

**Animals as Women's Perfect Familiars in Alice Walker's *The Temple of My Familiar*.****Zeyneb Benhenda**

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**Abstract:**

*The paper explores the nature of the relationship that exists between African-American women and animals in Alice Walker's *The Temple of My Familiar* while emphasizing how these women are awakened from their deep slumber. In other words, because of their consort with animals, these black women manage to awake from the long-established white-cultural hypnosis and to break free from the chains of silence and forgetfulness. In doing so, the female characters become able to reconstruct their identities as independent, powerful and free. Thereby, in *The Temple of My Familiar*, Alice Walker invites metaphorical animals to inhabit her text in order to vindicate the female characters and to re-instate their self-defined identities as powerful Goddesses. Hence, Walker digs deep in the memory of humanity to bring back the lost and the ostracized black matriarchal history to the surface of African-American people's consciousness.*

**Key Words:** *Familiars, Self-Definition, Matriarchal History, African-Goddess, Animality.*

**Introduction:**

Animals play a crucial role in all human cultures since pre-historic times. They first emerge in history as "messengers and promises" with magical functions either oracular or sacrificial (Berger, 1991, p. 4). This may be illustrated in religious books (Biblical books and Quran) or mythical ones (Roman and Greek Mythology). At that time, human-beings seem to have a closer relationship with animals as the latter have been regarded as nearly-divine. However, this relationship has been gradually contaminated and polluted with the growing industrialization and capitalism which rendered animals as mere resources for food, scientific experiments, and clothes. Thus, slowly and painfully, animals disappeared only to resurrect in the form of images, paintings, and toys. In other words, animals become a cultural construction. This paper investigates how animal imagery figures in human understanding of identity. More precisely, this paper explores how Alice Walker manipulates this kind of imagery to re-define the African-American woman's self as opposed to the prevailing stereotypes against her.

The "animal question" has been central to the Western thought and philosophy since the publication of Aristotle's *The Animal History* (350 BC) in which he establishes an intellectual

conceptualization of species hierarchy or what is later called the Great Chain of Being. By placing Animals in a lower rank than God and humans, Aristotle justifies human's dominion over the lower animals (pp. 5-7). However, the indivisible line between both categories has been established by René Descartes based on animal's lack of the faculty of mind and conscious thought. This philosophical debate has evolved over the years and emerged as a significant critical field with the publication of Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation* (1975) and Tom Regan's "The case for Animal Rights" (1983). However, both philosophers are more concerned with animal's rights of equal treatment and moral consideration. Over the recent years, the works of Jacques Derrida, Donna Haraway, Cary Wolf, Giorgio Agamben, and Steve Baker have brought increased attention to the cultural analysis of the representation of animals (Gerard, 2004, p. 136). In other words, these theorists focus more on deconstructing the indivisible line of demarcation between both categories and on investigating the significance of animals to issues like human subjectivity, difference and otherness.

Accordingly, animality emerges as a recurrent trope that African-American writers like Alice Walker and Zora Neale Hurston employ in relation to their characters' self-defined identities. For this purpose, they use physical animals, animalistic behaviors or animal traits to codify the subject of identity and to highlight their racial, gender and class oppression. Subsequently, they tend to project how the animal/women kinship also plays a significant role in the re-configuration of the latter's identity. Hence, reading Walker's *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989) in terms of animal imagery offers us with a meticulous understanding of how these authors project the social and religious confines which entrap the black women. Thereby, animal imagery is also used as a subversive strategy to show how these black women break free from these contextual confines by re-establishing their identities as powerful and independent subjects.

Henceforth, *The Temple of my Familiar* examines the nature of the bond between animals and black women. In other words, it examines the relationship between both species and how it led to the establishment of the black women as Goddesses of Africa and of all humanity. In a similar vein, the paper explores how the erasure of this connection affects black women's perception of their identities because "in consorting with man, as he had become, [black] woman was bound to lose her dignity, her integrity. It was a tragedy" (Walker, 2004, p. 371). Thus, the novel shows that when losing her bond with animals, the black woman was bound to lose her identity as a Goddess. The only way to re-establish this kind of identity is by re-remembering the lost matriarchal history that has been ostracized by the white man. So, the paper moves to investigate how Walker uses memory as a strategy of recollection in order to bring back the disremembered matriarchal history and place it within the mainstream culture.

### ***The Temple of My Familiar* as a dream within a dream novel:**

Because of its complex and intertextual form, *The Temple of My Familiar* lends itself to different readings and a variety of interpretations. For instance, Both Robert McKay (2001) and Amanda

Greenwood (2000) contend that in the novel Walker celebrates closeness to animals either to bridge the gap between both categories or to transcend the stereotypical representation of women and people of color. In contrast, this paper shows that Walker brings ‘Animals’ and ‘Human’ together to highlight the history of black women’s glory and oppression which is a history that has been entirely ostracized by the white man. Indeed, bringing back this history through Miss Lizzie’s narration would allow the black women to regain and to re-instate their self-defined identities.

Furthermore, Bonnie Braendlin (1996) reads the novel as a pastiche continually negotiating and revising the genres of the Bildungsroman (p. 50) and the novel of Awakening. Such negotiations are not always satirical but are for the purpose of perpetuating the genre with variation. Braendlin also interprets the novel as “eyewitness accounts of the deliberate and relentless enslavement and extermination of people of color” (p. 54). Therefore, the plot of this novel is interminably interrupted by these accounts which are nearly and sometimes deliberately forgotten (ibid). Agreeably, the novel can be considered as a pastiche that is repeatedly revising and emphasizing other literary genres and works either to parody or to perpetuate that particular genre or piece of writing. However, in this paper, *The Temple of My Familiar* is considered more as a plotless novel because it resists falling within any particular time-frame. The narrative keeps meandering, ceaselessly, in time and space which makes it difficult for the reader to recognize its main setting. The whole narrative can be viewed as a dream within a dream, an inward journey toward the African-American collective unconscious.

### **The black woman as the African goddess: A nostalgic journey toward the past.**

Accordingly, *The Temple of My Familiar* is a multilayered and a poly-vocal novel that acts as a vibrant cultural catalog exposing the rich cultures of the African Diaspora in America, Europe, and Africa. It is fragmented in both form and content mainly because of the dreams and memories that continually interrupt the linear narrative. Carl Gustav Jung (1972) describes any great work of art as a dream which allows imagery to flow spontaneously and naturally similarly to the way nature allows plants to grow. He also contends that using dream-memories within the text enables its author to penetrate “the matrix of life” of all humans. Hence, the author allows the individual characters to communicate their feelings and their stories to the whole mankind (p. 187). Seen from this perspective, using dream-memories enables Walker to draw upon “the healing and redeeming forces of the collective unconscious” that she transmits to all African-Americans through Lizzie’s re-remembering (ibid). Thus, the whole novel is structured as a dream-memory in which different characters enter in a dialogic re-rememberings of their past. Surprisingly, the character’s re-memories “touch upon each other’s life in many ways” that they, along with the readers, “can’t begin to imagine” (Walker, 2004, p. 354).

In fact, the novel focalizes the voice of Miss Lizzie Lyles who has been incarnated for hundreds of years into male and female, black and white, and even into a lion. However, most of her

incarnated souls were black women, something that makes her very proud. Lizzie feels the need to re-tell her past lives to Suwelo, a professor of American history, to bring back an entire matriarchal history and discourse that has been silenced by the male-authored written-history. This is a time when animals and women lived together as companions and perfect familiars. By telling him about her past lives, she not only resurrects the repressed African history but also shakes the African-American intellectuals to sweep the dust of forgetfulness covering their hearts and blinding their brains. These intellectuals are possessed by the white supremacist ideologies especially those of history. Like Suwelo, these intellectuals desire the American history to be “the center of everyone’s attention” (p. 180). This history represents “what a few white men wanted, thought, and did” (ibid).

Interestingly, the name Lizzie carries three different connotations which offer us with a clue to understand some of the thematic concerns of *The Temple of My Familiar*. First, the name means “the one who remembers everything” (p. 52). This definition suggests that Lizzie is the African Goddess who embodies within her memory the collective unconscious of all African-Americans. According to Jung (1972), the collective unconscious is “a certain psychic disposition shaped by the force of heredity” and from which consciousness develops (p. 183). In other words, the collective unconscious has never been a part of human consciousness or owes its existence to the personal experience; rather it exclusively owes its existence to heredity. In “The Significance of Constitution and Heredity in Psychology,” Jung (1969) also adds that our dreams, fantasies, and myths comprise primordial images and archetypes which together “belong to the basic stock of the unconscious psyche and cannot be explained as personal acquisitions. Together, they make up that psychic stratum which has been called the collective unconscious” (p.112). Accordingly, acting as the collective unconscious of all African-Americans, Lizzie becomes the bearer of a message to the coming generations of men. Consequently, the different lives that Lizzie experiences act as the archetypal ancestral figures since the “collective unconscious comprises in itself the psychic life of our ancestors right back to the earliest beginnings” (ibid). Elsewhere, Jung explains that these archetypal ancestors are not only remnants “of human modes of functioning, but also the residues of functions from [our] animal ancestry, whose duration in time was infinitely greater than the relatively brief epoch of specifically human existence” (2014, p. 98). This suggests that animals’ experience belong to our collective unconscious since they exist in this world long before humans.

Subsequently, Miss Lizzie can be seen as a female ancestral Goddess, the mother of all African women. Indeed, she becomes the Medusa. Therefore, Walker re-vision the mythical image of the Medusa by making her “the mother of Africa” whose wings are “the wings of Egypt” and whose head is “the head of Africa” (2004, p. 271). Contrary to the original myth, the Medusa is presented in the text as “an angel” and “the mother of Christian angels” who is known in Africa as “the Great Mother, Creator of All” (p. 269). Accordingly, Anne Nzingha accuses the white culture of presenting the snake-like locks of Medusa’s hair as real demonic snakes, though in

Africa, snakes “are the symbol of fertility and wisdom” (ibid). Similarly, Walker’s description of Miss Lizzie’s hair as abundant and glorious which “grew out in all directions from her skull. . . [and] gave her the curious look some ancient creature, which, even at rest, is about to *spring*” (emphasis added, 52) can be associated with Medusa’s serpentine hair as well. This image may also suggest that Miss Lizzie stands for the Sphinx which is also associated with the image of the Medusa. Henceforth, it foreshadows the fact that African-American women are about to spring from their deep slumber.

Second, Oxford’s *A Dictionary of First Names* (2006) defines the name Lizzie as a pet name for the name Elizabeth. The name is mostly associated with Queen Elizabeth I and Elizabeth II. However, etymologically, it means “God in my Oath” (p. 87). This suggests that Walker chooses this particular name to highlight the inherent royalty and divinity of the character. Third, the name bears a resemblance to the name of the lizard from “Lizzie The Lizard,” a television show airing at the time the novel is published (1989-1991), which probably inspired Walker. In the novel, the lizard is portrayed as the animal who teaches the Africans to worship the black mother. These African mother-worshippers are “devoted chameleons” who are “hard to break because they were devoted to the Goddess” (Walker, 2004, p. 64). Consequently, both on the denotative and the connotative level, Lizzie is an African Goddess whose love and worship is transmitted and taught by the lizards. In other words, animals play a crucial role in crowning the black women as goddesses of Africa and of all humanity. Henceforth, by bringing back the time when black women and animals were perfect familiars into African-American history, Walker manages to restore the identity of these women as free, independent and authentic Goddesses. In other words, she re-visions and subverts the white mainstream culture to re-inscribe black women’s glorious history and authentic selves.

Accordingly, by making Lizzie the archetypal ancestral goddess, Walker “re-vision(s) history” which is the act of “looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering a text from a new critical direction” (Rich, 1972, p. 18). In fact, in “When We Dead Awaken,” Adrienne Rich invites women-writers to look back to search for their selves as well as their identities. This act of looking back gives women a clue of how they have been trapped by language allowing them to see with a fresh eye the pathway to their freedom (p. 18). Subsequently, it allows them to regain their identity as Goddesses and as strong women.

Therefore, to recollect this lost self, Miss Lizzie undergoes a “nostalgic journey” toward self-discovery (Fleski, 1989, p. 142). Rita Fleski defines this journey as “an abrupt and visionary apprehension of underlying unity which leads to an overcoming of ironic and alienated self-consciousness” (ibid). In this context, the journey of Miss Lizzie offers a “visionary apprehension” of how the co-habitation between black women and animals creates a perfect balance in the former’s identity. Being with animals allow black women to be physically and emotionally independent from men. Fleski also explains that the female identity in quest is not something to be “acquired”; rather it is something to be “recovered” (ibid). For this reason,

Lizzie goes back to the beginning of time to revive the Great Mother, the Sphinx and the Medusa in the souls of all black women. Thereby, she conjures up the authentic selves of black women to awaken from their deep slumber. However, Lizzie needs a mediator whom she can trust with the repository of her past lives. She chooses Suwelo, an African-American man, to transmit her experience to all African-Americans. Undeniably, his vocation as an academic teacher of American history allows him to fill in the gaps within the white hegemonic history. Lizzie begins her narration by exposing the degraded and the dehumanized status of black women after they have been abandoned by animals. Then, she moves to remember the times when these women are empowered mainly because of their consort with their animal familiars. Indeed, Miss Lizzie also clarifies the reasons why animals abandon black women.

However, this paper starts with highlighting black women's consort with animals in order to emphasize the crucial role that the latter play in the construction of black women's identities. Initially, in one of Lizzie's dream-memories about the cousins, she explains that they act as the teachers of black women. But, Lizzie does not explicitly reveal their identity. She only describes them as "big as we were small- and black and hairy, with big teeth, flat black faces, and piercingly intelligent and gentle eyes" (Walker, 2004, p. 84). Thereby, these cousins represent the Gorillas that used to co-live with black women and their children. They live in different neighboring trees from those of women keeping a ritual of visiting each other frequently. Unlike Lizzie's last painting in which she depicts the tree of life, living in different trees clearly undermines Darwin's theory of evolution. Even Lizzie's tree of life does not emphasize the biological continuity between species; rather it accentuates the spiritual connectedness between all creators on earth.

Having the cousins as her teachers, Lizzie learns how to love her family and how to recover her identity as a mother. Unlike humans, these Gorillas cherish family life. They are unable to comprehend the separateness that took hold in human's way of life. According to Lizzie, the main concern of these animals is to protect and care for their children. While on the neighboring trees, men and women prefer to live in total separation leaving the care of children to the latter. Undeniably, Lizzie is fascinated with how the cousins "lived and breathed as a family, then as a clan, then as a forest and so on" (p. 86). Thus, when she becomes a mother, Lizzie refuses to let go of her child believing that caring for him is the main essence of her existence. Therefore, she chooses to be with the cousins and gradually transmit their teachings to her coming descendants.

Similarly, Kelly Oliver contends in *Animal Lessons* that the right question to be asked is how we do we learn from animals. In other words, instead of inquiring whether animals are subjects or machines, we should investigate the importance of what they teach us (Oliver, 2009, p. 13). Indeed, the constitution of our humanity is dependent on animal pedagogy. In other words, animals metaphorically and literally fortify and sustain humankind (p. 2). In the novel, Walker illustrates in this dream-memory that Lizzie recovers her sense of motherhood as a result of her communion with animals. She gradually constructs her identity as a mother when she assimilates

the gorilla's way of family life. However, Oliver also explains that humans disavow this indebtedness by making animals look dependent on a man (p. 13). This can be explained with how the tribe of man, "being Jealous" of the relationship that Lizzie and other black women have with the Gorillas (Walker, 2004, p. 87), they "learned to build weapons, spears, and poisoned tips and blow guns and sting shots" (ibid). These aggressive tools serve as a substitution for their lack and as a manifestation of their violent behavior.

In another dream-memory, Lizzie goes back to the beginning of time when men and women still live in separation. In this dream-memory, Lizzie explains how only black women enjoy the luxury of animal companionship. These familiars grant black women protection, power, and dignity. Thereby, the black women become emotionally and economically independent from men. This memory can be synchronized with that of Zede in which the latter explains how black women were the first beings to exist along with the Toucan. According to Zede, while men are still infatuated with their relative newness, black women "were already into adornment. They were already into high fashion!" using all kind of ornaments, flowers, and feathers (49). At that time, men "both worshiped and feared the women, they kept their distance from them but spied at them when they could" (50). Indeed, even in Lizzie's memory black women are "bowed down to, worshiped, feared, spoiled" (ibid).

Moreover, Alice Walker injects a re-vision of the biblical story within this dream-memory by re-creating the biblical scene in the Garden of Eden. In fact, upon realizing his difference, Lizzie who stands for Adam gets furious on his companion, Eve, causing her familiar snake to be frustrated. Walker's version of the biblical story puts the blame on the white man. The snake in this story is only trying to protect her master when she is threatened by Lizzie. Interestingly, after murdering Ba, Lizzie goes on self-exile in search of his own kind. Subsequently, to make up for his own lack and loneliness, the white man tames the barbarous dog to keep him company. Unlike other animals, only barbarous dogs cannot act as women's familiars mainly because they are "opportunistic little creatures and basically lazy, sorely lacking integrity and self-respect" (p. 361).

However, the barbarous dog differs substantively from Celie's dog, Creighton. The latter is presented as a faithful and a loyal creature that manifests absolute slavery. The dog has "the most wounded, pained, saddened, completely expressive eyes" (p. 313). This description is similar to Blue's expression which, again, suggests that animals have feelings. The dog never bites back his master Celie until Shug teaches him how to appreciate his own being as a dog. Deductively, Creighton's experience is similar to those of slaves and black women. Both are obliged to act as slaves despite the mean, brutal treatment of their masters toward them. They can never bite back until they learn the value of themselves as dogs and as women.

On the other hand, the barbarous dog in the text refers to the wolf. In the first volume of *The Beast and the Sovereign*, Jack Derrida studies the behavior and the status of the wolf tracing an

analogy with *The Wolf and the Lamb*. He argues that the wolf is a cruel and a vengeful creature “full of rage”, “ready to launch punitive, even preventive or vengeful expeditions” (Derrida, 2009, p. 209). The wolf is also a deceptive creature whose strongest feature is the love of the other. Indeed, “nothing is stronger than love save death” (p. 210). In the quotation, Derrida suggests that the wolf deceives the lamb, in this context the woman and other animals, by making it believe in its love. Alice Walker illustrates this claim by making black women fall in the white man’s trap as the latter deceives them with his false claim of love and protection. Clearly, the lions and other familiars are well aware of the trap that the white man and his barbarous dog are setting for the black women. However, they kept their distance to preserve their dignity.

Therefore, in another dream-memory, Lizzie resurrects as a lion to explain how the separation between animals and women cause the latter to lose their status as glorious Goddesses. Lizzie the lion also illustrates the reasons for such separation putting the blame not only on men but mainly on black women themselves. To start with, we need first to investigate Walker’s particular choice of the lion to be the bearer of animal voice. In fact, Derrida argues in his eight sessions of *The Beast and the Sovereign* that the lion and the wolf both stand for sovereignty and majesty. The only difference between the two is that the lion can act both as a king and as a subject (p. 214). In other words, the lion has the same rights as his subjects. Derrida explains that as a king, the lion does not issue deceptive and punitive laws. Rather, he posits “the right of the strongest” which in all cases privileges him most. Derrida also argues that the lion does not tempt his subject with fake love, but rather by inspiring fear and threat. This means that the lion, as Derrida puts it, relies on its own valiance and “courage of absolute performative” (ibid). Therefore, Walker chooses the lion to be the bearer of animal voice because of its sovereignty, courage, and valiance. However, she puts much emphasis on the lion’s dignity and loyalty.

Accordingly, Walker gives voice to the lion to speak of the time when the tribes of women and men merged together. This merger causes a great change in the structure of life resulting in chaos and trauma for the black women and animals alike (Walker, 2004, p. 370). Indeed, by overthrowing the black women from their throne, the white man posits himself as the only sovereign. He places himself above the law and forever subjugates the black women. The latter are enslaved and are “left with just man, screaming for his dinner and forever murdering her friends, and with man’s “best friend”, “the pet” familiar, the fake familiar, his dog” (ibid). Subsequently, the black women become “emotionally dependent on the individual man by whom man’s law now decreed they must have all their children, lost their wildness, that quality of homey ease on the earth that they shared with the rest of animals” (p. 369). Hence, wildness is a positive quality that African-American women attribute to themselves against the claims of savagery and bestiality. This means that Alice Walker, Toni Morrison among other black feminists chose the wild animals in particular to rebel against the white man’s attempt to domesticate them. For instance, in addition to Walker’s lion, Morrison chooses to attribute the

quality of a panther to her main character in the case of *God Help the Child* (2015) or the feral cat in the case of *Beloved* (1987).

Furthermore, Miss Lizzie explains that she and other animals do not feel guilty for leaving the black women alone. It is their nature as lions to live in serenity, peace, and harmony instead of the evilness, anger, and noise which the white man usually initiates. The lions refuse to share black woman's destiny of living without "dignity" and "integrity" or in Lizzie's words "[to live in] eternal strife" (p. 370). This separation causes animals to forget women's language which means two main things. First, black women have their own language, and hence, philosophical stances and viewpoints, as opposed to the western thought which denies them so. In particular, it goes against Lacan's argument that implies women's failure to enter the symbolic stage denying her of full subjectivity (Lacan, 1991, pp. 174-177). Second, Walker's argument emphasizes her claim that animals have their own language. They only speak with a different construction from that of humans. Obviously, only black women are capable of understanding such language because of their intimate association with animals. However, this long separation causes them to forget each other's language in the same way Walker forgot how to communicate with the neighboring horse, Blue.

Moreover, Lizzie mentions two main reasons to justify why animals relinquished their companionship to the black women. First, she puts the blame on the white man's jealousy from animals' consort with the black women. As mentioned earlier, such consort grants women superior status and dignity, something the white man cannot tolerate. Second, Lizzie holds responsible the black women themselves for being emotionally dependent on the individual man. As Derrida argues, but in a different context, the white man fools them with his fake love to make them fall into his trap. Falling into his trap, black women are doomed to eternal subjugation and slavery. This illustrates Derrida's association of the wolf with man and sovereignty. In addition, Lizzie also accuses the black women of betrayal. Undeniably, the latter sacrifice their sacred companionship with animals to gain human kinship. In *Animal Lessons*, Oliver argues that the kinship with animals is usually sacrificed for the sake of human kinship (2009, p. 16). In other words, the fraternity is possible between man and woman only when proper kinship between animals and women is discarded. Thus, to form a family of man, the possibility of any animal family should be excluded (ibid).

This exclusion is well illustrated in another dream-memory in which Lizzie re-incarnates as an ancient African Goddess. The latter has a chimerical familiar that is "part bird. . . part fish. . . part reptile" (2004, p. 118). Like Derrida's word "animot", the familiar is a single animal which contains within it a plurality of species representing air, water, and earth. This connotes the fact that all species of animals can act as women's best familiars except for the barbarous dog. In her attempt to establish kinship with white men, Lizzie imprisons her familiar in a metal washtub. Thus, out of human pride, she sacrifices her familiar's freedom in order to enjoy the white man's companionship. However, despite its fragile body, the chimerical animal manages to escape

away using its “wings [that] it had never used before” (ibid). Apparently, using its wings for the first time means that the animal never thought of freedom because it prefers women’s companionship. Indeed, Walker describes the familiar’s escape as a huge loss for the Goddess who is now left all alone with the white man. Walker also attributes the reasons for such desertion to black women’s thoughtlessness, pride, and distraction. In addition, the familiar stands for all the animals that inhabit the text of *The Temple of My Familiar* (the peacocks, the fish, the snake and the lizards). Therefore, this dream-memory can be considered as the cornerstone that weaves all the dream-memories together and the pillar on which all the narrative is built.

Subsequently, the novel shows that after they have been abandoned by animals, black women are dethroned systematically. First, they have been taken away from their African Kingdom and brutally sold into slavery. These women are animalized and made inferior by being deprived of their hair and clothes. The former represents their glory while the latter obviously stands as a sign of their humanity. Indeed, clothes are important for the African-American people for they represent a crucial sign of their humanity and subjectivity. In addition, during the time of slavery, the body of the Goddess has been ceaselessly violated and colonized. The latter is continuously raped and forcefully impregnated by the white man. These women are also packed as sardines in the ships and sold as cattle or cheap merchandise for cheap things like those “for which there was no apparent use” like “loud colored clothes, bright tin washbasins. . . [and] knickknacks” (2004, p. 61). Thus, the black women have not only been animalized and violated but they are also thingified. In addition, those who have managed to escape slavery are forcefully abducted to be part of what is called “Harem”. The latter is a refined term which stands as a substitution for prostitution.

Furthermore, those who are fortunate enough to keep their relationship with animals are haunted and persecuted as witches. In one of her past lives, Lizzie re-incarnates as “one of those ‘pagan’ heretics [the white man] burned at the stake” (p. 197). This dream-memory shows Walker’s distrust of the official and the written history. Indeed, she deliberately falsifies or re-writes some of the details revolving around these events to problematize their authenticity and subjectivity. Likewise, Miss Lizzie claims that during the witch-hunt (1450-1750), the witches are not burned at stake because of practicing witchcraft (p. 197). Rather, their germane crime is consorting with animals. These women are originally Africans who “by hook and by crook, and with a strong memory of the African Eden in [their], batteries kept alive some feelings for the other animals” (p. 200). At that time, the inquisitors, or “the devils” make it seem “righteous to kill, as brutally as possible, without any feeling but lustful self-justification, any animal or dark creature that one saw” (pp. 200-201). Actually, Miss Lizzie believes that men are simply jealous of this special relationship that “deeply satisf[ies] women” (p. 201).

**Conjuring the ghosts of the past: Memory as a strategy of recollection.**

Apparently, the matriarchal history that Lizzie recalls is not only ignored but entirely ostracized by the mainstream culture. Hence, Suwelo is unable to relate these memories to the American history he has been teaching for a long time. Such deliberate exclusion leaves the African-Americans, particularly women, with a psychological, a spiritual, and a cultural dislocation. Thus, they become culturally displaced, fragmented, and cut off from their roots and heritage which results in their alienated and disrupted identities. Accordingly, African-American writers feel the urge and the urgency to re-situate and re-integrate their presence and their language in the mainstream white-American culture (Dixon, 1994, p. 20). In other words, they feel the need to establish a “cultural memory . . . that is not dependent on written analysis or criticism” (p. 18). To achieve these ends, Melvin Dixon suggests that these writers develop new “strategies of recollection” in order to “transmit an Afrocentric wholeness” (p. 19). Dixon adds that one of the main strategies of recollection for African-Americans is “memory” (ibid).

Likewise, in *Living by the Word*, Alice Walker stresses the need to conjure the souls of their dead ancestors because African-Americans have become “spiritually thin, a mere shadow of who [they] were on the earth” (Walker, 2005, p. 62). These ghosts of the past come down to them as “the vibrations of souls [they] can know only through the sound and structure, the idiosyncrasies of speech” (p. 63). In the novel, she evokes the dead African ancestors, a benign presence, to urge the sleep-walkers to awaken. In other words, she brings back the memory of joy and suffering that black women experienced in the past to re-situate their experience within the mainstream history. Doing so will help the African-American women’s inhibited soul of African Goddess to resurrect. That is why, Walker warns African-American women, through Lizzie’s narration, to work against the “blockage between [themselves] and others”, whether dead or alive, because the walls of pain will remain and “grow moss. They [become] difficult barriers to cross, to get to others, to get to closed down parts of [themselves]” (p. 358). Thereby, Walker attempts to dig deep into the memory of humanity, going back to the beginning of times to re-vision the white culture in order to bring back to life a disremembered history. It is a history where black women were independent, powerful and free mainly because of their ability to consort with animals. The latter, has long been perfect familiars and protectors of women kind and whose main vocation was to keep women at peace and as Goddesses.

### **Conclusion:**

In conclusion, Alice Walker makes use of animals to both vindicate and to redeem the black female subject. She calls for metaphorical animals to inhabit her text in order to show how they break free from the contextual confines of western philosophy. Indeed, all the philosophers in the western philosophical tradition are concerned with how humans are defined by being placed in opposition to animals. These philosophers put the latter in the service of their theories about human language, society, desires, and actions. In other words, they tend to “dissect, probe, exploit, and domesticate animals to shore up the notions of human and humanity” (Oliver, 2009, p. 12). Accordingly, Walker’s animals make their way through the *Temple of My Familiar* in

order to cross “fences erected to keep them out” (ibid). Hence, she de-thingifies these animals by making them subjects capable of exhibiting free will, recollection, reason, and most importantly imagination. Also, giving voice to her animals allow Walker to recollect a cultural memory that has been long-ignored and ostracized. Thereby, by regaining this cultural memory, the African-American women recover their sense of themselves as powerful and independent subjects.

To achieve these ends, Walker uses memory as a subversive strategy to recollect the long-ignored history where black women were Goddesses of Africa. These women were powerful only because of their consort with animals (all kind of animals except for the barbarous dog). Indeed, when black women had a strong kinship with animals, they were emotionally and economically independent from men. However, out of human pride and thoughtlessness, they relinquished this association to establish kinship with the white man. Such new association systematically dethrones black women and it eventually results in centuries of oppression, enslavement, and dehumanization. Subsequently, Alice Walker makes Lizzie, particularly the lion, remember and re-imagine the past as a way to recover the lost self and identity of the African-American women. This can be done only by making Lizzie the collective unconscious of all African-American women. In other words, unlike in the novels dealt with in the previous chapter, *The Temple of My Familiar* is more concerned with a cultural identity that belongs not only to Lizzie but to all black women.

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