader and aesthetic form create the text’s political unconsciousness through mutual participation (55).

From the perspective of theme studies, critics mainly focus on the rewriting of history in The Temple of My Familiar. Carmen Gillespie regards the novel as an
extremely complex narrative, which tries to rewrite the history of the whole world (157). Silvia Del Pilar Castro Borrego points out that Alice Walker "joins her contemporaries in the effort of deconstructing history in a way that creates space for the stories that form the history of black people in the United States" (9). Ikenna Dieke pays close attention to Walker's reinterpretation of womanism and acclaims that "Walker moves into The Temple of My Familiar and creates a salutary vision of reality, which points toward a monistic idealism in which humans, animals, and the whole ecological order coexist in a unique dynamic of pancosmic symbiosis" (128–129).

The above analysis of Walker's reinterpretation of womanism by Dieke also reveals Walker's special idea on community. Influenced by pan-Africanism, Walker deconstructs the traditional human society and takes the whole universe as a community, in which all species should be coexisting because all share the common planet. Walker believes that such an ideal world once existed in human history but was destroyed by human beings. The narrator in The Temple of My Familiar gives us another chance to rethink the possibility of an ideal world through narrating. Through the analysis of the narrative strategy, this essay aims to explore Alice Walker's idea on community building.

I. The Juxtaposition of Space

The novel doesn't follow the traditional linear structure. There are different story lines developing at the same time. And meanwhile the stories are situated not at one place but all over the world. It seems the whole novel is fragmented into different pieces. However the narrator takes her special narrative strategy to construct the wholeness of the novel.

The Temple of My Familiar consists of two narrative levels. The major parts of the novel have been told by the character-narrators at the second narrative level through face-to-face talking, or writing letters and diaries. The novel mainly focuses on three groups of people; Carlotta and Arveyda, Fanny and Suwelo, and Lissie and Hal. The three main story lines of the novel develop independently and interdependently to form an organic whole, in which readers can also get to know other fragmented parts of different stories of a large number of people who are closely related with those three major groups of people. All of those stories work with the major three story lines to enrich the wholeness of the novel. The omniscient narrator at the first narrative level plays a very active role in the macro-adjustment of the different narrative voices and stories at the second narrative level. Since the stories at
the second narrative level have been broken into pieces in different chapters, the omniscient narrator at the first narrative level plays the important role to reorganize the fragmented stories into an organic whole. She tells the background information of the stories, the relationships between different characters, and includes all the different stories within the first narrative level to produce a sense of wholeness.

The geographical spaces are also condensed as an organic whole in *The Temple of My Familiar* through narration. The scenes of the stories are not confined to America but spread over the whole world. Different narrators in different places work together to show us a microcosm of the whole world through narrating. The major characters are all living in America where most part of the story happens. With the development of the story, South America, Europe and Africa come to our attention and are mutually connected as a whole through narrating. Carlotta's mother Zédé is from South America. When Arveyda fell in love with Zédé, they went back to South America to search for the past memory. Zédé told Arveyda what happened to her in South America and Arveyda brought the story back to America for Carlotta. We follow Fanny and her mother to Africa for her father. Fanny wrote letters about what happened in Africa to her husband Suwelo in America. Mary Ann left America for Europe to look after her Great aunt. She discovered a series of stories in Europe and Africa through her great aunt's diaries and books. It seems that different parts of the world are not far apart but closely interwoven with each other in the novel.

Through the narrating of different characters, the structure of the novel and the geographical places in the novel are both organized as an organic whole, which make the readers feel a strong sense of wholeness. In this way, the world in the novel is condensed as a whole community.

II. The Juxtaposition of Time

Not only are different places juxtaposed through narrating in the novel, *The Temple of My Familiar* also breaks the line of past and present in order to make the history of human being organic whole.

*The Temple of My Familiar* does not follow a linear structure. The story goes from the past to the present. As the stories develop, the characters in the novel tell their stories about the past in different ways. Their past stories constantly influence the characters' understanding of the present, which also exert great influence to the development of the stories at the present. In this way, the past and the present are interwoven and the past history and the present stories make a sense of wholeness.
The characters get a chance to give a second thought to this world and their place in the world through narrating (Sol, 396). Through telling stories of the past, people who live at the present get another chance to re-understand the world and themselves. Meanwhile the new understanding of the past will influence their present decision, so as to influence the development of the stories at the present and the future. On the trip to South American Zedé tells Arveyda her past stories as well as the stories of her mother and her foremothers: “Our mothers taught us that in the old, old days, when they were their grandmothers and their grandmothers were old—for we are our grandmothers, you understand, only with lots of new and different things added—only women had been priests Yes!” (Walker, 48) The past and the present can never be separated, the grandmothers, the mothers and the daughters are the one, but with different new things added. Through narrating, Zedé gets a new understanding about herself so that she decides to stay at South American and discover more about herself.

Lissie is the best example to show the juxtaposition and condensation of the time in the novel. Jana Heczkov advocates that “Miss Lissie is a transcendent figure who encompasses the whole of the cultural, historical, and maybe even mythical, existence of humankind”. Silvia Del Pilar Castro Borrego believes that Lissie’s dream memory is an encyclopedia, recording the all stories about the past and present. (9-22) Lissie is someone who transcends time and space, where the past and the present even the future meet. Through reincarnations, experiencing all different life forms, she still has memories of every life. She has the memory of prehistory, experiencing the life in harmonious relationship with the nature; she also has a clear memory of slavery because in one of her life time, her family and herself were sold by her uncle to the slaveholders. And she was once a witch who was burnt by man, etc.

With all of those memories of her different lifetimes stored in her mind, Lissie is a living history book. She goes through all history of human being, witnessing all the stories of human being. All the past and present meet in her. No matter how many reincarnations she has been through, the past memories and present stories are recorded in her mind and never fade away. In this way the past and the present are interwoven as a whole within Lissie without a clear line.

Besides, with the development of the stories, every character’s past and present are bridged. Those who can reconcile with the present all get a new understanding of the past. The major characters at first all have problems to recover their past because of the loss of their parents. They can only get their memories back if they recover
their communal memories about their parents and their family. Fanny goes back to Africa for her father and writes back to tell her husband the story about her father; Carlotta gets to know the stories of her father and mother through Arveyda’s narrating and she also tells Suwelo her mother’s story; with the encouragement of Hal and Lissie, Suwelo is brave enough to tell his parents’ story and reconcile with the past; and through telling his parents’ story to Fanny, Arveyda forgives his parents. The above analysis reveals the past and the present cannot be separated and everyone reconnects the broken chain of their memories through story telling. Through a study of the past, everyone gets another chance to re-understand his identity and his place in the present world. Those who want to know themselves have to have a clear thought to the past because the past and the present are interwined as a whole.

III. Voices and the Syncretic New World

Through a study on the time and space in the novel, we see that The Temple of My Familiar breaks the boundary of time and space, and condense the whole world as a community. In this entirety, Alice Walker aims to build a harmonious new world through different voices. In this new world all the species should coexist with each other because they are imperative parts of the organic community.

We first take a look at Walker’s idea on the human community. The Temple of My Familiar gives a microcosm of the world. Walker’s community contains the whole groups of human beings regardless of race, gender, class, age, etc. The major characters are Carlotta, Arveyda, Fanny, Suwelo, Lissie and Hal. Besides, the novel also involves a large number of different characters from different social background who are closely related with those major characters. For example, when we read the story of Carlotta and Arveyda, we will also find that Carlotta’s mother is a very important character in their stories. Through Zedé’s story telling we get to know another important character Mary Ann. Suwelo does not know Lissie and Hal, however he comes to inherit his uncle’s legacy and gets to know Lissie and Hal. Carlotta and Suwelo work in the same school, so Suwelo and his wife, Fanny, get a chance to know Carlotta’s husband Arveyda. Fanny and her mother Olivia go to Africa for her father and happen to meet Mary Ann and become friends. In this way, all of the stories of those different characters interwine together to form a social network. Most of the major characters in the novels are black, but we also see people of different colors, such as Lance (white), Corrine (American Indian), Robin (Mexican American), Mary Ann (white). Arveyda is a representative world man,
“in whom the African and the African and the European and the Mexican and the Indian and the Filipino and the Chinese met” (Walker, 393).

Those people in the community exert great influences to each other through narration and help to heal each other. Story telling gives each character a chance to rethink about the world and their identity. They support each other and encourage each other to tell their own stories. In this way, they build good relationships with each other regardless race, gender, and class. Through telling and listening to each other's past stories, the major characters learn from each other, influence each other and succeed in redefining their identity in this world. In *The Temple of My Familiar*, every story teller has at least one ideal audience who is eager to listen to his story. Through telling, the story tellers learn to reconcile the past with the present and the audience learn from the story and get encouraged. In this part, this essays aims to explore how the narrators connect each other and to make a whole community through orality, letter and diary. In this community, they exert great influence to each other to help each other grow through story telling.

Most of the stories are told orally by the major characters to their friends face to face. Through story telling, the narrators reinterpret their history and reconcile with the present; and the audience are encouraged to tell their own stories.

Zedé suffers a lot during her life time. Because of the painful past, she never tells her story until she meets Arveyda. On the trip to South Africa, Zedé for the first time tells her story to Arveyda. Her story telling reveals her great power of voice. "She spoke with an eloquence that startled Arveyda." (Walker, 45) With such an ideal listener, Zedé is reconnected to her own world through story telling and gets a new understanding of herself. From Zedé's story, Arveyda gains the power of voice. He bridges the gap between Carlotta and Zedé by retelling Zedé's story to Carlotta, which helps them to smooth the misunderstanding away. Arveyda gets an epiphany of his power of being a musician through story telling. "He was a musician, and an artist. Artists, he now understand, were simply messengers. On them fell the responsibility for uniting the world." (Walker, 125) Now "he knew he dared not doubt the power of his song". Through listening and telling, Arveyda is empowered by the voice. He stops doubting about himself and tries to spread the power of voice through his singing in order to influence more people. Carlotta is the first one who is encouraged by him. Through his retelling Zedé's story, Carlotta gets to know her mother, her father and his tribe for the first time, which helps Carlotta to rethink about her identity and start a new life. At the end of the novel, Carlotta is brave.
enough to tell her mother’s story to Suwelo, which shows she reconnects to the past.

When Suwelo meets Lissie and Hal, he is on the crossroad of his life. He was in a marriage crisis. Suwelo was an orphan since he was very young. The accidental death of his parents broke his heart; he could not even mention their name. When Lissie and Hal tell their own stories, they also encourage Suwelo to tell his own story. With their help, Suwelo tells what happens between his wife and himself so as to rethink about the relationship between them. Besides Lissie encourages Suwelo to face up to the past and recover his memories about his parents:

Hal and I felt you have closed a door, a very important door, against memory, the pain. That just to say their names, “Marcia” and “Louis,” is too heavy a key for your hand. And we urge you to open the door, to say their names. To speak of them, anything you can remember, freely and often, to Fanny. To trace what you can recognize in yourself back to them; to find the connection of spirit and heart you share with them, who are, after all you United Front. For really, Suwelo, if our parents are not present in us, consciously present, there is much, very much about ourselves we can never know. (Walker, 352)

His parents are his United Front, part of him and the key to know himself better. He can only understand himself and gets healed as long as he can face up to the past stories of his parents. At the end of the novel, Suwelo finally gets gut to tell his parents’ story and reconciles himself to the past.

On the trip to Africa, Fanny gets a chance to know the stories of her parents and other different people. She writes back to her husband and retells those stories. Living discriminated in American society, Fanny has a strong hatred to the white. Her husband’s affair makes her suffer even more and desperate. During the visiting of her father, she gets another chance to know this world, herself and the white. She learns to forgive from her mother and how to stay in a harmonious state from her father. Besides, she befriends with Mary Ann, a white woman and she is greatly influenced by her. Having talked with Mary Ann, Fanny tells, “I’d no idea a white person, especially a white woman, would touch upon my own life so-meaningly.” And Mary Ann answers, “We all touch upon each other’s lives in ways we can’t begin to imagine.” (Walker, 349) Through this trip to Africa, Fanny finds her root. She gets a chance to re-understand this world, her parents as well as the white, which helps to replace her in this world and construct her new identity. She heals through talking to different people and telling stories by writing letters. Now she can reconcile
with her husband and start a new life.

Mary Ann's life experience is another good example. She was born in a rich white family. On her trip to Europe, she discovers her foremothers' diary. Reading the diary, she gets to know her great aunt and great grand aunt's stories and finds out that they both once lived in Africa. With their guide, she comes to Africa and opens the best art school in Africa for the African kids and befriends with Fanny's father.

Through the analysis of the complicated relationships among the major characters, we can see all different people in this novel are interrelated in this big social net work to make a community, in which they influence each other regardless race, gender, class and age, etc. They support each other and learn from each other through story telling and listening to each other so as to build up a harmonious world.

Walker's community consists of not only human society but also other species in nature. At the beginning of the book before the story is told, we hear Lissie's voice first: "If they lied about Me, they have lied about everything." (Walker, "Dedication") We understand what Lissie means after finishing reading the whole book. If people lied about Lissie's story, they lied about everything because Lissie is everything. Through innumerable reincarnations, Lissie has all the memories of her different life. In her each life, she lives differently with different identities, such as, a black, a white, a man, a woman, a witch, a prostitute, a dwarf, a lion, etc. Before she dies, she draws a portrait of herself, "a big tree with all the black people and funny-looking critters, and snakes and everything [...] and even a white fellow in it. Then all those lions [...]." (Walker, 412) In this tree of life, Lissie shows us that she experiences different life forms which all leave marks on her. The white and the black, man and woman, as well as other species are all parts of her life.

Lissie tells the story of the nature where all the species live harmoniously together according to her dream memory. In her story, we rare in a forest that, for all we know, covers the whole earth. There is no concept of finiteness, in any sense. The trees were like cathedrals, and each one was an apartment building at night [...]. Our aunts and mothers foraged for food, sometimes taking us with them and sometimes leaving us in the care of the big trees. When you knew every branch, every hollow, and every crevice of a tree there was nothing safer; you could quickly hide from whatever might be pursuing you. Besides, we shared the tree with other creatures, who, in raucous or stealthy fashion—there was a python, for instance—looked out for us. (Walker, 84)
They regard the animals in the forest as cousins who not only play with them but also protect them. They are in a harmonious relationship with the nature until human beings destroyed it by taking their cousin’s skins and cooking and eating their cousin’s bodies. (Walker, 84 - 87) The idea of ownership makes people cut the forest into pieces for different tribes and men, “because they were stronger, at least during those periods when women were weak from childbearing, began to think of owning women and children” (Walker, 87).

In another story told by Lissie, human beings and animals are friends. Her mother has a Lion friend. “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 neighborhood, after all.” (Walker, 355 - 356) Through Lissie’s story, we see an ideal world once existed but destroyed by human beings in the history in which all different species lived harmoniously together. They were neighbors, friends, relatives to each other and they supported and protected each other because they shared the same living space and natural resources. Lissie’s story telling gives the reader another chance to rethink about the present world and a hope to build another ideal world, which once existed.

*The Temple of My Familiar* gives human beings another chance to rethink about the world. It is possible that human being can build up an ideal world, in which all the species coexist with each other with mutual love, respect and support. Celie goes through different obstacles during her life time and suffers a great deal. In the past, whenever she was hurt by some one stronger, she came back and hurt her dog to vent her anger. With the help of Shug, Celie learns to treat everything equal. “If you stepped on an ant in Mama Celie’s presence and didn’t beg forgiveness, you were just never invited to her house again.” (Walker, 169).

Alice Walker builds up an ideal world in *The Temple of My Familiar*. Through letters, diaries and face to face talking, the character, narrators at the second narrative level take turns to tell their stories. In this ideal world, the members of the community heal themselves through story telling and listening. The third person narrator at the first narrative level arranges all of those different stories as an organic whole. Through the juxtaposition of the past and the present, as well as the juxtaposition of the different places, the whole world is condensed as a complete whole community, in which all the species are coexisting. If any part of the community dies, death will come to the other parts. Just as Lissie says, “you cannot curse a part without damning the whole. That is why Mother Africa, cursed by all her
children, black, white, and in between, is dying today, and, after her, death will come to every other part of the globe.” (Walker, 198)

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