

# The Creative Launcher

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## The African Legacy: Influence of Myths in Alice Walker's Novels

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### Abstract

Walker positions herself as a writer who boldly acknowledges her African ancestry. Africa with its indigenous practices, rituals, myths and folklore became the raw material for Walker's narratives. The paper titled "The African Legacy: Myths in Alice Walker" analyses the myths that form a key constituent in Walker's narratives. The Sacred Serpent Burial Ground described in *Meridian* echoes the holiness attributed to serpents by African tribes. In *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, Walker exposes the practice of female genital mutilation that had been validated by the Dogon creation myths which propagate the message that humans become complete and unisexual beings only after circumcision. The African belief that ancestors are responsible for charting lives become the theme of Walker's novels, *The Temple of My Familiar* and *By the Light of My Father's Smile*.

**Keywords-** Myths, Black American woman, genital mutilation, Ancestor Worship

### Introduction

Myths, legends and folktales form an indispensable part of any culture. Writers of all languages and cultures are undoubtedly influenced by the myths of their own countries. Myths have been moulded and remoulded into different forms and shapes by their users. Though the word "myth" comes from the Greek word, *mythos* which means word, speech, tale or story; myth is basically a story. It may be a story which is narrated orally and later takes a written form. It is not compulsory that myth should have a written form. It may be expressed through painting, sculpture, music, dance or opera. In the Introduction to *Classical Mythology*, Mark Morford and Robert J. Lenardon attempts to define myth, legend and folktales as "...a comprehensive, but not exclusive term for stories primarily concerned with Gods and humankind's relation with them; saga or legend has a perceptible relationship to history; however fanciful and imaginative, it has its roots in historical fact"(2). Theories on the meanings and interpretations of myth are as numerous as myths themselves; since there is no monolithic theory to interpret myths. Mark Morford and Lenardon state that "myth provides us with absolutes in the place of ephemeral values and a comforting perception of the world that is necessary to make the insecurity and terror of existence bearable" (4).

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Different theorists give different interpretations to myths. Bronislaw Malinowski found out the close connection between myths and social institutions. Malinowski proposes that myths are related to our lives in many ways and they are carriers of social customs and belief. Robert Graves expounds that myth and ritual are one and the same. Max Muller is well-known for developing a meteorological or cosmological interpretation of myths. To him all myths are allegories of nature ( qtd. in Magaulick para 18).

Paul Radin, an eminent scholar of Native American Mythology, speaks about the fluidic nature of myth. According to him, the form and content of myths are subjected to change as a result of new influences and by the passage of time (370). Each generation tends to rewrite the myths, legends and folk tales which accounts for its fluidic nature. Gregory Schrempp who discusses the pervasiveness of myths in our culture, tries to establish the importance of myths in his book, *Magical Arrows*. Schrempp opines: “even the grandest paradigms of Western social science are, at base, often folk notions recast within the rhetoric and style of ‘science’ ”(38).

Northrope Frye claims that myth is a structural literary pattern in literature. According to Frye, “in terms of narrative, myth is the initiation of action here or at the conceivable limits of desire which means that myth is a structural literary pattern recurrent in literature” (*Anatomy* 136).

Structuralists like Claude Levi Strauss claim that myth can be approached in the same way as language. A universal resemblance in the patterning of myths all over the world is asserted by the structuralists. According to Levi Strauss, “Myth is language, functioning on an especially high level where meaning succeeds practically at 'taking off' from the linguistic ground on which it keeps rolling” (210).

Feminists, in general looked for ancient myths and folklore where women were treated as a man’s equal. The matriarchal myths offered them hope, for women were not only given equal status with men but also worshipped as deities. It was as a result of male domination that women were denigrated women to a state of second-class. Cynthia Eller, in her book *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory: Why an Invented Past Won't Give Women a Future*, states that it is foolish to adhere to the matriarchal myths as models from the past. Instead women should build their own future.

If there are no inherent barriers to women's equality, then the future of women does not rest on biological destiny or historical precedent, but rather on moral choice. What we must be and what we have been will of course have an effect on our gender relations, but ultimately these cannot and should not dictate what we want to be. If we are certain that we want to get rid of sexism, we do not need a mythical time of women's past greatness to get on with the effort toward ending it. (188)

Though African American women were victims of racism as well sexism, they strived hard to safeguard their culture and act as torchbearers of their tradition. They were keen to preserve the legacy of their rich tradition even in the midst of hostile circumstances. They

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were aware that the only legacy they could pass on to their future generations was their culture. As Lawrence Lewin comments “the Black Americans kept alive important strands of African consciousness and verbal art in their humour, songs, dance, speech, tales, games, folk beliefs and aphorisms”(444).

Myths, legends and folklore serve as an indispensable ingredient in the narrative matrix of Alice Walker’s novels. As a staunch supporter of the African tradition where there is a give-and-take relationship between the story-teller and the listener, Walker in her novels undertakes to create a reciprocal relationship between herself and her readers. Walker tried to transcript the ancestral wisdom in her stories so that posterity might be benefited. They are not only the charters of the past but signifiers of the present as well as the future. The Black American women who had undergone suffering all through their lives were able to face life boldly with equanimity. This could have been an outcome of their spiritual or psychological prowess. This paper attempts to study how the myths of the African and Afro-American culture influence Walker’s fiction and how Walker as a novelist tries to represent the past through their retelling.

Myths and stories form an indispensable part of African culture. Unlike the Greek and Indian mythologies, which were preserved in written form as epics, the African myths were orally transmitted and they were preserved in the memory of ancestors. Till the nineteenth century the Africans were alien to writing. The only means of expressing the thoughts and feelings of ancient people was through art forms. Painting and sculpture were the two forms of art where the ancient Africans expressed themselves. They engraved figures of men and women; wild and domestic animals on the walls of caves and rocks. For sculpting, Africans used baked clay, terracotta, or bronze; wood or stone.

Geoffrey Parrinder opines that the lack of any written text on African mythology made it difficult for the researchers to decipher the African myths. They were forced to believe in the surviving artifacts and the notes written by medieval Arab travellers who have recorded the African myths from the ancient Africans. The notes of Western scholars who have documented the lexis of Africans also form one of the sources for African mythology. (Parrinder 10)

The Fon tribes believe in the divinity of Sacred Serpent. They believe that the earth remains in this form and position because the Sacred Serpent holds the earth together with its coils, 3500 coils above and 3500 coils below. According to the Fon Creation myth, the Creator created the serpent first and it was the snake that carried the Creator in his mouth around the earth. When the Creator found there were an amazing number of large mountains, he asked the serpent to coil itself and support the earth. The Creator ordered the red monkeys to feed the serpent whenever it was hungry. If the monkeys forgot to feed the serpent, it is forced to eat its own tail. According to the Fon belief, if the serpent fails to support the earth for some reason, the earth will drown in the sea which will be the end of the world (Parrinder 20).

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In many of the African Myths the serpent is given a superior position. It may be because, the serpent is believed to support the earth and sustain life on earth. People of the Fon tribe as well as the Masai tribe avoid killing snakes. They believe serpents to be the re-born spirits of their ancestors.

The influence of African myths is evident in Walker's writings. Myths offer a ground for re-reading and re-creating the past. Thus the re-told myths when infused with contemporary reality become a functional tool for the writer..

The Sacred Serpent Burial Ground described in *Meridian* serves as a link that connects Meridian with the past. With the mentioning of the Sacred Serpent Burial Ground, Walker attempts to trace the divinity attributed to the serpent by the Africans in African mythology. The Sacred Serpent Burial Ground was considered sacrosanct by her great grandmother, Feather Mae, because she could experience a spiritual intoxication, had an extraordinary ecstatic experience "as if she had stepped into another world, into a different kind of air" (57). Standing at the centre of the Serpent's coiled tail; a pit which is forty feet deep, Meridian too experienced an ethereal sensation:

From a spot at the back of her left leg there began a stinging sensation, which, had she not been standing so purposely calm and waiting, she might have dismissed as a sign of anxiety or fatigue. Then her right palm, and her left, began to feel as if someone had slapped them. But it was in her head that the lightness started. It was as if the walls earth that enclosed her rushed outward, levelling themselves at a dizzying rate, and then spinning wildly, lifting her out of her body and giving her a feeling of flying. And in this movement she saw the faces of her family, the branches of trees, the wings of birds, the corner of houses, blades of grass and petals of flowers rush toward a central point high above her and she was drawn with them, as whirling, as bright, as free, as they. (58)

Meridian's father also believed in the ethereal nature of the Serpent's Ground. He tells her that the reason behind the construction of Serpent's Ground is to give the living an account of the sensation similar to that of dying. In his words "The body seemed to drop away and only the spirit lived" (58). The Sacred Serpent Burial ground becomes a place that witnesses the ancestral bondage of three generations.

The creation myth of the Dogon tribe justifies female genital mutilation. According to the myth, the Supreme God, Amma, after creating sun, moon and stars created earth. Amma who felt lonely came to female earth for copulation. But because of the presence of a red termite hill, the union could not take place. Amma cut down the termite hill and united with the earth. The obstruction caused by the termite hill made the union defective and instead of twins, a jackal was born. The jackal caused much trouble to Amma. Afterwards, Amma united with earth and the union bore twins, called Nommo which were half-human, half-snake. The Nommo covered the earth with trees and plants and vested the power of language to Mother earth. But the jackal attacked earth because of his jealousy towards earth's ability

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to possess language. Jackal finally could get possession of the language and could reveal Amma's plans to others. Amma decided to create human beings without earth. It is believed that man was created as a bi-sexual being and every human had two souls. The man's soul is removed from the female's body during female circumcision and the woman's soul is removed from man's body during circumcision. The myth propagates the message that in order to become complete and unisexual beings, circumcision must be done.

In *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, Walker integrates the social issue of genital mutilation into the narrative where the binaries, present and the past, ancient and the modern are skillfully intermingled. The ritual of genital mutilation which is common among the African tribes is described in the novel. Walker describes in the *Afterword* of the novel, how female genital mutilation is becoming common in many countries including the US and Europe. "It is estimated that from ninety to one hundred million women and girls living today in African, Far Eastern and Middle Eastern countries have suffered from some form of genital mutilation" (*Possessing* 283). The pain imposed on the female body in the name of ritual might be looked upon as the imposition of patriarchy upon the female body. This ritual is not only restricted to some tribes of Africa, but is stretched on to many continents where immigrants uphold this as a part of their tradition. Walker, who uses her pen to fight against this social menace, makes an appeal to put an end to this torture which is propagated as a part of the culture. In *Warrior Marks*, Walker clarifies: "I maintain that culture is not child abuse, it is not battering. People customarily do these things just as they customarily enslaved people, but slavery is not culture, nor is mutilation" (270).

Clitoridectomy was one of the ways in which man strived to control female sexuality. The widespread belief that clitoridectomy was intended to prevent promiscuity in women made this ritual popular. Man tried to popularize the belief that genital mutilation is a cleansing ritual which makes woman pure and clean. Women agreed to perform this ritual for they had no other choice and also for the fear of becoming an outcast lest they denied it. Annie Brisibe observes:

FGM (Female Genital Mutilation) is a tradition that parents carry out because they love their children and they don't want their children to be an object of mockery to the society. To be an uncircumcised female is to attract ridicule from one's own community. The rationale...behind FGM is to prevent young girls and later women from being promiscuous. In short, FGM is an act of patriarchy that benefits only man. (9)

In *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, Tashi, in spite of the protest from Olivia and Adam was determined to undergo the ritual. Tashi, on her way to the Mbele camp was dressed in the traditional Olinkan way with her "mealie row fan hairstyle" (22). Tashi "sat astride on the donkey in the pose of a chief, a warrior"(22) while going to the Mbele camp, lashed at Adam about her need to emboss the marks of her tribe upon her body. "All I care about now is the struggle for our people...Who are you and your people never to accept us as we are? Never to

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imitate any of our ways? It is always we who have to change” (22-23). Tashi believed that embossing the marks of her tribe and following the rituals of her tribe were one of the ways of resisting the onslaught of colonialism.

After the ritual, Tashi’s mind and body witnessed hitherto unseen changes. Her joyful, carefree expression changed to passive, sad grimace. She required quarter of an hour for urination and her menstrual periods lasted for ten days. The cramps debilitated her half a month. The physical as well as mental pain impaired herself. The destruction of Tashi’s sexual life was another consequence of the ritual. Physical infirmities due to female circumcision are described in Annie Brisibe’s article:

Long-term complications include sexual frigidity, genital malformation, delayed menarche, chronic pelvic complications, recurrent urinary retention and infection, and an entire range of obstetric complications whereas the foetus is exposed to a range of infectious diseases as well as facing the risk of having his or her head crushed in the damaged birth canal. (23)

Tashi’s delivery of her son was so complicated that Benny’s brain got damaged during his birth. As Tashi says: “Benny, my radiant brown baby, the image of Adam, was retarded” (61).

Tashi, who became a sacrificial victim for the sake of her community suffered appallingly all through her lifetime. This along with the knowledge that the mutilation ritual was responsible for her sister Dura’s death made Tashi take the decision to kill M’Lissa, the tsunga or the circumciser, thereby saving posterity. M’Lissa who became a “national monument” (149) by then was honoured by the Government for her “unfailing adherence to the ancient customs and traditions of the Olinkan state” (149). Tashi accomplishes her revenge by choking M’Lissa to death. Tashi justifies her act in a letter to Lisette that had she not killed the circumciser, “Africa may well be depopulated of black people in our grandchildren’s life-time and the world-wide suffering of our children will continue to be our curse” (275). Walker here expresses her deep concern for the future of the African Americans, especially Black females who are always facing some kind or other kind of oppression.

In African mythology, there are messenger gods, who act as intermediaries between god and men. Eshu, a messenger god in West African mythology acts as the guardian of men. Eshu is represented as a god with an unpredictable character, who could be kind as well as cruel, the creator as well as the destroyer, mischievous as well as good-natured. Eshu is usually considered to be a trickster –god who is well-known for his pranks. Henry Louis Gates Jr. describes Eshu as “the guardian of crossroads, master of style and stylus, the phallic god of generation and fecundity, master of that elusive, mystic barrier that separates the divine from the profane” (*The Signifying Monkey* 6). According to one of the stories, it is Eshu’s prank that made him wear the garb of messenger. Eshu stole yams from God’s garden wearing God’s shoes to make footprints. Eshu accused God of stealing the yams. This

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infuriated God and as a punishment God commanded Eshu to visit earth every day and return to sky every night and give report of the happenings on earth. Eshu, the trickster figure enjoys creating confusion among couples, friends and relatives. One of the stories tells about how Eshu creates discord in a house where a man lived happily and peacefully with his two wives. Eshu, took the form of a trader and stood in the marketplace trading the beautiful headdress he had made. One of the wives got attracted to the headdress and she bought it from the trader. Her husband liked the headdress and complimented her to such an extent that the other wife became jealous of her. The other wife went to the market and brought a headdress which was more beautiful than the first and grabbed her husband's attention. Seeing this, the first wife went to the market in search of a better headdress and was followed by the other. This process continued till the two wives became enemies. Eshu disappeared from market, leaving behind the family in contention (Parrinder 91).

This Trickster figure in African Mythology, who uses different forms of trickery must have inspired Walker while moulding the character of Grange Copeland in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*. Grange, who escapes to the North for better opportunities, cannot not survive without some sort of trickery in a world which is extremely antagonistic to a coloured man. His life in the North teaches him to fight even if it meant adopting the strategy of a trickster. In his last phase of life, his only aim is to provide the best for Ruth and also make her independent, psychologically as well as economically. In his desperate attempt to strengthen Ruth's sagacity and her literacy, Grange steals books from the library. Grange gathers money for Ruth's college education through bootlegging and other tricks. Grange affirms to Ruth "When I die this farm ain't going to be nobody's but yours. I done paid for it with every trick I had" (*The Third Life* 251). The one-time cruel man undergoes an unbelievable transformation into a loving grandfather who does tricks and pranks for the survival of his granddaughter.

In African mythology, ancestors are given a significant place and they are revered and regular homage is done because the Africans believe, the ancestors can influence the course of their lives. It is usually believed that the foundation of the life of entire humanity is not based on the activities of the living people alone but on the deeds of ancestors as well. The mystery that shrouds life after death must have been the basis for ancestor worship in Africa. Anything that appears to be mystifying or inexplicable was given a divine attribute by the ancient people.

Walker discusses the theme of after-life and how ancestors influence the life of the descendants in her novel, *By the Light of My Father's Smile*. Manuolito, a member of the Mundo tribe goes on to describe the unique beliefs and practices of their tribe to Senor Robinson. According to the Mundo belief, the dead people do not disappear all of a sudden after their death. But they continue to talk and weave stories. The stories connect them with the other world. The Mundo belief insists that "the dead are required to finish two tasks before all is over with them" (148). "...One is to guide back to the path someone you left

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behind who is lost, because of your folly; the other is to host a ceremony so that you and others you have hurt may face eternity reconciled and complete” (148).

According to African traditional belief, a person has two souls- the life soul and the thought soul. The life-soul or the bio-spirit disappears suddenly after a person’s death. Whereas the thought soul will linger for some time till its obligations and duties are finished. In the patterning of the Mundo belief about the lingering of the dead person’s soul till he finishes his commitments, Walker might have been influenced by this traditional African belief.

Walker explains in the novel, the Mundo custom of the bride or bridegroom’s father kissing the five places; ears, eyes, nose, mouth and genitals of the bride or bridegroom. This custom was practiced by the Mundos during the birth and death of loved ones as well. The colonizers who found this custom unpalatable tried to oppress the Mundos in different ways.

Manuelito tells Senor Robinson about the Mundo custom of mother-in-law teaching the daughter-in-law about the interconnectedness between the woman and the moon. Moon, thus becomes closely associated with woman’s rhythm of life. Mundo women thus realize that she is part of everything in nature. The Mundos’ marriage would take place only when the moon waned and reappeared “as a smile in a dark place, in the sky” (210). According to the Mundo custom, when a girl is going to meet her lover to make love, they think of the moon as her father approving their relationship and so they sing the song, “by the light of my father’s smile”.

The moon is revered as moon goddess in African mythology. Mawu, the West African moon goddess is worshipped by the Fon people of Benin as the creator. Mawu is related with motherhood and fertility. She is responsible for teaching people the necessity of revering ancestors. Mawu is believed to have a partner, the God of heat and strength, Liza.

Manuelito tells about the significance of moon for Mundos :

The crescent moon, which is sometimes like a bowl or a boat, is the moon smiling its light on the good lovemaking that is to come. The moon, while, forever a woman, for just a while, becomes, also a man....If you are in love, and going to meet your lover, to make love, you think of the moon as a father, happily looking down on you. For Mundo fathers are happy that their children, the girls as well as the boys, enjoy what your culture calls, sex. And that is why, a young girl sings, as she goes to her lover, just as does a boy: “by the light of my father’s smile”! And that is why no one among the Mundo would marry when the moon is full, but only when it has waned and then reappears, as a smile in a dark face, in the sky. (210)

Through her stories, Walker tries to establish the oft-forgotten fact that man and nature are inextricably connected. Walker’s fiction tells about her accountability towards her ancestors as well. Walker believes in an egalitarian view of nature where all the animals, trees, fishes and humans co-exist with the blessings of their ancestors.



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The acknowledgement of the presence of one's ancestors is a necessity for one's spiritual development. In *The Temple of My Familiar*, Lissie beseeches Suwelo to re-establish the bond with his parents who have died in an accident. Lissie finds out that since Suwelo has severed the bonds with his ancestors, his mind is spiritually impoverished. Lissie's words in an audio cassette, given to Suwelo before her death implore him to relink with his ancestors:

Hal and I felt you have closed a door, a very important door against memory, against pain. That just to say their names "Marcia" and "Loius" is too heavy a key for your hand. And we urge you to open that door, to say their names. To speak to 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, your 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....And, more important, the doors into the ancient past, the ancient self, the pre-ancient current of life itself, remain closed. When this happens, crucial natural abilities are likely to be inaccessible to one: the ability to smile, to joke, to have fun, to be serious, to be thoughtful, to be limber of limb. (352-53)

The words of Lissie prompted Suwelo to restore the broken ties with his deceased parents which ultimately paved the way for his spiritual development. Here Walker stresses the need to forge a healthy relationship with one's ancestry for one's spiritual development.

Walker attempts to implant the myths and beliefs of Africans she had heard into the template of her novel as an effort to strengthen the ancestral bonding. She consciously does this so that future generations might be informed of the vast richness of the African culture. Through the re-writing of myths, the writer not only rewrites the past, but also modifies the present as well.

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