

Ethos of Cultural Connectivity and Ancestral Bonding in Alice Walker's *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart*

Santosh Kumari

*Associate professor Department of English & Foreign Languages,
Maharishi Dayanand University, Rohtak, Haryana*

ABSTRACT: *Ancestral figure in Walker's fiction incorporates central component of cultural connectivity. Ancestors symbolize a historic body as African conventional standards are reactivated to establish a complex relationship between past and present. The presence of ancestors is inexplicitly implied through a high notion of black heritage. As no civilization on this planet may exist and flourish without the sheltering hands of past, ancestral agency in Walker's fiction directs the present generation towards righteousness and value based social order. Though Walker's novels seem deeply rooted to the glorified status of African ancestors, her bold rejection of outdated dehumanizing rituals and community constraints, also extend a redefined modern view of tradition.*

Keywords: *Righteousness, Ancestral reverence, Spiritual inheritance, Bonding*

Cultural connectivity in Walker's fiction empowers self discovery within the paradigm of spiritual advancement that seems committed to human bonds. The presence of reverent past encourages positive assertion to human values and guides to resist onslaughts of institutionalized hostile forces with a never bending will and endurance. The external hindrances in their way to interaction with the present, ultimately balance the continual struggle of paradoxes, and crossing the boundaries of time and space, the ancestors freely affirm their affinity with the established world of nature. Constituting a deep connectedness, ancestors harbor predominant spiritual influence and frequently give an other worldly call to retain contemplation of eternal truth. In addition to their concern for directing the present generation to come out of bewildering state of inner tribulations, they sharpen one's awareness towards social responsibility and emphasize spiritual renewal. Ancestral existence evidently encourages multi dimensional quality of life, and seeps to attune material accumulation to protect natural assets of mother earth.

II. ANCESTRAL SUBLIMITY

However, the term 'ancestral' is not confined to the singular figure of family members, it consists a value-laden realm of historical and cultural body that distinctly identifies sublime codes for the welfare of present generation. No transformations and modifications may retain creative process without paying reverence to cultural roots. The concept of ancestry embodies central structure of wisdom, and no human civilization may reach glorified status by ignoring its roots. Walker emphatically states in *Anything We Love Can Be Saved*:

I create characters who sometimes speak in the language of immediate Ancestors, characters who are not passive but active in the discovery of what is vital and real in this world. Characters who explore what it would feel like not to be imprisoned by the hatred of women, the love of violence, and the destructiveness of greed taught to human beings as the 'religion' by which they must guide their lives (4).

Walker's fiction extensively emphasizes the presence of ancestral entity and her novels are addressed more often to the spirits or some other supernatural agency. African aesthetics in Walker's novels are focused through the portrayal of ancestors who coalesce influence regardless of time and space boundaries. The complex relationship between past and present projects a peculiar longing for connectivity with heritage that is distinctly superior to the modern system. In the Acknowledgement of *Now Is The Time To Open Your Heart*, Walker admits, "with this writing, whatever its faults, I express my gratitude to all devas, angels and bodhi sattvas who accompany, watch over, and protect explorers, pioneers and artists"(ii). The present day generation always looks for guidance. The transcendent form of ideal beings such as Lissie in *The Temple of My Familiar* displays ancient sagacity and spirit of endurance. Lissie's elevated self has traveled through a number of births such as human beings, lion, and even as a bird. She seems to be an epitome of cultural memory. Her varied experiences embody the best of past experiences, and direct the present how to make the best use of present and future. She helps Fanny and Suwello to overcome petty emotions of envy, and hatred, and leads them to a state of self-realization, compassion and tolerance for each other. Lissi admits that she "swallowed past experiences all her

life" (366), and brushing through all adversaries, she always tried to guard the cultural, historical and ethical existence of mankind.

III. DECONSTRUCTING TRADITION

However, the concept of ancestral reverence in Walker's most recent novel *Now Is The Time To Open Your Heart*, seems deconstructing preoccupied sublimity of past. The over-idealization of past as established in Walker's earlier novels *The Colour Purple* and *The Temple of My Familiar*, is analytically questioned. Ancestral figure in *Now Is The Time To Open Your Heart*, ceases to symbolize a selfless sheltering power. It is no more an omnipotent guiding agency voicing protection and direction. The ancestral presence in the novel is neither visualized in a transcendent state like that of Lissie in *The Temple of My Familiar*, nor it stands for geographical spaciousness of Africa as presented in *The Colour Purple*. The ancestral imagery in *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart*, symbolizes demeaning experiences of racial hatred and slavery, and this way indicates a sharp twist in Walker's view of esteemed ancestors. Kate, the protagonist is "plagued by those ancestors of hers ... wh'd lived and died miserably" (90). 'The man with no teeth' seems demoting and deconstructing the so far established superiority of ancestral reverence. These ancestors are former slaves, and delineate with African American history of slave trading. Kate's revelation of her ancestral encounters demystifies the previous assumptions as it presents a sharp contrast to the image of highly esteemed ancestors. As Walker stated in the novel, "Even though today everybody talks about ancestors in a somewhat lofty way- ancestor this, ancestor that- they are actually very much like one's siblings. ...Some of them need to be negotiated"(94).

Remus, designated as African American ancestral familiar and a story teller in the novel, fails to recognize himself as more well-informed and superior to Kate who represents the characters living in present. When Kate is shocked to observe Remus' failing in maintaining high pedestal of forefather's dignity, Remus ironically asks "who's the ancestor here?" (98) Creating somewhat reversal situation, he not only fails to win over superiority over present but also pleads Kate to sort out problems and strengthen his psychological stand. The past and present are intricately interconnected, and advocating the need of reciprocal interaction, establish that "past is constructed in the relation to the present just as the present is explained by the past" (Le Goff 16). The present as symbolized by Kate, supports past personified by Remus, and the two entities after the accomplishment of their mutually built up cause, merge into a perfect coexistence. The interaction between past and present on both fronts, historical as well as psychological, paves a way to natural co-ordination. This process makes the reader to realize that "history must not only make it possible for us to understand the present by means of the past – a traditional attitude – but also to understand the past by means of the present" (Le Goff 107). The continuum between two planes of time analytically re-evaluates human accomplishments and encourages the spirit of negotiating with ethical codes of hierarchy. Kate, a middle aged women and a Talking tree discovers aesthetic beauty of nature and appreciates the power of ancestral connectivity. On her way to a spiritual sojourn Kate feels:

An internal roar as of the sound of a massive accumulation of words, spoken all at once, but collected over a lifetime, now trying to leave her body....All the words from decades of her life filled her throat. Words she had said or had imagined saying or had swallowed before saying to her father, dead these many years (23).

Kate displays deep reverence for her ancestors, and instead of erasing the memory of her father who "crashed like an accordion" in an accident, she is determined that "she must remember it, linger over her response to it"(42). Motivated by the recurring appearance of her mother in her dream, who also died in an accident, Kate develops the art of story writing. She is overwhelmed to dream of her ancestor Remus, whom Ku Klux Klan nightriders brutally killed. Kate is horribly disturbed to see Remus with bleeding gums and toothless mouth. She offers corns to Remus out of love, and miraculously the corns are transformed into beautiful teeth. Kate is deeply moved to remember the heart-rending experiences of her forefathers. Ancestral bonding gradually relieves Kate of painful past and paves a way to spiritual advancement. Materialism and consumerism seem utterly futile and her mind is purged of all petty emotions. Burning several hundred-dollar bills, Kate devalues material gains and realizes that money is not the goal or goddess of her life. Spiritual dimensions in the novel are immediately linked up with soul-searching rituals of past. Walker emphatically states in the novel:

Do you think when a tree dies all its work is finished? Of course not. It then has the work of decomposing, of becoming soil in which other trees grow. It is very careful to do this, left to itself, and not hauled off to a lumberyard. If it is hauled off to a lumberyard and if nothing is left to decompose and nurture the young trees coming up...Disaster! (96)

IV. SPIRITUAL REGENERATION

Cultural traditions are also transmitted by the incorporation of sermons and folk tales of ancestors. Walker's fictions is replete with instances where spirituality is empowered through rituals reflecting reverence for past practices, and the underlying message of promoting harmony and human love is conveyed from

generation to generation. Such timeless connection indeed abridges the existing gap, and continuous flow of self-realization, eco-spirituality and human bonding is maintained without obstructions. The ancestral forefathers manifest unique modes of redefining values which are frequently questioned to meet the parameters of present time. The concept of ancestral existence stems from the accentuation of cultural conflicts. It reveals, "a psychic connection with the cultural tradition transmitted by the oral mode from one generation to the next" (Cannon, Black 84). However, Walker does not belittle the validity of past, rather she seems to question the irrational blind submission to tradition. The novel *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart* unfolds debatable dimensions of the relevance of ancestral figure. Remus and Armando embody conflation of the two cycles of past and present. Remus stands for present day individual, while Armando, being himself a shaman, communicates with present as well as past and talks to the spirit of the dead people. Walker's reshaping the image of ancestry in *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart* thus, provides a platform for redefining tradition in the context of the needs of the day. Present can not ignore the past. It has to explore its specific routes to establish its identity. The two can not be perceived mutually alienated.

REFERENCES

- [1]. Le Goff, Jacques. *History And Memory*. Trans. Steven Rendall and Elizabeth Claman. New York: Columbia UP, 1992.
- [2]. Cannon, Katie G. *Black Womanist Ethics*. Atlanta, Scholars Press, 1988.
- [3]. Walker, Alice. *Anything We Love Can Be Saved : A Writer's Activism*. New York: The Ballantine Publishing Group, 1997.
- [4]. Walker, Alice. *Now Is The Time To Open Your Heart*. New York: Random House, 2004.
- [5]. Walker, Alice. *The Temple of My Familiar*. New York: Pocket, 1989.