

## Once Upon a Time: The Influence of Folktales and Legends in the Novels of Alice Walker

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### Abstract

The African legends and folktales provide raw material for Walker's narratives. In her fictional narratives, we find a judicious intermingling of legends and folktales. Walker's narratives reflect the complex experiences of Black women rooted as they are in culture and tradition. Walker assumes the role of a spokesperson and narrates their stories. Walker articulates the history of her people so that posterity might be informed of the struggles, oppressions and subjugations their forefathers and foremothers had to endure.

**Keywords:** African legends, folktales, African Americans

Folktales and legends play a significant role in the lives of the Afro-Americans. The influence of folktales is evident in the works of many Afro-American writers. The sway of oral tradition is clearly manifested in the way they treat the themes of their novels and in their approach to character delineation. It was Ralph Ellison who pronounced the importance of folklore in the lives of Afro-Americans:

For us (Black Americans) the question should be, what are the specific forms of that humanity and what in our background is worth preserving or abandoning. The clue to this can be found in folklore, which offers the first drawings of any group's character. It preserves mainly those situations which have repeated themselves again and again in the history of any given group. It describes those rites, manners and customs and so forth which insure the good life or destroy it; and it describes those

boundaries of feeling, thought and action which that particular group has found to be the limitation of the human condition. It projects this wisdom in symbols, which express the group's will to survive....These drawings may be crude that they are nonetheless profound that they represent the group's attempt to humanize the world. It's no accident that great literature, the product of individual artists, is erected upon this humble base.  
(172)

When the African Americans were carried off to far lands as slaves, the only possession they could take with them was their folklore. The slaves who were forcefully hauled to an alien land by the White masters were given stern instructions not to speak their native language or follow their native religious practices. Corporal punishments were given to those who tried to communicate with their friends or relatives in their native language. They, in their loneliness and isolation found solace in the folktales passed on to them by their forefathers, and made it a point to pass them on to younger generation. The folktales thus became a unifying element for the slaves. The younger generation wholeheartedly preserved these folktales which bore the stamp of their past and tradition.

*The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* defines a folktale as “a story passed on by word of mouth rather than by writing and thus partly modified by successive re- tellings before being written down or recorded” (132). According to *The Oxford Dictionary of English Folklore*, all prose narratives which are orally transmitted and that pursue the traditional story-lines come under the term, folktale. Thus fairytales, legends, fables, adventure stories, humorous anecdotes come under the purview of folktales (Simpson, Jacqueline 132).

An important landmark in the history of folktales is Joel Chandler Harris' work, *Uncle Remus: His Songs and Sayings* in 1880. His work is credited with having chronicled all the important folktales of oral literature of the Blacks. These folktales are indeed an analysis of the psychology of the Negro and often satirize the follies and foibles of humans. The story of Brer Rabbit, Brer Fox and Tar Baby, one of the most popular animal trickster tales, gives a moral that strength can be outwitted with wisdom. Brer Fox attempts to trap Brer Rabbit by placing Tar Baby on its way. Curious Brer Rabbit tries to draw attention by kicking and hitting the tar baby. Finally Rabbit who gets stuck in tar realizes this might be the trick of Brer Fox. Thinking that Fox would have been hiding

somewhere and would do exactly against his wish, Brer Rabbit announces that he fears being thrown into a briar patch which would be the worst form of death. Brer Rabbit is thrown into the briar patch from where Rabbit eventually escapes.

The theme of the strong trying to entrap the powerless can be called the leitmotif in these folktales. In another tale, Fox who manages to get inside pig's house during a storm comfortably forgets the compassionate nature of the host, and devices plans to kill the pig and sings while looking at the pot of peas boiling:

“Fox and peas are very good  
But pig and peas are better “(Lewin, Lawrence 107)

The pig, though afraid at heart regains self-composure and uses its wit to trap the fox. Making the fox believe that a pack of hounds is approaching fast, the pig hides the fox inside a barrel and cunningly pours hot peas into it blistering the wicked fox to death and ultimately sings:

“Pigs and peas are good

But fox and peas are better.” (Lewin, Lawrence 107)

The animal trickster tales like that of Brer Rabbit reflect the prowess of the African American slaves who resisted the malice of the White masters with their wit and intelligence. It may be allegorical of the Whites' inhuman treatment meted out to the helpless slaves and their ultimate craving for survival.

The folktale of Tar Baby and Brer Rabbit has served as a hinge in many works of African American writers. Toni Morrison's novel, *Tar Baby* effectively uses the folklore where Son is the Brer Rabbit and Jadine, the Tar Baby. Having escaped from a ship, Son hides in Valerin's house, Larbe de la Croix and Jadine, a posh model and actress falls in love with him.

The origin of the Brer Rabbit in the Uncle Remus stories may be traced back to the trickster hare, Kadimba which is a popular figure among the Bantu speaking people of West Africa. Similar trickster figures, the Anansi spider of the Asanthi tribes and the Ijapa tortoise of the Yoruba folktales are popular figures in the folktales of West Africa. After the Civil War, the character Brer Rabbit came to be known as John, the slave who with his intelligence wins over

his master, Old Massa and runs off to freedom.

Zora Neale Hurston, the literary foremother of Alice Walker is credited with collecting a number of Black American folktales which might have disappeared. As an ethnographer, Zora worked with the famous anthropologist, Frances Boas and her trip to Eatonville to collect folktales was a part of her fellowship programme. In the Introduction of *Mules and Men*, Hurston employs the imagery of a tight chemise while referring to the folktales. To her, folktales were an inevitable part of her childhood and it was only when she left her native land for pursuing studies she realized the impact of folktales in her lives. To quote her own words, "...But it was fitting like a tight chemise. I couldn't see it for wearing it. It was only when I was off in college, away from my native surroundings that I could see like somebody else and stand off and look at my garment" (*Mules and Men* 2). It was at that stage Zora apprehended it was her moral obligation to collect the folktales of her culture and safeguard it for posterity. Zora herself acknowledges in the Introduction of her folk tale collection, *Mules and Men* that Black people will not let the Whites intrude into the soul of their culture. The Black people are usually elusive and they trick other people who come with the aim of delving into their culture with a "feather bed resistance" (*Mules and Men* 3) so that the investigator will not come out of the quandary. In *Mules and Men* Zora is depicted in her own self as one who goes back to Eatonville in the South to collect the folktales. When she discloses her intention of collecting folktales, her friend exclaims about the folktales as "the big old lies we tell when we're jus' sittin' around here on the store porch doin nothing" (*Mules and Men* 8). Her friends accuse her of lying when she pronounces her objective is to collect folktales. Zora tutors them about the importance of their folktales and the need to preserve them before it fades into oblivion. A conversational type of narration is adopted in *Mules and Men*. Different folktales are being narrated amidst the conversation among the friends.

Tales of John, the faithful slave and his master, Old Massa are narrated in the first chapter of *Mules and Men*. These stories are analogous to the Brer Rabbit stories and the Anansi stories where the weak character outwits the strong character. In the story of "John and the Frog", Old Massa asks John to bring a pitcher full of cold water from the spring in one night. John sees a frog in the spring and comes home yelling to his master that he has seen a booger in the spring. It is actually a trick of John not to make him go in the night so as to fetch water. When Old Massa asks him to describe what he has seen, John answers

that it had eyes similar to balls of fire and “when he was standin’ up he was sittin’ down and when he moved, he moved by jerks and had most no tail”(10). The ingrained humour lies in the description of booger by John and his deployment of intelligence as to outsmart his master. Most of the stories provide an evaluation of the power relations between the strong and the weak. These tales depict the binaries- the strong and the weak, freedom and slavery, intelligence and foolishness.

In West African folktales, Anansi, the trickster spider plays an important role. Anansi is the son of the sky god of African Mythology, Nyame and Asase Ya, the goddess of Earth and fertility. It is believed that Nyame was exasperated by Anansi’s mischief that he turned his son to be spider-man. From then, he had to use various tricks to survive on earth.

W. H. Barker and Cecelia Sinclair, in the anthology *West African Folktales*, narrates an interesting story of how the Anansi tales became popular. According to the story, Anansi, went to chief of gods, Nyankupon and submitted a request before him that in the future people should tell stories of Anansi and not about Nyankupon. Anansi’s request was agreed on the condition that he should bring three things to Nyankupon. The first one was “a jar full of live bees, the second a boa-constrictor and the third, a tiger” (1). Nyankupon never thought a puny spider could accomplish the tasks put forward by him.

Anansi went to the beehive with an earthen vessel and started muttering himself the words, “No, they will not be able”, “Yes, they will be able” until the bees came to Anansi and enquired about the matter. Clever Anansi told the bees that he had a dispute with Nyankupon who told that bees could not enter inside the jar, while Anansi told they could. As the bees flew inside the jar so as to prove their ability, Anansi sealed the jar quickly and sent them to Nyankupon.

Anansi, on the next day, took a long stick with him and went to the place where a boa-constrictor lived. There, he started mumbling himself the words “Yes, he will be as long as this stick”, “No, he will not be as long as this stick” until boa-constrictor came and probed the matter. Anansi told him about the quarrel he had with Nyankupon’s people who claim that the boa-constrictor is not as long as a stick. The boa-constrictor, unaware of Anansi’s guile stretched out on the stick for Anansi to measure. Anansi tied him onto the stick and sent him to Nyankupon.

Anansi, having accomplished his two tasks, got ready for his final and most difficult task. He had devised a master plan for trapping the mighty tiger. Anansi sewed up his eyes with a needle and a thread and went to tiger's den shouting and singing at the top of his voice. When the tiger asked for the reason for his singing and shouting, Anansi replied since his eyes were sewn up he could see fantastic things of which he must sing. Believing Anansi's words, Tiger that was excited to see the astonishing things asked Anansi to sew up his eyes. Anansi sewed up Tiger's eyes and led him to Nyankupon's place. The guile of Anansi impressed Nyankupon and he gave sanction that in the future all tales will be called Anansi tales. With his intelligence and wit, Anansi could outsmart creatures who were physically stronger and mightier. (3).

In many of the Anansi tales, the theme of deception is fore grounded. Deception can be used to fulfill one's greedy requirements without causing much trouble to others as in the case of harmless tricks. It can also result in annihilation, when used with a destructive mentality. There are many instances of deception in Alice Walker's novels. The theme of deception, being a universal theme had its manifestations in different genres of literature. In Walker's first novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, we find the theme of deception recurring in various forms and through various persons. We find Grange Copeland deceiving his family by leading a promiscuous life with Josie and ignoring all his duties and responsibilities towards his family. The main reason behind his promiscuity is his inferiority as he confronts his White master, Mr. Shipley. Copeland's confidence shrinks at the sight of Mr. Shipley and he tries to surmount his feeling of inferiority through battering his wife, and neglecting his son, Brownfield. The cyclical pattern of harassment continues in Grange's family and this prompts Margaret to deceive her husband. When Margaret finds Copeland's harassment unbearable, Margaret starts deceiving Grange as well as her son by leading a licentious life. Deception makes her guilt-ridden and she commits suicide along with her bastard baby. Brownfield follows his father in abusing his wife and neglecting his children. He deceives his family by killing his own child who looks similar to Grange Copeland. Brownfield's character becomes demonic when he murders his innocent wife, Mem.

In *Meridian* also, the theme of deception is inherent. Meridian's mother, Mrs. Hill, because of her prudery never uses the word 'sex' in front of her children and never cautions her children against the treacherous pitfalls into

which they might fall as victims. Meridian, when she was only twelve becomes a prey to lascivious Dexter, who is the director of the local funeral parlour. Meridian finds herself deceived by her mother because of not cautioning her against the danger of sex. Meridian's sexual encounter with Eddie during her high school days is a sequel to her unawareness about the consequences of sex. Pregnancy becomes a shock to her and motherhood, an agonizing burden.

Meridian finds herself deceived when she realizes Truman is just another male bigot who draws a line of distinction between good girls and bad girls. Truman, an enthusiast who works for the well-being of black people turns out to be an oppressor of black women in his private life. Meridian feels dejected and deceived by the society when she discovers the Movement into which she has dedicated her life has ultimately failed.

Deception forms a main theme in *The Color Purple* where Celie was deceived by her step-father, Alfonso by raping her when she was fourteen years old. Threatening Celie that he will kill her mother, her step-father made her hush up the incident. Celie was again deceived by Alfonso by selling her children. Albert, Celie's husband deceives her by concealing the letters written by her sister Nettie and thus severing the sisterly bond between them.

In *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, Tashi feels deceived by her community by imparting in her the notion that genital mutilation should be done as it bears the stamp of her community. It is only later that Tashi realizes her own life and her sister Dura's life are torn apart because of genital mutilation .

In *The Temple of My Familiar*, Fanny experiences deception as Suwelo, her husband becomes involved in a sexual affair with her mother, Zede. As an academician, Fanny becomes more frustrated as she feels betrayed by the racial and sexual prejudice of her colleagues.

Senor Robinson, in *By the Light of My Father's Smile*, who is an anthropologist by profession, deceives the Mundo tribe and his own self by pretending as a preacher. The feeling of being betrayed mounts up in his mind, when he comes to know about the affair between his daughter, Magdalena and the Mundo boy, Manuelito which prompts him to beat her cruelly with the silver belt.

In Walker's novels we find a reworking of the folktales at times,

thematically and at times structurally. Julius Lester in his *Introduction to Black Folktales* remarks that it is through the folktales “we communicate about our fears, hopes, dreams and fantasies and seek understanding about the whys and hows of the world and ourselves” (*Introduction X*). The African belief stresses the importance of the influence of ancestors upon the lives of living members. But slavery destroyed their ties with the motherland and ancestors whom they believed to guide their lives. It was through the folklore, myths and legends that the Afro-Americans strived to reconnect themselves with their past. Walker, a staunch upholder of her ancestry strives to re-establish the connection through the retelling of the folklore, myths and legends.

Though legends and myths are terms used interchangeably, legend is a traditional story which has a historical base. While myths deal with supernatural subjects, right from the creation of the world, legends deal with stories after creation, which can be recorded in history. But, unlike history, legends are patterned in a peculiar manner in a predetermined style and characterization. Timothy Tangherlini defines legend as:

Legend, typically, is a short (mono-)episodic, traditional, highly ecotypified historicized narrative performed in a conversational mode, reflecting on a psychological level a symbolic representation of folk belief and collective experiences and serving as a reaffirmation of commonly held values of the group to whose tradition it belongs. (385)

Each tribal group in Africa is assigned with a legend of their first king or their chief with superhuman powers. For the Yoruba tribe, little is known about their first king, Oduduwa who is the founder of their race. The legend of Onaryan, son of Oduduwa is popular among the Yorubas. Onaryan, the great warrior king, retired to the forest when he was old. But whenever there was an attack from foreigners, he would emerge out of the forest to defend his subjects. One day, when the people were celebrating a festival, some men who were intoxicated called upon Onaryan and reported that they were being attacked. Onaryan arrived the place on horseback and started killing the people. The carnage continued until some people begged him to stop killing his own people. Onaryan was so shocked that he placed his staff on the ground, pledging never to fight again. Onaryan, his wife and the staff he had laid down were converted to stones ( Parrinder, Joeffrey 107).



Walker, in *Meridian* embeds three legends which were common in the South into the main narrative of *Meridian*. Through the images of Marilene O'Shay, Wild Child and Louvinie, Walker reasserts the fact that if a woman strays away from the traditional societal standards, she is either murdered by her partner as in the case of Marilene O'Shay, or murdered by society itself, as in the case of Wild Child. In Louvinie's case, her exceptional talent for story-telling is put to a premature end by chopping off her tongue.

The first legend introduced by Walker in *Meridian* is that of Marilene O'Shay who was killed by her husband for being promiscuous. Her husband, Henry exhibits his wife's mummified dead body and describes it as "One of twelve Human Wonders of the World: Dead for Twenty-five years, Preserved in Life-like Condition" (19). The banner also says she was an "Obedient Daughter", "Devoted Wife", "Adoring Mother", "Gone Wrong" (19). These words summarize her life-story - she was killed by her husband for being licentious. The White man's mind that made his wife's dead body, a mere object for monetary benefits is criticized here by Walker. The adjectives attributed to Marilene also designate the norms dictated by the patriarchal world and cautions that if she swerves from that she is doomed to death. It becomes a symbol for the White man's brutality and insensitivity towards women folk.

The second legend narrated by Walker is that of Wild Child. The Wild Child or "Wile Chile" a savage girl who revolts against all societal norms and conventions becomes symbol of rebelliousness. She shuns the polished society. Walker describes Wile Chile: "She would be seen scavenging for food in the garbage cans, and when called to, she would run" (35). *Meridian* makes a futile attempt to bring discipline in Wile Chile's life as *Meridian* draws her into the civilized world of Saxon College. Her indecent behaviour raises the brow of the house mother who bluntly expressed: "She must not stay here. Think of the influence. This is a school for young ladies" (37). Unable to conform to the rules and regulations of the society, she escapes from there, but is killed in an accident. Madhu Dubey examines that the "narrative of Wile Chile most dramatically illustrates the novel's refusal of a totalized collective vision. Wile Chile personifies the absolutely marginal other who cannot be contained by any collective construct" (139). The local legends of Marilene O'Shay and Wild Child may be described as a reaffirmation of the principle that when the values of the society are challenged, the society negates them in one form or another.

Another legend which Walker incorporates into the narrative of Meridian is that of Louvinie who was a slave in the Saxon plantation. She was adored by the children of the Saxon household because of her exceptional talent for telling “stories of blood-curdling horror” (43). The children followed her wherever she went and demanded more and more stories. Louvinie’s story-weaving is brought to a sudden end when a seven-year old boy of the Saxon family dies of a heart attack while hearing her “master-piece of fright” (43). Her master chopped off her tongue which “was like a thick pink rose petal, blood at the root”(44). Louvinie was troubled by the West African belief that without a tongue, the “singer in one’s soul was lost forever to grunt and snort through eternity like a pig”(44). Louvinie buried her tongue under the magnolia tree on the Saxon plantation. Later, the tree outgrew all other trees and people believed that it possessed some kind of magical power. The tree was supposed to possess the power to obscure vision and a slave hiding in its branches could not be seen. It was also believed that the tree had the capacity to talk and to compose music and so birds regarded it as sacred. Years later while Meridian was studying at the Saxon College, the sacred tree was called, Sojourner tree or the Music tree which symbolized the past for the Blacks.

Louvinie thus becomes symbolic of the premature death of Black woman’s creativity in the hands of Whites. The act of chopping down the tongue of a story-teller represents the iron-handedness of racism and sexism. Walker’s stories are a reconstruction of such lost and silent voices.

Brownfield in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* embodies the villainous nature of Black men, who are notorious for domestic violence and malevolence. Though the story begins through the perspective of young Brownfield, with whom the readers sympathize, Brownfield later develops into a devil-like character who kills his own son and wife.

The picture of Brownfield corresponds to that of Stagger Lee, Staglee or Stag O Lee, the vicious man in Black legends and Blues music who is callous enough to take away a person’s life. Julius Lester has described Stagger Lee as “undoubtedly and without question, the baddest nigger that ever lived. Stagolee was so bad that the flies wouldn’t even fly around his head in the summertime, and snow wouldn’t fall on his house in the winter” (113).

Though these were exaggerated descriptions of the cold-blooded

murderer, Stagglee, this name invokes fear and revulsion in the minds of Black Americans. Nevertheless there are different versions for the crime of Stagolee, it is believed that he had an argument with his friend over some political issue and his friend snatched Stagolee's hat. Stagolee, who became furious over this, shot his friend with his revolver and walked away with his hat. This historical incident became legendary in the South and many tales developed with wicked Stagolee as the protagonist. In one of the blues songs, Stagolee is described as "That bad man, O cruel Stack O' Lee" and even the police officer is too afraid to arrest Stagolee. "Police officer, how can it be? / You can 'rest everybody but cruel Stack O' Lee". (Kullen, Tony para 5)

Alice Walker might have had the picture of the vicious nigger, Stagolee a popular figure in the local black legends while portraying Brownfield who is wickedness incarnate. Walker weaves stories by using such legends and myths which form the warp and weft of her tales.

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