

Know Your Roots: Ancestral Bonding in Alice Walker's *By the Light of My Father's Smile and Now is the Time to Open Your Heart*

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Abstract

Alice Walker acknowledges the relationship with her ancestors in her works. She believes in the African belief that ancestors act as signposts in the descendants' lives and concedes the importance of ancestors in their lives. Her narratives lament the loss of ancestral ties. Walker makes a modest attempt to reclaim her bonding with the ancestral past through her records.

Keywords: Ancestral bonding, descendants, African belief

Alice Walker establishes a close connection with her ancestors, whom she considers store-houses of accumulated wisdom and knowledge. She places herself in the continuum of her mother, grandmother, great-grandmother, and other ancestors who served as mentors and taught the young generation the aesthetics of life and the basics of survival. Walker acknowledges her ancestors who have bequeathed her the gift of creativity. She expresses her anxiety about those ancestors who were creative artists but were forced to relinquish their creativity:

What did it mean for a black woman to be an artist in our grandmother's time? On our great-grandmother's day? It is a question with an answer cruel enough to stop the blood.

Did you have a genius great-grandmother who died under some ignorant and depraved white overseer's lash? Or was she required to bake biscuits for a lazy backwater tramp when she cried out in her soul to paint watercolors of sunsets or the rain falling on the green and peaceful pasturelands? Or was her body broken and forced to bear children (who were none more often than not sold away from her) - eight, ten, fifteen, twenty children-when? Her one joy was the thought of modeling the heroic figures of rebellion in stone or clay? (In Search 233)

Walker remembers with concern her foremothers, who were distraught with their creativity which was not given expression. Walker realizes that the younger generation must

acknowledge their greatness and proudly inherit the legacy of invention. She takes it up as her duty to chronicle the lives of black women so that posterity might be benefitted.

The Africans believe in the power of ancestors in charting the course of their lives. The ancestors act as signposts that guide in times of necessity, help choose the right path in times of confusion, and assist in warding off the dangers and obstacles. Walker, too, acknowledges the ancestral influence in her works. As Morrison opines in "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," ancestors are "timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom" (343).

In African mythology, ancestors are given a significant place and revered. Regular homage is accomplished because the Africans believe their ancestors can influence the course of their lives. It is usually thought 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. The mystery that shrouds life after death must have been the base for ancestor worship in Africa. The ancient people give anything that appears mysterious or inexplicable a divine attribute.

Manuelito, 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 story is what connects 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).

According to the traditional African belief, a person has two souls- the living 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 until its obligations and duties are finished. In the patterning of the Mundo belief about remaining in the dead person's soul till he ends his commitments, Walker might have been influenced by this traditional African belief.

The principle that hurting someone in the earthly life will thwart the attainment of peace in his afterlife is given stress by the Mundos. Senor Robinson falls short of getting peace even after his death as he is guilty of destroying his daughter's life. He was having whipped Magdalena brutally with the leather belt for her affair with Manuelito, an unbridgeable gap generated between father and daughter, which continued throughout their lives. Susannah, the elder daughter who witnessed this scene of her "gentle, compassionate father turning into Godzilla" (27) through the door's keyhole, severed all filial ties with her father. This scene marked the end of Senor's role as a loving father in the mindscape of the two daughters. His daughters' permanent hatred toward Senor Robinson prevented him from attaining tranquility even after his death. It was by the assistance given by Manuelito that Senor could relieve himself of the guilty feeling. In the other world, a role change occurs where Manuelito becomes the preacher and Senor, his disciple.

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. The Mundos also practiced this custom during the birth and death of loved ones. The colonizers who found this custom unpalatable tried to oppress the Mundos differently.

However, they did not appreciate the idea of a father and mother touching the vulva and phallus of their grown children, even to bless them. We explained that the kissing was respectful, the lightest touch.

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 a woman's rhythm of life. Mundo women, therefore, realize that she is part of everything in nature. The Mundo's marriage would take place only when the moon has 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 the 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 to motherhood and fertility. She is responsible for teaching the people the necessity of revering ancestors. Mawu is believed to have a partner, the God of heat and strength, Liza.

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

In this journey, Kate attempts to consume the sacred medicine or yage or Ayahuasca, known as "Grandmother," which is believed to bring about spiritual transformation. The ethnobotanist Richard Evans Schultes in the 1950s discovered the brew used by natives of Amazonian Colombia for spiritual and healing functions. It is believed that Ayahuasca influences human consciousness for six hours after half an hour of consumption. Schultes gives an account of the effects of Ayahuasca upon the natives of upper Rio Negro of Brazil that it "...is pleasantly characterized among other strange effects by colored visual hallucinations. In excessive doses it is said to bring on frighteningly nightmarish visions...but consciousness is not lost..." (Stafford, Peter13). Kate takes medicine with a prayer for the well-being of all humans, animals, plants, and rocks and also for the planet's future generations. A request was made to the Grandmother Spirit to protect her and guide her "to the knowledge of how to act in the world for the highest good of all" (62). The idea behind Kate's consumption of sacred medicine is to bring about psychic healing of the self and thereby effect a positive change in society.

Walker's accountability to her ancestors is reflected in her character Kate who keeps the photographs of her late parents on her home altar. Walker has realized the importance of ancestors who give guidance to the young members. As Gerri Bates opines, "Ancestors are influential in charting the correct course of action for their living relatives, often communicating with the living through dreams and visions" (174). At first, Kate finds one of her hands missing, but as she finishes untangling the net, she finds herself flinging the net with both hands. Gerri Bates comments on Kate's dream of her mother "As an ancestor, her mother helps her to overcome the issues that burden her, allowing Kate to continue to exist in the physical world without obstacles in her path"(174). In his discussion on the ancestral influence upon the lives of family members, Gerri Bates points out that: "They (Ancestors) are the connection between the past and the present, the material and the immaterial. Those alive make contact with the ancestors through contemplation, prayer, propitiation, and supplication" (174). Kate's meeting with her mother in her dreams was a rewarding experience for her. In Kate's words, "For that one enigmatic moment with her mother, she would have made the river journey" (40).

In the dream, Kate accompanies Remus to the cornfield. Remus remembers the times he used to plant, harvest and shell the cornfield. Kate offers him an ear of corn, but he tells her he can't eat as his teeth are absent. When Kate pleaded, Remus ate the corn, and suddenly, kernels of corn flew and stuck themselves on the gums, which made Kate remark, "you now have a full set of teeth" (99). When Remus runs all around looking for a mirror, Kate says: "Here is the mirror. Look in my eyes" (99). Inviting her ancestor to look into her eyes is a gesture of acknowledging her bonds with him.

Ancestors are believed to possess divine powers that can alter human beings' fate. Walker acknowledges the influence of ancestral spirits in her narratives. Her narratives lament the loss of traditional ties. Walker makes a modest attempt to reclaim her bonding with the ancestral past through her descriptions.

Like an African griot, Walker, through her novels, attempts to record the past of her community from declining into oblivion. The African griot is the Medieval European minstrel's counterpart who passes the ancestors' stories from one generation to the next. They are known to be custodians of history, as written history is something new to Africans. Griots sing songs about their ancestors and also of their past. Walker expounds on her bonding with her ancestors in these words:

I gathered up the historical and psychological threads of my ancestors' lives, and in writing...I felt joy and strength and my continuity. I had that wonderful feeling that writers get sometimes...of being with a great many people, ancient spirits, all pleased to see me consulting and acknowledging them and eager to let me know through the joy of their presence that, indeed, I am not alone. (In Search 157)

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