

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Trajectories of Belief: Religion and Spirituality in Alice Walker's *Meridian* and *The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff*

Dr.Asha Krishnan, Assistant Professor, Department of English, NSS College for women, Neeramankara, Thiruvananthapuram

Abstract

Black Americans followed a syncretic religion as they combined elements of Spirituality and nature worship with Christianity. Black Church was influential among the Black Americans as they found it a platform to voice their anxieties without hesitation. Spirituality was a legacy which the Black Americans inherited from their forefathers. Walker's spirituality believes in the existence of a Universal Spirit. The paper analyses how religion and spirituality become influential in Walker's selected works.

Keywords: Religion, Spirituality, Black Church, Universal Spirit

Religion and spirituality were the two influencing factors in the lives of African Americans. Though many of the first-generation African Americans accepted Christianity as their religion, they were unwilling to discard the rituals and practices they followed in Africa. The African Americans, to whom Christianity was introduced by the White masters, did not uncritically accept the new religion. Instead, they combined the practices of their indigenous religion with Christianity to form a religion with syncretic nature. The African Americans were unwilling to discard their indigenous practices, but they could not survive in America without accepting their Master's religion. This led to the confluence of two different religious concepts. Gayraud Wilmore comments:

... they adopted new ideas and rituals that were similar to the old ones they knew back home, the African forms were strengthened

rather than discarded, although it is more accurate to say that they were gradually transformed. The Africanized Christianity that flourished on southern plantations, often to the disgust and dismay of the White missionaries, included some characteristics that were unfamiliar to White Christians. For example, there was much dancing and singing in the African style of 'call and response'; drumming (whenever permitted, for the masters were afraid that drums might signal revolt); elaborate night time funeral customs; spirit possession; and conversion experiences that involved flying, traveling great distances, or encountering spirit guides, of one kind or another, in dreams and visions. (30)

Many of the African beliefs and rituals were retained by the Black Americans though they practised the syncretized religion. Worship of nature, veneration for ancestors, belief in intermediary deities were all retained by the Black Americans. Maulana Karenga identifies how African characteristics were transferred on to Christianity. In his article, "Black Religion: The African Model", Karenga points out the influence of the African conviction that "there is the belief in one Supreme God," who is at times represented as the "Father" or "Mother" (42). This Supreme Being is often made available for daily interaction with people through

RESEARCH ARTICLE

divinities, “who are seen as God’s intermediaries and assistants” (Karenga 43).

Boyd Franklin views spirituality as an indispensable and deeply rooted factor in the lives of many African Americans. He feels that spirituality must have provided solace and comfort to the distressed minds of the slaves, when they were uprooted from their motherland. It must have been the source of strength when they had to face innumerable ordeals. In times of emotional distress, spirituality guarded the shaky minds of the Blacks, instilling a faith in their future. According to Cook and Wiley, “whether churched or unchurched, most African-Americans are aware of spiritual influences passed down through their generations”(186).

Voodoo or Hodoo is an African system of belief based on the presence of spirits, ancestors and God. The slaves who were brought to the different parts of America spread this system of belief. Voodoo religion is a blend of the religious practices of African ethnic groups such as the Fon, the Nago, the Ibos, Dahomeans, Congos, Senegalese, Haussars, Caplaous, Mondunges. According to Jessie Carney Smith, Voodoo is not a finite religion, as it can be practiced in different ways. “The terms like Voodoo, Hodoo, conjure, rootwork can be used interchangeably or referred to as separate sets of beliefs and practices” (Smith 1450). Some supporters regard Voodoo as a religious practice while some others give importance to the magical aspects. The male priests who practice voodoo are called hougans and female priests are called mambos. Different ceremonies related to Voodoo take place in temples or oumfus which include offerings, animal sacrifices, foretelling, singing and spirit possessions. Some equate voodoo with black magic as there are many objects associated with voodoo which are used as charms to bring luck, wealth, love and power in one’s lives.

Walker, in one of her short stories, “The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff”, employs her knowledge of Voodoo. The story tells about the

revenge of Hannah Kemhuff to a White woman who insulted her and denied food for her and her family during the Great Depression, for the reason that Hannah was wearing better clothes than the White woman, Sarah Marie Sadler Holley. Hannah, while standing in the queue yearned for food: “All around her I could smell them red beans and my mouth was watering for a taste of cornpone”(The Complete Stories 60). Sadler, who felt inferior and infuriated by Hannah’s good looks commented “You don’t need nothing to eat from the way you all dressed up...Move along now, somebody here may really need our help!”(61). After this incident, Hannah’s husband deserted her family. Starvation led Hannah’s children to death, one by one. Hannah’s spirit never recovered from the insult and had frequent nightmares of the “little moppet”(62). Hannah expresses the intensity of her insult in these words: “...and always feel the moment when my spirit was trampled down within me while they all stood and laughed and she stood there grinning behind her hands”(62). Hannah, in the last years of her life goes to a root worker, Tanta Rosie to accomplish her revenge against Mrs. Holley. Walker here employs the curse-payer mentioned in Zora Neale Hurston’s book, *Mules and Men*. Tanta Rosie’s apprentice visits Mrs.Holley’s house and declares that a Black woman needs some of her hair, nails, excretions and a piece of cloth which carries her smell. She mentions the power of voodoo and states “...this combination, with the right prayers, can eat away part of a person just like the disease that ruins so much fine antique pewter”(71). Frightened, Mrs. Holley started leading a secluded life till death and in fear of voodoo, she desperately collected her stray hair, ate her fingernails, and collected her excretions which drove away all her friends and relatives. Hannah Kemhuff, thus accomplishes her revenge with the help of voodoo.

Walker mentions in *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* that her own mother had to bear the insult of a White woman during the time of Depression for the reason that her mother wore dresses better than the White lady who served them

RESEARCH ARTICLE

ration. It was from her mother’s real life experience that Walker crafted the story. Walker dedicates this story “In grateful memory of Zora Neale Hurston” (56).

According to the voodoo belief, the Supreme Being or God controls the whole universe. Spirit/s or Loa comes second in the hierarchical order that control day-to-day activities like family, health, money, happiness, love and harvest. So, the Spirits have to be appeased if someone wants success in material life. Each Spirit is in charge of some element in nature or the other. All manifestations in nature; be it in the form of trees or animals or rivers or oceans, are sacred to one Spirit or the other. Loa acts as intermediary force between humans and the Supreme Being.

Black Americans, even though they tried to retain some features of the cultural continuity from Africa, could not accomplish it because of the fear of the wrath of their White masters during the times of slavery. But they clandestinely practised the curing technique and lived in the spiritual world of rituals, healing techniques, indigenous medicines and curing rites. This created a parallel world for the Black Americans where they lived a life analogous to their lives in Africa. It enabled their minds to relax and be themselves. Laurie Wilkie rightly comments that “the spiritual realm provided an autonomous sphere, compatible with African-American worldview, which allowed enslaved African Americans to exercise control over their own communities” (147).

The African Americans were much influenced by the spirituality of the Africans who believed in the presence of a universal spirit in Nature. But, their life in America as slaves of the Whites changed their perspective regarding religion and belief. They tended to identify with a Christian God who endured suffering, humiliation, torture and finally rose to freedom. The story of Jesus Christ filled the hearts of the African Americans with empathy as well as sympathy. The African Americans who were denied

freedom for centuries could easily relate themselves with those who suffered and at last rose to freedom. Eric Lincoln opines that the importance of freedom in the lives of the Black Americans has religious overtones as well (4). Lincoln states:

Depending upon the time and context, the implications of freedom were derived from the nature of the exigency. During slavery, it meant release from bondage; after emancipation it meant the right to be educated, to be employed, and to move about freely from place to place. In the twentieth century, freedom means social, political and economic justice. (4)

The religious associations of freedom with the will of God and also with the connotation of salvation made the African American crave for freedom. The yearning for freedom by the Blacks became indispensable as it drew them nearer to God. Even in the Negro spirituals the craving for freedom is evident. This is how the yearning for freedom echoes in one of the spirituals:

Oh Freedom! Oh freedom! Oh
freedom over me
And before I ‘ll be a slave I’ll be
buried in my grave
And go home to my Lord and be
free.
No mo’ moanin’
No mo’ weepin’
There’ll be singin’
There’ll be shoutin’
There’ll be prayin’
And before I be a slave I’ll be
buried in my grave
And go home to my Lord and be
free.(qtd. in Oral Moses)

The Black church enhanced the perception of freedom in the minds of Black Americans. Black Americans have an exceptional relationship with the

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Black church as it was the first institution that belonged solely to them. The role of the minister of the church in the lives of Black Americans was equally substantial as the Black church was like an extended family to them (Cook and Wiley 190). Black Americans who were forced to face class as well as racial discrimination from the Whites, felt relieved during their sessions in the church. It provided them with much-needed consolation when they found themselves in turmoil. According to Boyd-Franklin, Black churches have become multifunctional community institutions that involve in social as well as political activities, construct schools and conduct activities which help to develop a positive outlook among the members (46). Many of the Blacks are regular visitors of the church and willingly take part in all the ecclesiastical activities. Adorning important positions in the church pleased the members of Black community as they found this their only platform to exhibit their leadership qualities. The Blacks actively involved in the electoral processes in the churches, electing pastors, trustees, deacons and bishops.

The role of the Black church in politics became significant because the votes of Black people depended on the words of the preacher. Eric Lincoln states that “the black church served substantially as a political organization” (205) because if the members of the Black community voted contrary to the instruction of the preacher, they would be ostracized and expelled from the church (205). Bishop Henry McNeil Turner of the African Methodist Episcopal Church was a noteworthy political figure among the Black preachers of the nineteenth century. His political activism helped the Republicans gain a political base in regions around Georgia.

Until the Civil Rights Era, the Whites never addressed the Blacks by mentioning the accustomed titles. An adult Black male was addressed as “boy” by the Whites and Black women were called by their first names without the accompaniment of any titles. Only the Black ministers or pastors would be

addressed by the title “preacher “or “Rev” (Lincoln 206). For the Blacks, becoming a pastor of their church was highly covetable.

In the early novels of Alice Walker, there are references to the Black Church and how the Black church influenced the lives of different characters. In her later novels, there is a shift in the perception of spirituality. Walker tends to move towards New Age spirituality which embraces the presence of an all-pervading spirit.

In Walker’s *Meridian*, Mrs. Hill, Meridian’s mother is portrayed as a highly religious lady who is a regular visitor to the Black church. Her belief in the church was unquestionable and absolute. Mrs. Hill represents those of the old generation with unflinching belief in church and God. Walker comments about Mrs. Hill’s belief:

She did not complain against the church because she believed the church building- the mortar and the bricks- to be holy; she believed that this holiness had rubbed off from years of scripture reading and impassioned prayers, so that now holiness covered the walls like paint. She thought the church was literally God’s house, and believed she felt his presence there when she entered the door; when she stepped back outside there was a different feeling, she believed.(77)

Though there were many drawbacks in the Black church, Mrs. Hill’s devotion brushed them aside. Even if the preacher’s words were incomprehensible, she never complained. Mrs. Hill had only elementary knowledge about Biblical stories. She knew only a few stories like the birth and crucifixion of Christ, the miracle of Ezekiel’s wheel and of Exodus.

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Meridian, who is a rebel, never believed in the Black church. It may be because Meridian opposed her mother's convictions and beliefs that she became an atheist. But in one of the final chapters, Walker portrays Meridian entering the Black church. She realizes to her surprise that the Black church is no longer the one which used to be. Deborah McDowell observes about the transformation of the church:

It is rather the restored church of her slave ancestors that Meridian ultimately embraces, the church of Nat Turner, of Denmark Vesey, the church rooted in the soil of protest against oppression, the church of communal spirit, togetherness, righteous convergence. (272)

The church's ideology had changed from salvation after death to resistance. Meridian finds herself totally confused. The church had modified its stand on political as well as social issues. A member of the congregation would lead the prayer and thanked the congregation for being together in times of trouble. He did not kneel down for the prayer for as he said, "there was a lot of work for the community to do"(195).

Meridian is completely surprised to find the change in Church music. It reminds her of Margaret Walker's famous poem "Let the martial songs be written...let the dirges disappear"(195). Meridian's surprise is reflected in these words: "The people looked exactly as they had ever since she had known black churchgoing people, which was all her life, but they had changed the music! She was shocked" (195).

The minister's voice reminds her of Martin Luther King. He is in his thirties and dressed in a neat black suit and striped tie. The political references in his sermon startle Meridian. He refers to President Nixon as "Tricky Dick" (195) and in his sermon, warns the young men against participating in the Vietnam War. The older congregants are admonished by the preacher for letting their children fight the battles for them. The transformation in the

tone of the preacher reflected the change in attitude of the Black church. "It was like a play. This startled Meridian; and the preacher's voice-not his own voice at all, but rather the voice of millions who could no longer speak-wound on and on along its now heated, now cool track. God was not mentioned, except as a reference"(196).

Meridian's astonishment is doubled when she confronts the picture of "traditional pale Christ with stray lamb" (198) replaced by that of "B.B with a Sword" (199). It was the picture of B.B.King, the blues singer, who is a tall, broad-shouldered Black man with guitar in one hand and a sword dripping with blood on the other hand. Deborah McDowell remarks: "Here, Alice Walker, like a number of other black writers, is using the black musician as a symbol of an enduring cultural tradition and as an exemplification of unity and community" (176).

During the Civil Rights Era, the church became a safe refuge where people could gather and hold meetings. The preachers used spirituals as a tool to teach the followers about the ideals of freedom and liberation. Guy and Candie Carwan, two Civil Rights activists recount the role of church during Civil Rights Movement:

the churches were the meeting place for the movement and singing was a central ingredient of mass meetings which took place night after night....The meetings started with old time unaccompanied singing and prayer. The older people expressed years of suffering and hope through their songs. The young people followed with newly adapted freedom songs.(60)

After Meridian's visit to the Black church, she feels she found out answers to the much-perturbing questions that has been disturbing her soul. She feels she must continue her life "against whatever obstacles, to live it, and not to give up any particle of it without a fight to death, preferably, not

RESEARCH ARTICLE

her own”(200). Meridian realizes the commitment she has towards her community and that her life cannot be and should not be separated from the lives of her fellow beings.

Spirituality forms a recognizable element in the narratives of Walker. Walker’s spirituality is rooted on the African concept of belief in the presence of a Universal Spirit. Walker never believed in conventional religion or in the image of a White God. Walker believed in the pagan religion of her African ancestors who worshipped Earth, Nature and the all-pervading Spirit that inhabits nature. Walker states in *Anything We Love Can be Saved* about her concept of spirituality that “All people deserve to worship a God who also worships them. A God that made them, and likes them. That is why Nature, Mother Earth, is such a good choice” (25). Walker’s spirituality believes that all creations of Nature are inhabited by the all-pervading spirit and every creature should be given due respect. The relationship between the Universal Spirit and the particular is emphasized in Walker’s works.

REFERENCES:

- [1]Carwan, Candie and Guy Carawan.*Sing for Freedom*. Bethlehem, PA: Sing Out, 1990.Print.
- [2]Cook, D. A. and Wiley, C.Y. “Psychotherapy with Members of AfricanAmerican Churches and Spiritual Traditions”. *Handbook of Psychotherapy and Religious Diversity*. eds. P. S. Richards &A. E.Bergin.WashingtonDC: Amer. Psychological Assn., 2000. 185-209. Print.
- [3]Franklin, Boyd N. *Black Families in Therapy: Understanding the African American Experience*.2nd ed. New York: Guilford P, 2003.Print.
- [4]Karenga, Maulana. “Black Religion: The African Model.” *Down by the Riverside: Readings in African American Religion*. Ed. Murphy, Larry New York: New[5] York U P, 2000. 41-48. Print.
- [5]Lincoln, EricC.,LawenceH.Mamiya. *The Black Church in the AfricanAmerican Experience*.USA: Duke U P, 1990. Print.
- [6]McDowell, Deborah E. “The Self in Bloom: Alice Walker's Meridian”.*CLA Journal* 24.3(1981): 262-275. Print.
- [7]Moses, Oral. “Oh!Freedom”.Ed.*The Negro Spritual* .Web.9. April. 2013.
- [8]Smith, Jessie Carney, Ed. *Encyclopedia of African American PopularCulture*.USA: Greenwood,2011.Print.
- [9]Walker, Alice. *Meridian*. 1976. New York: Pocket, 1986.Print.
---.*The Color Purple* 1982.Great Britain: Phoenix, 2004.Print.
---.*In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens. Womanist Prose*. 1983. Great Britain: Phoenix 2005. Print.
---.*Living by the Word*. San Diego: HBJ, 1989. Print.
---.*The Complete Stories*. Great Britain: Phoenix, 1994.Print.
- [10]Phoenix, 1994.Print.
---. *Anything We Love Can be Saved: A Writer's Activism*. New York: Ballantine,1997. Print.
- [11]Wilmore, Gayraud S. “What Is African American Christianity?” *Down by the Riverside: Readings in African American Religion*. Ed.LarryMurphy, New York: New York U P, 2000. 26-31.Print.