

**“A STANDING SELF AGAINST THE WORLD”:  
THE BLACK WOMANIST PERSPECTIVE IN  
ALICE WALKER’S FICTION**

**Abstract**

**By**

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## **Introduction:**

Alice Walker has contributed immensely to the vast body of African American writing, both as creative artist and critical writer. Six of her novels and two volumes of short stories have been taken as texts for the present study. Her fiction reveals a deeply personal exploration of the African American psyche, an exploration that is rooted in her "womanist" philosophy.

In the 1970s, there was an explosion of works by African American writers, as a result of the intersection of two movements, the Civil Rights Movement and the Women's Movement. Many African American women writers including June Jordan, Audrey Lorde and Alice Walker had been major actors in these movements. The year 1970 was critical for African American women writers. In that year, Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* was published, and its success signaled the existence of a market for works by African American women writers. That same year, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison and June Jordan published their first novels. Their novels shifted the focus from that of a "black monolithic community" to that of "specific black communities."<sup>1</sup> In so doing, they refused all-encompassing definitions of the African American community, of the African American man, or of the African American woman, and emphasized the concept of difference that would be central to the literature and criticism of the 1970s and 1980s.

Walker's upbringing in the rural South has greatly influenced her writing. Historically, Walker is uniquely placed because she was able to witness firsthand the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, as well as the rise of the Women's Movement. These have played crucial roles in her evolution as a writer. The Black Arts Movement (BAM), often referred to as "the artistic sister of the Black Power Movement", gained popularity at this time, and greatly influenced the literature of

African Americans. It explicitly targeted a number of long-standing assumptions of literary critics and historians; even though it was critical in orientation, the BAM also produced literature of great power and integrity. As part of the cultural awakening, many African Americans rediscovered a new pride in their African ancestry and heritage.

Walker's pride in her heritage is also reflected in her search for literary role models among African American women writers, as opposed to white writers with whom she could not wholly identify. Although she had been influenced by white women writers such as the Bronte sisters and Virginia Woolf as a student in college, her desire to have an African American woman writer to claim as her own intensified. She embarked on a quest for a literary role model, and "found" Zora Neale Hurston, whose works were to play a crucial role in Walker's subsequent development as a writer.<sup>2</sup>

The women's movement that gained widespread popularity during the late 1960s also impacted Alice Walker's evolution as a writer. The movement heralded a new awareness of women's status in the society, and a dissatisfaction with what was perceived as a neglect of her individual rights and needs, both in the society, as well as within the family. White women solicited the cooperation of African American women to further the cause of women's liberation, and for a time, black and white women worked alongside each other. However, there were soon differences between them, mainly because of the disparity in their economic and social status.

Under such circumstances, it is not surprising that an African American woman and activist like Alice Walker would choose to separate herself from mainstream feminism. She articulates her critique of race and gender relations in the feminist post-Civil Rights era and theorizes it in the concept of womanism.

Womanism brings a racialized and often class-located experience to the gendered experience suggested by feminism. It also reflects a link with history that includes African cultural heritage, enslavement, women's culture, and a kinship with other women, especially women of color.

Another important aspect of Walker's fiction is her use of traditional African American forms of artistic and personal expression. She upholds the narrative techniques of orality, exemplified in the epistolary form of *The Color Purple*, in which Celie's letters to God sound like the colloquial speech of African Americans. She also makes extensive use of the themes and techniques of blues music. Blues music brings out the essence of the African American experience more than any other art form; as the name suggests, it epitomizes the "blue" mood, the suffering of the African American whose very existence is often brutally painful. The narratives of Walker's women characters may all be read as blues songs, with each woman giving her personalized version of the suffering she experiences. Yet, as Maria Lauret comments, "it remains vital to realize that the blues as elegy is always counterbalanced by the blues as transcendence."<sup>3</sup>

#### **Alice Walker and the Womanist Perspective:**

Alice Walker celebrates the creativity of African American women found in the commonplace activities of everyday life, such as quilting, gardening and sewing. She marvels at African American women who, enslaved and oppressed for centuries, nevertheless kept their creativity alive (*Search*, p. 232). Walker bases her own artistry upon this natural fount of creativity.

Alice Walker's womanism does not stress so much on a rebellion against men, black or white, as it does on the celebration of womanhood, a fact which is

evident from her definition of the word “womanist”. It is concerned with the complete emancipation of women of all colors and creeds. She writes, ‘a woman/ is wilderness/ unbounded/ holding the future/ between each breath/ walking the earth/ only because/ she *is* free/ and not creepervine/ or tree.’<sup>4</sup> It emphasizes the necessity of enabling a woman to display her true nature, which is, “outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful”. A womanist must resist all forms of oppression that hinders her development into wholeness; if this oppression comes from African American men as well as white people and their institutions, then a womanist must display her courage by resisting these African American men as well. A womanist is committed to both her gender and race on preferential and historical grounds rather than those of biology, and she values the culture that history has given her, a sentiment amplified in her assertion that a womanist loves music, dance, the moon, the Spirit, struggle, the Folk, and herself.

Art, for Walker, does not exist for itself alone; it serves as the vehicle for re-education and re-evaluation, which will ensure the “survival whole” of African American people. A passive acceptance of injustice and oppression is eschewed for a willingness to change, “I believe in change: change personal, and change in society” (*Search*, p.252), and an active participation to overthrow any form of oppression. In her own words,

It is, in the end, the saving of lives that we writers are about. Whether we are “minority” writers or “majority”. It is simply in our power to do this. We do it because we care [...] We care because we know this: *the life we save is our own.* (*Search*, p. 14)

More than anything else, however, Walker’s womanist vision is one of celebration, a celebration of the self, and of African American womanhood.

## Chapter I: Sieving the Past through Womanist Eyes.

Alice Walker views the role of the black artist as multifaceted, and one of the most crucial responsibilities of the artist is the presentation and representation of history. Walker constantly alludes to the past in order to gain a better understanding of the present. The past that she delves into in her fiction is both the collective past of the black race, as well as the personal pasts of individual characters. She underlines repeatedly the lasting impact of the past over the present:

It is memory more than anything else, that sours the sweetness of what has been accomplished.... What we cannot forget and never will forgive. ('Choosing to Stay Home', *Search*, p. 166)

Walker's "simplifying" of history is done through the consciousness of her characters, predominantly African American women and the experiences that they have undergone. African American women play an important role in the oral tradition because they were most often the storytellers within the family, and in effect, the transmitters of history. The relationship between history and memory is one that is explored in all its complexities by the author through her characters. This often results in a radically different view of history as opposed to the traditionally accepted version, which does not often accommodate the history of those who are marginalized along gender or racial lines. It is a history that has been purported by the dominant classes in society. Walker follows the pattern of traditional African American male discourse in her fiction by questioning omissions based on race in the historical narratives, but she goes a step further and persistently challenges this discourse by offering a feminine counter-discourse. Oral discourse, myths, demythologizing existing myths, and folklore constitute part of this alternative history offered by a womanist ideology.

A significant part of Walker's feminine counterdiscourse is a privatized version of historical events, with myth and folklore as alternatives to history. These myths provide alternative historical readings, and the demystification of existing myths serves to challenge and reconstruct conventional versions of history. Another crucial tool of Walker's womanist rendering of history is by utilizing the techniques and themes of blues music, a vital aspect of the black tradition. Walker uses the blues techniques of contrast and juxtaposition to articulate discrepancies between appearance and reality. She also uses blues characters, forms, themes, images and linguistic techniques to convey the multi-faceted nature of black reality. The conjunction with blues music is, of course, no coincidence. She has often credited blues singers such as Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith and Mamie Smith in her work.<sup>5</sup>

Yet another aspect of this revisiting of the past is forgiveness – the asking and granting of forgiveness. Unless the past is put to rest by making peace with it, the individual or race will neither be completely whole nor healed. What is crucial is that in her womanist writing, it is the women who are at the heart of this revision and reinterpretation of memory, history, and the past. What is implicitly suggested here is also that women are more inclined to accepting and adjusting themselves to change.

## **Chapter II: The Story of "America's Greatest Heroes."**

Walker talks about the heroic spirit of African American women who use every obstacle in their paths to create something good. Talking of her own mother, she says, "Like Mem, a character in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, [she] adorned with flowers whatever shabby house [they] were forced to live in." (*Search*, p. 241) This inherent creativity is a subject of fascination to Walker, who often

repeats the theme in her portrayal of African American women. She reclaims the legacy of African American women by focusing on their art forms such as quilting, gardening, story telling, singing, writing, as well as other forms of creativity.

In order to understand the heroic attributes of the African American woman and the magnitude of her courage, Walker emphasizes the nature of what she has experienced and how she has survived. Only in understanding her reality can there be a justification of the term 'heroism' as applied to her. The African American woman's reality, in this case, is specifically studied in terms of the intense oppression and suffering she has undergone, thereby showing that it is no mean feat to even attempt to survive such circumstances, let alone claim victory.

In an interview with Barbara A. Bannon, Walker says, "the black woman is one of America's greatest heroes.... She has been oppressed beyond recognition."<sup>6</sup> This oppression "beyond recognition" takes place in multiple and overlapping ways, at physical, emotional and psychic levels. For the African American man, the white man is the person who determines his existence by setting the social norms and standards by which he is expected to live. Similarly, just as the white man is the one who sets the rules of existence for the African American man and is his oppressor; the African American man in turn becomes the oppressor or the object for the African American woman, who is the subject or the oppressed, by setting the norms for her existence. As Walker puts it:

They [Black men] never examine their relationship to Black women and rarely to Black children. Because their whole thing is to be manly. Not only to be men, but to be white men. Their whole number is to be white men.<sup>7</sup>

Hence the African American woman suffers a double oppression under black and white patriarchy.

One of the most crucial issues to be tackled is the way in which African American women have been forced to take on the yoke of forced identities. This forces them into paths that they have not chosen. Walker calls African American women the “mules of the world” (*Search*, p.237) because they “have been handed the burdens everyone else – everyone else – refused to carry.” The identities that have been foisted upon them include the assumption that they must fulfil certain stereotypical roles such as that of “matriarchs”, “superwomen”, “mean and evil bitches”, “castrators” and “Sapphire’s Mama”. Walker further adds:

When we have pleaded for understanding, our character has been distorted; when we have asked for simple caring, we have been handed empty inspirational appellations, then stuck in the farthest corner. When we have asked for love, we have been given children. In short, even our plainer gifts, our labors of fidelity and love have been knocked down our throats. (*Search*, p. 237).

Walker asserts that only in their freedom can they find their true selves. Recognizing this, many women have attempted to find freedom by simply refusing to bow down. Like Walker’s definition of who a “womanist” is, they have tried to “love themselves. Regardless.”<sup>8</sup>

The stories of these women underline society’s insistence that they embrace identities that are not their own. Many women lose their individuality in their effort to fill the prescribed roles of mother, wife, daughter, lover, or slave. There is a resultant confusion over such an imposition. This is seen in the physical and mental abuse suffered by Margaret and Mem (*Grange*), the denial of a personal identity suffered by Celie (*CP*), the indignity and trauma of a sexually mutilated Tashi (*Possessing*), and the psychological angst and imbalance of Susannah and Magdalene (*By the Light*). Similarly, this is portrayed in case of the frail Meridian

(*Meridian*)<sup>9</sup>, misunderstood because of her refusal to conform to conventional norms and pressures in her political and personal life. Tashi becomes mentally disturbed and has to undergo extensive therapy; Margaret and Mem both lose their lives in their efforts to transcend this fragmentation; Celie sinks into near total despair.

Yet their stories do not end here. Once they stop trying to fit into the molds prescribed by others, they eventually find their true selves. They come to realize that they must find their own niche in a society that marginalizes them. In so doing, they find that they need not adopt a false identity based on the expectations of others.

Their journey to self-discovery is aided by the ability to find expression in a creative way. Creativity affords them a measure of power, something that they have never been allowed to possess. Creativity is given a new dimension in the hands of these women. It becomes a tool of re-emergence, revitalization, renewal, retrieval and rebirth. Celie, for instance, now has "a needle and not a razor" (*CP*, p.125) in her hands. Whether in life or in death, their efforts are not in vain, as the placard that the women hold up before Tashi's execution reads: "RESISTANCE is the secret of joy". (Original emphasis. *Possessing*, p. 264). The crucial point is that these women have made efforts to resist, using resources available to them. In the process, they find a measure of joy.

The heroism that Walker talks about, thus, is the kind of heroism that is displayed by the African American woman's strength of character. To stand up against hardship and opposition and be an artist in spite of them, calls for courage. Hence, she calls the African American woman one of America's greatest heroes, even if she is an unsung hero. In asserting her individuality through her imagination and creative expression, be it quilting, singing, cutting hair, painting, writing, or presenting a 'performance', as *Meridian's* political actions are often described, she

creates an identity for herself, and a space of her own. Whether the African American woman is slave, wife, mother, sister, daughter, lover or object, and regardless of whether she is subject to physical, psychical, emotional or mental subjugation, or all of them, what stands out is the resilience of her spirit, and her refusal to bow down to circumstances. This is what ultimately affords her real liberty and peace, be it in death, like the sisters Magdalena and Susannah, or in life, like Celie.

### **Chapter III: The Politics of Womanist Survival.**

There is always a moment in any kind of struggle when one feels in full bloom. Vivid. Alive. One might be blown to bits in such a moment and still be at peace.<sup>10</sup>

Walker's fiction repeatedly depicts the struggle of the African American woman against forces that subjugate her, forces that are rendered powerful because they are often backed by political authority. For the African American woman, the political struggle is also an intensely personal struggle, since any oppression and effort at surviving and triumphing over that oppression echoes what she has long fought against in her personal life. African American history has had a long line of courageous women who have risen above political and personal oppression in their own ways, as mothers, writers, orators, and activists. They participated in revolutions that had roots in the defiance of mothers and grandmothers, who were slaves, a revolution that gained momentum in the despair, poverty and exhaustion of the women who nevertheless kept their families together during the Harlem years, and finally culminated in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s.

The protagonist in *Meridian*, like Walker herself, is a young African American activist working in the South. Walker uses the story of the physically frail, emotionally intense, and politically charged Meridian to delve into the politics of

race and gender, issues that were brought to the forefront especially during the Civil Rights Movement. Walker also explores how the struggle for African American liberty reverberates in the life of the African American woman's personal struggle for emancipation at a social and psychological level. "Unlike many white women writers of these period, African-American women writers related the personal issues of their communities to global political issues. In effect, they insisted that personal and political issues could not be separated into exclusive categories."<sup>11</sup>

Women played a crucial role in the Movement, and yet there were certain gender issues within it that became increasingly disturbing and detrimental to the relationships between African American men and women. Black Aesthetic discourse, which focused on cultural nationalism, discouraged any literary exploration of gender and other differences that might complicate a unitary conception of the black experience. African American women writers like Alice Walker set out to redefine the parameters of the nationalist construction of femininity. In particular, they began to rewrite the existing beliefs propagated by Black Aestheticians regarding the relationships between 'individual and community, oppressive past and revolutionary future, and absent and present subjectivity'.<sup>12</sup>

To the womanist, there can be neither a sharp delineation between the past and present, nor between the personal, political or spiritual. Like Grange's three lives, she has led many lives, a product of the winds that have blown about her, and impacted her life. Through it all, she has attempted to remain true to what she believes she is. Because of the nature of the reality that she faces, a reality that is often harsh and unrelentingly painful, she has had to learn to survive, 'regardless'. Her struggle for a voice, freedom, love and life, is her political struggle. Many times, her body becomes the tool of this struggle, or the site upon which it is fought.

Walker vehemently believes that unless the African American woman attains political emancipation, the race itself cannot be free, for she is the mother of the race, and to chain her would also mean to keep her children in bondage. At the same time, she cannot wallow in hatred and bitterness, for that would render her immobile and helpless. Thus, her political struggle becomes an intensely personal mission that remembers the lessons of the past, and moves beyond it towards a progressive future that will proclaim freedom for black, white, woman, man, and child.

Whatever course of action the African American woman lays out for herself, the important factor is that she must participate, because it is a question of her survival. As Walker observes, simply withholding participation because of the belief that their efforts have not made a change significant enough, is dangerous:

For we can do nothing substantial toward changing our course on the planet, a destructive one, without rousing ourselves, individual by individual, and bringing our small, imperfect stones [of activism] to the pile. (*Anything*, Intro xxiii)

The womanist then painstakingly creates a monument of freedom by creating beauty, by educating people, by being true to herself, by preserving history, and by maintaining fidelity to truth in whatever she does. This fidelity to truth also entails an acceptance of blackness as wanting in perfection. With such perception comes wisdom, and this in turn would bring the political and personal liberty denied to the African American woman.

#### **Chapter IV: Motifs of Discordance in the Womanist Personality.**

*Be nobody's darling/ Be an outcast. / Take the contradictions/ Of your life/  
And wrap around/ You like a shawl, / To parry stones/ To keep you warm.*<sup>13</sup>

This chapter deals primarily with issues found in her two collections of short stories, *In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women* (1973)<sup>14</sup>, which contains a total of thirteen stories, and *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down* (1981) which has fourteen stories. In many of these stories, she explores and summarizes the problems of being a colored person in predominantly white America. Many of the themes found in her two volumes of short stories are themes that are explored in greater detail in her novels.

The theme of *In Love and Trouble* is the psychic displacement that women face as a result of the many impositions that society places upon them. This psychic displacement further brings on a fragmentation and inner turmoil that cannot be fully remedied by white institutions, notwithstanding the many stamps of approval that their norms bear. As Alice Petry notes, the women in this early volume truly are “in love and trouble” due in large measure to the roles, relationships, and “self-images” imposed upon them by a society, “which knows little and cares less about them as individuals.”<sup>15</sup>

The failure of religious and social institutions to offer any sort of redemption is a recurring theme in Walker's fiction, and this is underlined in her short stories. It is not only institutions that fail these African American women. African American men, too, fall short of women's expectations. Often, larger social issues intrude into the lives of black men and women to become an excuse for cruelty. In her short stories, Walker also talks about the “spiritual colonization” that political colonization brings with it. She refers to the concept of a white Christian god<sup>16</sup> that dominates African Americans, and how they have to perpetually rise above their perceived inferiority. She underlines the necessity of “decolonizing the spirit.”

Walker often portrays the unique position of women who have had the privilege of a white education and a degree of exposure to white culture. Often, their personalities are shaped by the clash of cultures that they have experienced. This is characterized by anxiety and the subsequent dilemma that they face, caused by loyalty to race on one hand, and the other recognition of the tools for survival. This often mistakenly translates into an acceptance of white values.

Walker feels the necessity of striking a discordant note, a note that jars people out of their complacency. An apt tool that she uses to bring this message across, is the use of blues music techniques and themes in her fiction, combined with the use of signifyin(g). 'Signifying' is a term brought into critical usage by Henry Louis Gates Jr. in his book, *The Signifying Monkey*.<sup>17</sup>

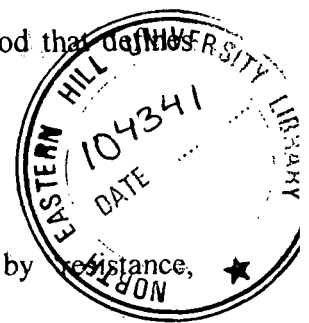
The various stories in *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down* talk about 'good' women who refuse to be 'kept down'. The tales of suffering that are narrated through their lives are neither exaggerated nor minimized. Whether it is Hannah Kemhuff who spends the best part of her life in plotting revenge, the African Nun forever cloistered within the walls of the convent, Mrs. Washington who becomes deranged and commits suicide for loving the wrong man, or Roselily, who willingly enters into a marriage characterized by bondage, what underscores each of their experiences is pain. It is a pain that is so intense that it haunts every second of their waking hour. Each woman's story is a haunting blues song, sung with a simplicity and matter-of-factness that makes it all the more tragic. Yet, what strikes the reader is not simply the trauma and suffering that they undergo, but the note of discordance at the end. Their spirit refuses to be defined or defeated by pain. It is apt that the last story in *In Love*, 'To Hell with Dying' strikes a different note in its understanding of the kind of hope that love offers. An old man, beyond all expectations, is perpetually

brought back from the brink of death by the love of two children. Walker's message is that if love brings trouble, it also brings hope and healing.

Like the blues singer who creates beauty out of suffering, these women create beauty by showing courage and resilience even when under pain. Like the blues song, they may be 'thrown down', but they 'rise up in some other town', as is evident when we see the emergence of the self-confident, self-assertive women of *You Can't Keep*. They refuse to stay within the boundaries that society, institutions and men try to impose upon them. In so doing, they attain a selfhood that defines who they are in their own terms.

#### CONCLUSION:

The "womanist" reality presented by Alice Walker is characterized by resistance, without much commentary." (*Search*, p. 268). It is the courage of African American women, manifested in different ways, which Walker celebrates in her fiction. They express their total defiance of oppressive norms, and resist the forces that threaten their very existence. Most of all, they transform their difficult circumstances into art by using their inherent creativity. In the face of opposition, that creativity itself has been severely hindered; they were "driven to a numb and bleeding madness by the springs of creativity in them for which there was no release" (*Search*, p.233). Yet they "forced their minds to desert their bodies and their striving spirits sought to rise" (*Search*, p. 232) and created beauty in spite of their circumstances. Quilting, gardening, story-telling, singing, and writing are just a few of the ways in which black women express their creativity. "For her, so hindered and intruded upon in so many ways, being an artist has still been a daily part of her life. This ability to hold on, even in very simple ways, is work black women have done for a very long time." (*Search*, p. 242) African American women's art, beyond being an assertion of their



lives and independence, also serves as a means of retelling their own stories. Thus, Nettie and Celie in *The Color Purple* utilize the power of the written word to rewrite their history and that of African American people, just as Walker herself uses her art to retell the story of African American women, whose portrayal in male literature has often been erroneous and misleading.

Walker's fiction shows how African American women, oppressed by violence, racism and sexual discrimination embark on an odyssey which will take them away from a state of being victimized to a consciousness that allows them to have control over their lives. Having redefined themselves, Alice Walker's women emerge with dignity.

Walker's women live for what they believe in, and they do this by looking within themselves to discover who they are. They purge themselves of the expectations of others, and through the baptism of self-discovery, declare their real selves. These womanists create freedom for themselves and their sisters in domestic, cultural, social and artistic spheres. They reassert and reinvent themselves, re-telling their stories of a survival that is hard-earned and lasting. Walker proves herself to be a creative chronicler of the past as well as a perceptive commentator of the present. Most of all, she has succeeded in presenting a comprehensive portrayal of the black womanist perspective in all its complexity and beauty. In so doing, it may be said that she paves the way for future generations of artists who will continue to uphold the values that she has so artfully inscribed in her womanist fiction.

### Endnotes:

1. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, (New York: Norton, 1997). Please refer to Introduction and Chapter I of this book.
2. Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, (Florida: Harcourt, 1984), p. 92.  
Henceforth referred to in parenthesis as *Search*.
3. Maria Lauret, *Alice Walker*, (London: Macmillan, 2000), p. 114.
4. Alice Walker, 'A Woman Is Not a Potted Plant', qtd in 'What Can I Give My Daughters, Who Are Brave?' *Anything We Love Can Be Saved: A Writer's Activism*, (New York: Random, 1997), p.105.
5. For a discussion of these women blues artists by Walker, see her essay, "Zora Neale Hurston" in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, pp. 83-92.
6. Barbara A. Bannon, Interview with Alice Walker, *Publishers' Weekly*.  
<http://www.publishersweekly.com/> 19 September 2001.
7. 'Alice Walker is a Free Woman', *Sojourner*, Jan 1983, p.13.
8. This is a reference to Walker's definition of "womanist", in *Search*.
9. Alice Walker, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, (New York: Harcourt, 1970).  
Parenthetically referred to as *Grange*.  
---, *Meridian*, (New York: Harcourt, 1976). Parenthetically referred to as *Meridian*.  
---, *The Color Purple*, (New York: Harcourt, 1982). Parenthetically referred to as *CP*.  
---, *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, (New York: Harcourt, 1992). Parenthetically referred to as *Possessing*.  
---, *By the Light of My Father's Smile*, (New York: Random, 1998). Parenthetically referred to as *By the Light*.

10. Alice Walker, *Anything We Love Can be Saved: A Writer's Activism*, (New York: Random, 1997) p. xxiii. Henceforth parenthetically referred to in the text as *Anything*.
11. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Norton Anthology of Afro- American Literature*, p. 2016
12. Madhu Dubey, *Black Women Novelists and the Nationalist Aesthetic*, (Indiana: Indiana UP, 1994), p. 21.
13. Alice Walker, 'Be Nobody's Darling', *Revolutionary Petunias and Other Poems*, (New York: Harcourt, 1973), p. 193.
14. Alice Walker, *In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women*, (New York: Harcourt, 1973). Henceforth referred to parenthetically as *In Love*.
- , *You Just Can't Keep a Good Woman Down*, (New York: Harcourt, 1981), henceforth referred to parenthetically as *You Can't Keep*.
15. Alice Petry, 'Walker: The Achievement of the Short Fiction' in Henry Louis Gates Jr., and K.A. Appiah (eds), *Alice Walker: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, (New York: Amistad, 1993), p. 193.
16. David Cowart, 'Heritage and Deracination in Walker's "Everyday Use"', *Alice Walker Studies in Short Fiction*, Spring 1996, p. 172.
17. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism*, (New York and Oxford: OUP, 1988). Briefly put, it is a trope whereby there is an 'encoded intention to say one thing but to mean quite another', denoting a gap between intention and expression. Black writers learn to write by reading literature, especially the canonical texts of the Western tradition. Consequently, black texts resemble other, Western texts. Yet, "black formal repetition always

repeats with a difference, a black difference that manifests itself in specific language use." In "signifying" black writers write "texts that are double-voiced in the sense that their literary antecedents are both white and black novels, but also modes of figuration lifted from the black vernacular tradition." (*Signifying*, p. xxiii)

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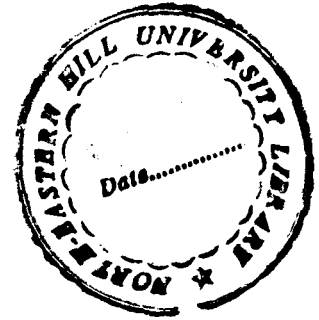
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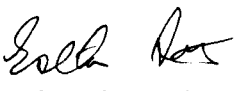
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I, Cherrie Lalnunziri Chhangte, declare that the subject matter of this thesis is the record of work done by me, that the contents of this thesis did not form <sup>the</sup> basis of the award of any previous degree to me or to the best of my knowledge to anybody else, and that the thesis has not been submitted by me for any research degree in any other University/Institute.

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**Cherrie Lalnunziri Chhangte**

## **CONTENTS**

	<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>1-32</b>
<b>CHAPTER 1:</b>	<b>SIEVING THE PAST THROUGH WOMANIST EYES</b>	<b>33-61</b>
<b>CHAPTER 2:</b>	<b>THE STORY OF AMERICA'S GREATEST HEROES</b>	<b>62-89</b>
<b>CHAPTER 3:</b>	<b>THE POLITICS OF WOMANIST SURVIVAL</b>	<b>90-120</b>
<b>CHAPTER 4:</b>	<b>MOTIFS OF DISCORDANCE IN THE WOMANIST PERSONALITY</b>	<b>121-153</b>
	<b>CONCLUSION</b>	<b>154-160</b>
	<b>APPENDICES</b>	<b>161-163</b>
	<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>	<b>164-170</b>
	<b>BRIEF BIO-DATA OF THE CANDIDATE</b>	

## INTRODUCTION

Both as creative artist and critical writer, Alice Walker has contributed immensely to the complex body of African American writing. Six of her novels and two volumes of short stories have been taken as texts for the present study. Her fiction reveals a deeply personal exploration of the African American psyche, an exploration that is rooted in her “womanist” philosophy.

As a result of the intersection of two movements, the Civil Rights Movement and the Women’s Movement in the 1970s, there was an explosion of works by African American writers. Many African American women writers including June Jordan, Audre Lorde and Alice Walker had been major actors in these movements. The year 1970 was critical for African American women writers. In that year, Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* was published. Its success signaled the existence of a market for works by African American women writers. That same year, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison and June Jordan published their first novels. Their novels shifted the focus from that of a “black monolithic community” to that of “specific black communities.”<sup>1</sup> In so doing, they refused all-encompassing definitions of the African American community, of the African American man, or of the African American woman, and emphasized the concept of difference that would be central to the literature and criticism of the 1970s and 80s.

### **Alice Walker’s Life and Works**

Alice Walker was born on February 9, 1944, in Eatonton, Georgia, in the United States of America. She was the youngest of eight children born to Willie Lee and Minnie Tallulah Grant Walker, who were sharecroppers. She shares glimpses of her childhood and formative years in her essays and prose writings, notably in *In Search*

of *Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* and *Anything We Love Can Be Saved: A Writer's Activism*. Her childhood was marked by poverty, a poverty she often mentions when she writes about her parents' lives. At the age of eight, she was blinded in one eye when one of her brothers accidentally shot her with a BB gun.<sup>2</sup> The physical and psychological scars that accompanied this disfigurement were to have far-reaching effects on her:

I have always been a solitary person, and since I was eight years old (and a victim of a traumatic accident that blinded and scarred one eye), I have daydreamed – not of fairy tales – but of falling on swords, of putting guns to my heart or head, and of slashing my wrists with a razor. For a long time I thought I was very ugly and disfigured. This made me shy and timid, and I often reacted to insults and slights that were not intended.... I believe, though, that it was from this period – from my solitary, lonely position, the position of an outcast – that I began to really see people and things, really to notice relationships and to learn to be patient enough to care about how they turned out. I no longer felt like the little girl I was. I felt old, and because I was unpleasant to look at, filled with shame. I retreated into solitude, and read stories and began to write poems. (*Search*, pp. 244-45).

Walker won a scholarship to Spelman College, and then finished her education at Sarah Lawrence College. She was an active participant in the Civil Rights Movement, working on voter registration in Georgia and for the Head Start Program in Mississippi, as well as for the Department of Welfare in New York City. She taught at Jackson College in the 1960s, at Tougaloo College, Wellesley College, the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, the University of California at Berkeley, and Brandeis University for varied intervals. She has won several awards for her work, most notably the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the National Book Award for *The Color Purple* in 1983.<sup>3</sup> In 1967, she married the Jewish Civil Rights lawyer, Mel Leventhal, at a time when interracial marriage was still illegal in Jackson, Mississippi, where they lived. They had one daughter, Rebecca. Their marriage was consequently

terminated in 1976. Her recollections of their time together are to be found in her book, *The Way Forward Is with a Broken Heart* (2000).

Alice Walker is a prolific writer. With the encouragement of her mentor at Sarah Lawrence, Muriel Rukeyser, her first book of poems, *Once* (1968), was published when she was only twenty four years old. This first collection was a result of the combined influences of a trip she took to Africa in 1964, “because the vitality and color and friendships in Africa rushed over me in dreams the first night I slept”, and an unwanted pregnancy, which brought her much anguish and depression. She felt suicidal, until a friend helped her get an abortion. Her creativity helped her to survive this trauma: “That week I wrote without stopping...almost all of the poems in *Once*” (*Search*, p. 248). Her works include novels, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970), *Meridian* (1976), *The Color Purple* (1982), *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989), *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992), *By the Light of My Father's Smile* (1998), *Now is the Time to Open Your Heart* (2004), *We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For* (2006); two volumes of short stories, *In Love and Trouble* (1973), and *You Can't keep A Good Woman Down* (1981). Apart from this, she has also published several books of poetry, *Once* (1968), *Revolutionary Petunias* (1973), *Goodnight, Willie Lee, I'll See you In the Morning* (1979), *Horses Make a Landscape More Beautiful* (1984), and *Her Blue Body Everything We Know: Earthling Poems, 1973-1987* (1991), as well as several essays and non-fictional pieces.<sup>4</sup>

Walker's upbringing in the rural South has greatly influenced her writing. Both poverty and the South have ambivalent meanings for Walker, and she articulates these in her essay, 'The Black Writer and the Southern Experience'. On one hand, she feels that as an African American Southern writer, she has inherited a sense of community as part of the culture, even if that solidarity comes from poverty. As long

as the consciousness of being poor is recognized for what it is, imposed from the outside through “deliberate humiliation”, and does not become internalized as a feeling of worthlessness, then the community of poverty can be a positive thing, enabling interdependence without shame (*Search*, p. 17). On the other hand, Walker also notes that Southern African American life is not something to be romanticized, because it was determined by hard work in the fields, poor housing, and the greed and ruthlessness of white employers who worked her parents nearly to death. For Southern African American writers, this means that they not only have a legacy of love and hate to draw on, but also “an enormous richness and beauty” (*Search*, p. 21).

This is evident in the way that Walker has passed on some of her Southern heritage in her fiction. Childhood memories of happiness come from the stories her mother told her, the rural environment of Eatonton, and her friendship with the old man, Mr. Sweet, who inspired the short story, ‘To Hell with Dying’, which was later published as a book for children. Langston Hughes, whom Walker described as the “greatest of the old black singer poets”,<sup>5</sup> published it in *Best Short Stories by Negro Writers*.<sup>6</sup> One of her mother’s stories about life in the South during the Depression was the source for ‘The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff’.<sup>7</sup> Like Zora Neale Hurston, who listened to black folk tell tales on the porch of Joe Clarke’s store in Eatonville, and Maya Angelou, who heard similar tales in the porch of her grandmother’s store,<sup>8</sup> Walker also grew up hearing these stories repeated and improvised upon by black folk. Many aspects of the oral tradition that Walker presents in her fiction had their roots in the story telling that is a vibrant part of black folk culture.

### **Factors Influencing Walker's Womanist Fiction**

Historically, Walker is uniquely placed because she was able to witness firsthand the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, as well as the rise of the Women's Movement. These have played crucial roles in her evolution as a writer. Much of the experience and wisdom she gained as a participant in these two movements helped shape her "womanist" sensibilities. Despite articulating her grievances against the rampant racism that many African Americans encounter, the Civil Rights creed of 'black and white together' remains a strong influence on her. This has been proved by her marriage to a white man. Prior to a detailed study of the term "womanist" and what it denotes, a brief study of these two Movements is in order.

The American Civil Rights Movement (1955-1968) refers to a set of events and reform movements in the United States aimed at abolishing public and private acts of racial discrimination against African-Americans, particularly in the South. Denied constitutional guarantees (1787) because of their slave status at the founding of the republic, African Americans were first promised fundamental citizenship rights in the 13th-15th constitutional amendments (1865-70). The Civil Rights Act of 1875 required equal accommodations for African Americans with whites in public facilities (other than schools), but this legislation was effectively voided by the Supreme Court in 1883. By 1900, eighteen states of the North and West had legislated public policies against racial discrimination, but in the South new laws eroded the franchise and reinforced segregation practices, while the U.S. Supreme Court upheld "separate but equal" facilities for the races in Plessy v. Ferguson (1896), thus legitimizing the segregation of African Americans from whites.

During World War II, progress was made in outlawing discrimination in defense industries (1941) and after the war, in desegregating the armed forces (1948).

During the late 1940s and early 1950s, lawyers for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) pressed a series of important cases before the Supreme Court in which they argued that segregation meant inherently unequal (and inadequate) educational and other public facilities for African Americans. These cases culminated in the Court's landmark decision in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* (May 17, 1954), in which it declared that separate educational facilities were inherently unequal and, therefore, unconstitutional. This historic decision was to stimulate a mass movement on the part of African Americans and their white sympathizers to try to end the segregationist practices and racial inequalities that were firmly entrenched across the nation, particularly in the South. Although the movement was strongly resisted by many whites, there were also sympathetic white people who took active part in the Movement. Lynne, Meridian's white friend in *Meridian*, is an example of such a white volunteer; Mel Leventhal, Walker's Jewish former husband, also fought for black rights in Mississippi during this time.

After an African American woman, Rosa Parks, was arrested for refusing to move to the Negro section of a bus in Montgomery, Alabama (Dec. 1, 1955), African Americans staged a one-day local boycott of the buses to protest her arrest. Fusing these protest elements with the historic force of the black churches, Martin Luther King, Jr., succeeded in transforming a spontaneous racial protest into a massive resistance movement, led from 1957 by his Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). After a protracted boycott of the Montgomery Bus Company forced it to desegregate its facilities, picketing and boycotting spread rapidly to other communities. During the period 1955 to 1960, some progress was made toward integrating schools and other public facilities in the upper South and the border states,

but the Deep South remained adamant in its opposition to most desegregation measures.<sup>9</sup>

In 1960 the sit-in movement, largely under the auspices of the newly formed Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), was launched at Greensboro, N.C., when African American college students insisted on service at a local segregated lunch counter. Patterning its techniques on the nonviolent methods of Indian leader Mohandas Gandhi, the movement spread across the nation, forcing the desegregation of department stores, supermarkets, libraries, and movie theatres. In May 1961, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) sent "Freedom Riders" of both races through the South, to test and break down segregated accommodations in interstate transportation. By September, it was estimated that more than 70,000 students had participated in the movement, with approximately 3,600 arrested; more than 100 cities in 20 states had been affected. The movement reached its climax in August 1963 with a march organized in Washington, D.C. to protest against racial discrimination and, to demonstrate support for major civil-rights legislations pending in Congress.

Around the year 1966, there arose a difference of opinion regarding the two key tenets that the Civil Rights Movement had been based on, integration and non-violence. While Martin Luther King, Jr. had advocated this, black activists within SNCC and Core stood to differ. They had chafed for some time at the influence wielded by white advisors to Civil Rights organizations, and the "disproportionate" attention that was given to the deaths of white civil rights workers while black workers' deaths went virtually unnoticed. Stokely Carmichael, who became the leader of SNCC in 1966, was one of the earliest and most articulate of the spokespersons for what became known as the "Black Power" Movement. Stokely Carmichael had used

this slogan at a public demonstration in Greenwood, Mississippi on June 17, 1966. Carmichael also urged African American communities to confront, with arms, the white supremacist group known as the Ku Klux Klan. As a result of the armed confrontations, the Klan stopped terrorizing the Black communities. The Black Power movement is also synonymous with "Black Nationalism".

This tendency towards violence in the Movement received mixed responses, confusion articulated in Meridian's (*Meridian*) inability to commit herself to killing for the Revolution, while at the same time understanding the necessity for violence. Grange Copeland, in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, is a firm believer in the Black Power ideology of violence and hatred of whites as the only means of resistance and survival. His granddaughter, Ruth, on the other hand, finds it difficult to embrace her grandfather's dictum of "hatred", and believes in the power of active participation through helping and educating others.<sup>10</sup>

Several African Americans who were involved with the Black Power movement gained a sense of black pride and identity as well. In this new-found pride in their identity, several African Americans demanded that whites no longer refer to them as "Negroes" but as "Afro-Americans."<sup>11</sup> Up to the mid-1960s, African Americans had slavishly imitated whites in fashion. As the consciousness of a unique identity began to take shape, African Americans now wore loose fitting *Dashikis*, multi-colored African clothing. They also stopped straightening their hair thus maintaining the Afro look. The Afro, sometimes nicknamed the "fro," remained a popular black hairstyle until the late 1970s. In her essay, 'Oppressed Hair Puts a Ceiling on the Brain', Walker recounts the liberating experience of freeing her hair from the dictates of white fashion:

Eventually I knew precisely what hair wanted: it wanted to grow, to be itself, to attract lint, if that was its destiny, but to be left alone by anyone, including me, who did not love it as it was. What do you think happened? .... the ceiling at the top of my brain lifted; once again my mind (and spirit) could get outside myself. I would not be stuck in restless silence, but would continue to grow [.....] the realization that as long as there is joy in creation there will always be new creations to discover, or to rediscover, and that a prime place to look is within and about the self.<sup>12</sup>

The Black Arts Movement (BAM), often referred to as "the artistic sister of the Black Power Movement", gained popularity at this time, and greatly influenced the literature of African Americans. It explicitly targeted the long-standing assumptions of literary critics and historians; in particular, the role of historical narratives, the timelessness of art, the responsibility of artists to their communities, and the significance of oral forms in cultural struggles. Even though it was critical in orientation, the BAM also produced literature of great power and integrity. As part of the cultural awakening, many blacks rediscovered a new pride in their African ancestry and heritage. This is seen the Dee's character in the short story, 'Everyday Use'.

Walker's pride in her heritage is also reflected in much of her womanist ideology, notably in her search for literary role models among African American women writers, as opposed to white writers with whom she could not wholly identify. Although she had been influenced by white women writers such as the Bronte sisters and Virginia Woolf, her desire to have an African American woman writer to claim as her own, intensified. She embarked on a quest for such a literary role model and "found" Zora Neale Hurston:

Folklorist, novelist anthropologist, serious student of voodoo, also all-round black woman, with guts enough to take a slide rule and measure random heads in Harlem; not to prove their inferiority, but to prove that whatever their size, shape or present condition of servitude, those heads contained all the intelligence anyone could use to get through this world. (*Search*, p. 12)

In their commitment to Southern folk culture, the black vernacular, and the emancipation of women, there are remarkable similarities between Walker's *The Color Purple* and Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Walker was especially inspired by the character of Janie Crawford in *Their Eyes*, and remarks in a poem:

I love the way Janie Crawford  
left her husbands  
the one who wanted to change her  
into a mule  
and the other who tried to interest her  
in being a queen.  
A woman, unless she submits,  
is neither a mule  
nor a queen  
though like a mule she may suffer  
and like a queen pace the floor. (*Search*, p. 7)

Elsewhere, referring to Hurston, who died in obscurity, she writes, "We are a people. A people do not throw their geniuses away. And if they are thrown away, it is our duty as artists and as witnesses for the future to collect them again for the sake of our children, and if necessary, bone by bone" (*Search*, p. 92).

The women's movement that gained widespread popularity during the late 1960s also shaped much of what Alice Walker was later to become. It heralded a new awareness of women's status in society, and a dissatisfaction with what was perceived as a neglect of their individual rights and needs, both in the domestic and social sphere. White women solicited the cooperation of African American women to further the cause of women's liberation, and for a time, black and white women worked alongside each other. However, differences soon became evident as a result of the disparity in their economic and social status. At the same time that they were working for a common cause, their concerns were vastly different. What African American women perceived as the inherent racism of their white counterparts prevented any long-lasting alliance between them, both during the Women's Rights Movement, and

in the women's movement of the 1960s. The earlier Women's Rights Movement of the late 1800s had taken place in the wake of the fight for the emancipation of slaves. Many African Americans saw this as a means for white women to take advantage of the African American struggle for freedom to further their own feminist cause. They felt that these feminists sought to deflect attention from the race problem to the problems of white middle class women. African American women in the Civil Rights Movement had similar misgivings about the motives of the feminist movement that emerged in the 1960s, primarily because the term "women" tended to exclude black women. In the words of bell hooks,

The structure of the contemporary women's movement was no different from that of the earlier women's rights movement. Like their predecessors, the white women who initiated the women's movement launched their efforts in the wake of the 60s black liberation movement... When the movement began in the late 60s, it was evident that the white women who dominated the movement felt it was "their" movement, that is, the medium through which a white woman would voice her grievances to society. Not only would white women act as if feminist ideology existed solely to serve their own interests because they were able to draw public attention to feminist concerns. They were unwilling to acknowledge that non-white women were part of the collective group women in American society. They urged black women to join "their" movement or in some case the women's movement, but in dialogues and in writings, their attitudes toward black women were both racist and sexist. Their racism did not assume the form of overt expressions of hatred; it was far more subtle. It took the form of simply ignoring the existence of black women or writing about them using common sexist and racist stereotypes. From Betty Freidan's *The Feminine Mystique* to Barbara Berg's *The Remembered Gate*... most white female writers who considered themselves feminist revealed in their writing that they had been socialized to accept and perpetuate racist ideology.<sup>13</sup>

Under such circumstances, it is not surprising that an African American woman and activist like Alice Walker would choose to separate herself from mainstream feminism. She articulates her critique of race and gender relations in the feminist post-

Civil Rights era and theorizes it in the concept of womanism. Her definition of womanist appears at the beginning of *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*:

Womanist 1. From *womanish*. (Opp. Of "girlish," i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, "You acting womanish," i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to audacious, courageous or *willful* behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered "good" for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: "You trying to be grown." Responsible. In charge. *Serious*.

why not  
precipitous

2. Also: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, woman's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist...

3. Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. *Loves* the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. *Loves* the folk. Loves herself. *Regardless*.

4. Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender. (Original emphasis, *Search*, pp. xi-xii)

In 1984, in an interview with *The New York Times Magazine*, Alice Walker explains her choice of "womanism" thus:

I don't choose womanism because it is 'better' than feminism...Since womanism means black feminism, this would be a nonsensical distinction. I choose it because I prefer the sound, the feel, the fit of it; because I cherish the spirit of the women (like Sojourner) the word calls to mind, and because I share the old ethnic-American habit of offering society a new word when the old word it is using fails to describe behavior and change that only a new word can help it more fully see.<sup>14</sup>

Womanism brings a racialized and often class-located experience to the gendered experience suggested by feminism. It also reflects a link with history that includes African cultural heritage, enslavement, women's culture, and a kinship with other women, especially women of color. As Walker also clarified to the *Times*, "Feminism (all colors) definitely teaches women they are capable, one reason for its universal

appeal. In addition to this, womanist (i.e. black feminist) tradition assumes, because of our experiences during slavery, that black women are capable."

Womanist and womanism were soon adopted by, and often used in description of, African American women's struggle for self-determination and community in the past and present. According to Gloria Steinem, it is welcomed by some for having a stronger sound than feminist, which shares the root of feminine -- as Walker put it in 1983, "Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender". Womanist and womanism helped give visibility to the experience of African American and other women of color who have always been on the forefront of movements to overthrow the sexual and racial caste systems, yet who have often been marginalized or rendered invisible in history texts, the media, and mainstream movements led by European American feminists or male civil rights leaders. Unlike feminist and pro-feminist, however, the definition of womanist has yet to be extended to men who are also working for women's empowerment, and that has been a source of reluctance to use it. Others prefer black feminism because retaining the adjective makes racial experience more visible, and because failing to use the more familiar noun might be seen as deserting some of its basic beliefs and/or controversies; for instance, the false notion that feminism is synonymous with lesbianism, as opposed to including all females.<sup>15</sup>

A study of Walker's art would be incomplete without a reference to the influence of blues music techniques and themes in her fiction.<sup>16</sup> She often applauds the spirit of blues musicians such as Billie Holiday, Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith and Mamie Smith in her essays, and includes Zora Neale Hurston among the legendary blues artists. Blues is a vocal and instrumental form of music based on a pentatonic scale and a characteristic twelve-bar chord progression. The form evolved in the United States in the communities of former African slaves from spirituals, praise

songs, field hollers, shouts, and chants. The use of blues notes and the prominence of call-and-response patterns in the music and lyrics are indicative of blues' West African pedigree. Blues has been a major influence on later American and Western popular music, finding expression in ragtime, jazz, bluegrass, rhythm and blues, rock and roll, hip-hop, and country music, as well as conventional pop songs.

The phrase "the blues" is a synonym for having a fit of the blue devils, meaning low spirits, depression and sadness. An early reference to this may be found in George Colman's *Blue Devils*, a farce in one act (1798). Later during the 19th century, the phrase was used as a euphemism for delirium tremens and the police. Though usage of the phrase in African American music may be older, it has been attested to since 1912 in Memphis, Tennessee with W. C. Handy's "Memphis Blues". In lyrics, the phrase is often used to describe a depressed mood.<sup>17</sup> Early blues frequently took the form of a loose narrative, often with the singer voicing his or her "personal woes in a world of harsh reality: a lost love, the cruelty of police officers, oppression at the hands of white folk, hard times".<sup>18</sup>

Much has been speculated upon, for the social and economic reasons of the appearance of blues. The first appearance of blues is not definite, and is often dated between 1870 and 1900. This period coincides with the emancipation of the slaves and the transition from slavery to sharecropping, and small-scale agricultural production in the American South. Several scholars characterize the development, which appeared at the turn of the century, as a move from group performances to a more individualized style. They argue that the development of blues is strongly related to the newly acquired freedom of the slaves. According to Lawrence Levine, "there was a direct relationship between the national ideological emphasis upon the individual, the popularity of Booker T. Washington's teachings, and the rise of the

blues. Psychologically, socially, and economically, Negroes were being acculturated in a way that would have been impossible during slavery, and it is hardly surprising that their secular music reflected this as much as their religious music did."<sup>19</sup>

Prior to the blues, song in the African American context consisted of field hollers and calls, which served as a means of communication among plantation workers. While these had elements of personalized song, they had never truly developed as solo songs. In blues music, the call and response form of expression was retained, but instead of incorporating a response from another participant, the blues singer responded to himself or herself. Thus, it was not created from a new type of music, but from a new perception about oneself. The blues song varies from singer to singer, depending upon the singer's personal experiences. Women's blues, for instance, often lamented upon their isolation and betrayal by men in their lives. Bessie Smith sings:

I got the blues, the weary blues

And I'm sad and lonely, won't somebody come and take a chance with me?

I'll sing sweet love songs honey, all the time

If you'll come and be my sweet baby mine

'Cause I ain't got nobody, and nobody cares for me.<sup>20</sup>



The quintessence of blues was pain, but the art of the blues consisted in bridging the gap between tragedy and comedy, with lyrics often being humorous and raunchy.

Behind the façade of broken love relationships and tragic-comic narrations, lies the painful reality of the African American. This pain is sometimes too intense to relate, and the trauma is hidden behind the seeming levity and commonplace complaints reflected in the lyrics. As Billie Holiday sings, there is much to lament for the African American woman:

10 3880

I've got a right to sing the blues,  
 Got the right to moan and sigh,  
 I've got a right to sit and cry  
 Down along the river.<sup>21</sup>

The narratives of Walker's women characters may be read as blues songs, with each woman giving her personalized version of the suffering that she undergoes. Yet, as Maria Lauret comments, "it remains vital to realize that the blues as elegy is always counterbalanced by the blues as transcendence."<sup>22</sup> The leap of faith, which occurs so often in the final stanza of blues lyrics, softens or tries to undo the mournful qualities of the blues. In Walker's positive endings, we see the same quality. Such transcendence takes the form of celebration of the black community, of the South's beauty and artistry, and of belief in social, political and personal change. Most of all, it is achieved in the creative act itself, in the singing of the song or the writing of the text.

A technique that Walker often uses to establish her connection to the literary and artistic tradition that preceded her is what Henry Louis Gates, Jr. called "signifyin(g)."<sup>23</sup> African American writers learnt to write by reading literature, especially the canonical texts of the Western tradition. Consequently, African American texts resemble Western texts. Yet, "black formal repetition always repeats with a difference, a black difference that manifests itself in specific language use." Briefly put, "signifying" is a trope whereby African American writers write "texts that are double-voiced in the sense that their literary antecedents are both white and black novels, but also modes of figuration lifted from the black vernacular tradition."

(*Signifying*, p. xxiii) Gates goes on to say:

Free of the white person's gaze, blacks created their own unique vernacular structures and relished in the double play that these forms bore to white forms. Repetition and revision are fundamental to black artistic forms, from painting and sculpture to music and language

use...[signifying] is repetition and revision, or repetition with a signal difference. (*Signifying*, p. xxiv)

In this sense, Walker signifies on existing literary traditions and texts. For instance, the epistolary form of *The Color Purple* signifies on the epistolary forms of conventional European texts of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but she uses this form to represent the conditions of “women isolated from one another within the patriarchal network.”<sup>24</sup> Similarly, in her short story, ‘Nineteen Fifty Five’, she signifies on the relationship between Elvis Presley and Willie Mae “Big Mama” Thornton, the African American woman blues singer who first recorded the song, ‘Hound Dog’, which catapulted Presley into fame. In the characters of Traynor and Gracie Mae Still, she explores the cultural and personal dynamics of the interaction between blacks and whites in the music industry. The title of her short story collection, *You Can’t Keep a Good Woman Down* again signifies on Perry Bradford’s song, ‘You Can’t Keep a Good Woman Down’.

Gates notes that Walker also signifies extensively on Zora Neale Hurston’s “explicit and implicit strategies of narration,” repeating and revising what Hurston had started by incorporating black dialect and black folk themes in her narration. (*Signifying*, p. xxvi) Walker takes as inspiration Janie Crawford, the protagonist of Hurston’s novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* for the character of Celie in *The Color Purple*. According to Gates, Walker’s use of the epistolary form “to write a novel seemingly spoken by Hurston’s protagonist is perhaps the most stunning instance of revision in the tradition of the black novel” (*Signifying*, p. xxvi). Janie’s story unfolds as she narrates her story to her friend Phoeby, while Celie writes hers in letters. Gates writes:

The most obvious difference between the two texts is that Celie writes herself into being, before our very eyes. Whereas Janie's moment of consciousness is figured as a ritual speech act, for Celie it is the written voice which is her vehicle for self-expression and self-revelation [...] Celie writes her text, and is a text...in the same way that Langston Hughes wrote that Hurston was a book – “a perfect book of entertainment in herself.” (*Signifying*, p. 245)

Thus, what is significant in Walker's revision and repetition of literary tropes and figures is her ability to give different meanings and perspectives out of the same material. Like her characters, Walker uses her art to affirm new ways of “self-expression and self-revelation.”

*self-expression*

### **Alice Walker and the Womanist Perspective**

The multi-dimensional historical and cultural milieu of the African American served as the background for Walker's development as a womanist. Creativity in Walker is not limited only to the blues. She also celebrates the creativity of African American women that is found in the commonplace activities of everyday life, such as quilting, gardening and sewing. She marvels at African American women who, enslaved and oppressed for centuries, nevertheless kept their creativity alive (*Search*, p. 232). It is on this very heritage of creativity that Walker bases her own artistry. Looking for literary predecessors and models, she did not find them in the hallowed institutions she attended (*Search*, p. 132). Instead she found them amongst the “anonymous” mothers, grandmothers and artists; her own mother and Zora Neale Hurston were among these.

What proves extremely interesting about Walker's womanism is that she does not indulge in abstract theorization. Instead, she propounds her philosophy by giving concrete examples out of her own perceptions and experiences, and those of people around her. As Clara Juncker observes, Walker “employs an intimate,

autobiographical mode of expression that blends with other women's voices into a maternal signature."<sup>25</sup> She further states:

Her [Walker's] autobiographical, poetic, elliptic and multivocal discourse... signifies, moreover, her difference from dominant cultural theoreticians and theories. Exploring the meaning of her mother's garden, Walker writes black feminine creativity as a marginal, maternal and magic space inhabited by mythic figures, whose knowledge and power explode traditional symbolic codes. In short, Walker presents in her essays, and I believe in her later novels, a womanist theory of "the blackness of blackness."<sup>26</sup>

An important aspect of Walker's work is that all her writing, be it prose, poetry, or fiction, is inter-related. An instance of this can be seen in her rendering of the same subject, that is, her sister, in the story 'Everyday Use' and in the poem, 'For My Sister, Molly, Who in the Fifties'.<sup>27</sup> Further, her essays in *Anything We Love Can Be Saved: A Writer's Activism*, and the final section of *In Search of our Mother's Gardens*, both of which relate to the Civil Rights Movement, can easily be linked up to the novel, *Meridian*. Similarly, her definition of womanist is best understood when it is used as a gauge to measure the characters of the women in her fiction. Walker repeatedly reiterates her stance through the stories that she tells. Like the blues singer, she improvises upon her material in such a way that her message of womanism is presented in different ways, through different characters and situations.

Contrary to popular belief, Alice Walker's creed of womanism does not stress so much on a rebellion against men, black or white, as it does on the celebration of womanhood, a fact which is evident from her definition of the word "womanist". It is concerned with the complete emancipation of women of all colors and creeds. She writes, 'a woman/ is wilderness/ unbounded/ holding the future/ between each breath/ walking the earth/ only because/ she is free/ and not creepervine/ or tree.'<sup>28</sup> It emphasizes the necessity of enabling a woman to display her true nature, which is,

“outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful”. The womanist must resist all forms of oppression that hinders her development into wholeness; if this oppression comes from African American men as well as white people and their institutions, then the womanist must display her courage by resisting these African American men as well.

As an African American woman artist, Walker shares the concerns of many of her fellow women writers. In an interview, she says:

Critics seem unusually ill-equipped to discuss and analyze the works of black women intelligently. Generally, they do not even make the attempt; they prefer, rather, to talk about the lives of black women writers, not about what they write. And, since black women are not – it would seem, very likeable – until recently they were the least willing worshippers of male supremacy – comments about them tend to be cruel (*Search*, pp. 260-61).

*illustrate*

Walker received much criticism for what was perceived as her negative portrayal of African American men in the character of Mister in her book, *The Color Purple*, which was made into a motion picture. Similar criticism was leveled against her portrayal of African American men in the *Third Life of Grange Copeland* and *Meridian*. She was “disappointed” in some African American men’s “inability to empathize with black women’s suffering under sexism, their refusal even to acknowledge our struggles; indeed, there are many black men who appear unaware that sexism exists... or that women are oppressed in virtually all cultures, and if they do recognize there is abuse, their tendency is to minimize it or deflect attention from it to themselves.”<sup>29</sup> There was also a great amount of criticism of *The Color Purple* because of its explicit language and the portrayal of a lesbian relationship. Walker’s response to this was:

In my opinion, it is not the depiction of the brutal behavior of a black male character that is the problem for the critics.... Rather, it is the behavior of the women characters that is objectionable...women have their own agenda, and it does not include knuckling under to abusive men. Women loving women, and expressing it “publicly,” if they so

choose, is part and parcel of what freedom for women means, just as this is what it means for anyone else. If you are not free to express your love, you are a slave; and anyone who would demand that you enslave yourself by not freely expressing your love is a person with a slaveholder's mentality.<sup>30</sup>

In any case, Walker's struggle against African American men is not because they are male *per se*, but *because* their gender privileges them in such a way that they tend to oppress African American women. Similarly whites oppressed the African American race for centuries, and social institutions oppressed minorities like homosexuals and other nonconformist groups. In her journal she writes, "No matter in what anger I have written about the black man, I have never once let go of his hand. Though he has kicked me in the shins many times."<sup>31</sup>

A womanist is committed to both her gender and race on preferential and historical grounds rather than those of biology, and she values the culture that history has given her, a sentiment amplified in her assertion that the womanist loves music, dance, the moon, the Spirit, struggle, the Folk, and herself. In the words of Maria Lauret:

Pleasure and sensuality are foregrounded here; womanism is articulated as a political identity which is integrated into everyday life, non-elitist and positive/active *rather than determined by victim-status*.<sup>32</sup>

The womanist also has the capacity to love both men and women, sexually or non-sexually. Her commitment to the survival whole of her people includes "male *and* female". Walker's understanding of herself as woman and as artist comes from an awareness that everything in life, all histories and beings, are interconnected, and that it is the responsibility of the artist to portray this vital truth. This cosmic vision is increasingly apparent in her later works, such as *The Temple of My Familiar*, and *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, where her artistry tends to lean towards the spiritual and

the psychic. Her narrative does not simply end with the portrayal of the atrocities and sufferings experienced by her people; as a womanist, she is affirmative. Taking her cue from the courageous African American women who have preceded her, she affirms the necessity and possibility of survival, which these women have amply demonstrated in their own lives. Art, for Walker, does not exist for itself alone; it serves as the vehicle for re-education and re-evaluation, which will ensure the “survival whole” of black people. A passive acceptance of injustice and oppression is eschewed for a willingness to change, “I believe in change: change personal, and change in society” (*Search*, p. 252), and an active participation to overthrow any form of oppression. In her own words,

It is, in the end, the saving of lives that we writers are about. Whether we are “minority” writers or “majority”. It is simply in our power to do this. We do it because we care [...] We care because we know this: *the life we save is our own.* (*Search*, p. 14)

More than anything else, however, Walker’s womanist vision is one of celebration, a celebration of the self and of African American womanhood. This celebration is represented in her part-autobiographical, part-metaphorical essay, ‘Beauty: When the Other Dancer is the Self’, the concluding essay of *Search*. The fragments of autobiography that climax in the whirling, jubilant dancing of the final paragraph introduce the visions and re-visions that constitute the African American woman inhabiting the pages of her novels. After having suffered from the disfigurement of a partially blinded eye, which had made her feel ugly, Walker is made to re-assess her disfigurement when her daughter says, “Mommy, there’s a *world* in your eye.” From this point on, she sees what she had hitherto considered a handicap, as a blessing:

Yes, indeed, I realized, looking into the mirror. There *was* a world in my eye. And I saw that it was possible to love it: that in fact, for all it had taught me of shame and anger and inner vision, I did love it. (*Search*, p. 393).

In the essay as the dancer swirls to Stevie Wonder's music, another "brightfaced" dancer joins her, a beautiful and free mirror image, who is the other part of herself that she has neglected for so long. "She is beautiful, whole and free. And she is also me." (*Search*, 393) The fragmented self becomes integrated because she is willing to accept all aspects of her life, her personality, and her history. As Clara Juncker notes, "with the emergence of the second dancer, who is "also me", Walker introduces the self-division of African American femininity. At the same time, the dancing itself – and Wonder's music – signify a bodily, extralinguistic discourse that situates black feminine expression at the margin of traditional sign systems."<sup>33</sup> Walker's essay above all, sums up the special vision of the African American woman; she has her own "world" in her eye, and her perspective, therefore, is necessarily different. It is this different perspective, a perspective that offers an alternative reading of history and often strikes a note of discordance, which Alice Walker presents in her fiction.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Much has been written on the different aspects of Alice Walker's creative and critical writings. Her books have elicited much critical response, as varied as they are numerous. Much of the literature available on Alice Walker are in the form of scholarly articles in literary journals. There are relatively fewer studies in book forms. Criticism on Walker has been noted in order of relevance only and not in any particular chronological sequence:

Donna Haisty Winchell has written *Alice Walker* (1992), which gives an overall view of Walker's literary preoccupations, and deals with both her nonfictional

works such as *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, and *Living by the Word*, as well as the novels, short stories and poems.

Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and K.A. Appiah have edited a collection of critical essays entitled *Alice Walker: Critical Perspectives Past and Present* (1993). The book contains reviews of her first five novels, essays by sixteen scholars mostly focusing on her fiction, as well as interviews of Walker by John O'Brien and Sharon Wilson.

Maria Lauret has written a book entitled *Alice Walker* (2000) as part of a *Modern Novelists* series. She traces Walker's distinctive themes of child abuse and women's sexuality, and shows the development of Walker's theories of racial hybridity, spirituality and goddess worship. She also analyses Walker's treatment of African American history, which is staged as a protest against the white masculinist dominance of western thinking. Walker's interest in the work of psychoanalyst Carl Jung, her concern with ecology, spirituality and Native American philosophies of the life cycle are also explored. Lauret shows that Walker's later, more complex novels are a logical development from the earlier work. In her book, *Liberating Literature: Feminist Fiction in America* (1994), she also includes a chapter on Alice Walker's *Meridian*, entitled 'Healing the Body Politic'.

In *The Afro-American Novel Since 1960* (1982) edited by Peter Bruck and Wolfgang Karrer, Klaus Ensslen's essay, 'Collective Experience and Individual Responsibility: Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970)' is included. The essay outlines the broad racial experiences of the black community, which although shared, may be subjective in its effect on different people. He talks about Walker's belief that the individual has a responsibility to rise above his circumstances, and that he has a choice as to how to react to the injustice and oppression of his circumstances.

*Race, Gender and Desire: Narrative Strategies in the Fiction of Toni Cade Bambara, Toni Morrison and Alice Walker* (1989), by Elliot Butler-Evans gives an interesting insight into Walker's art, focusing particularly on *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, *Meridian* and *The Color Purple*.

In his book, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (1998), Henry Louis Gates, Jr., devotes an entire chapter on Walker's use of signifying as a means to rewrite and revise the techniques of folk oral expression used by Zora Neale Hurston.

*Modern Critical Interpretations: Alice Walker's The Color Purple* (2000), edited by Harold Bloom contains some of the best essays on this novel by twelve scholars, including Lauren Berlant, bell hooks, Molly Hite, Carolyn Williams and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. Themes such as Walker's didacticism, her "womanist gospel", the generational connections between black women and the question of race, domesticity and marginality are some of the issues tackled by these scholars. Bloom has also edited *Major Novelists: Alice Walker* (2000), which takes up studies on *Meridian* and *The Color Purple*. Essayists include Gloria Steinem, Deborah E. McDowell, Thadious M. Davis, Barbara Christian and Mel Watkins.

Lillie P. Howard has compiled and edited a collection of essays on comparative studies between Zora Neale Hurston and Alice Walker in her book, *Alice Walker and Zora Neale Hurston: the Common Bond* (1993). Contributors include well-known Walker scholars like Trudier Harris, Mary Anne Wilson, and Valerie Babb, as also an essay by Walker herself on Zora Neale Hurston. Most of the writers focus on the similarities of these two writers, both as individuals and artists, and also the way in which Walker consciously establishes a connection with Hurston, whom she considers her literary model.

*Black Women Writers (1950- 1980)*, edited by Mari Evans (1984) gives a comprehensive view of African American women writers of this period, and contains a section on Alice Walker, with essays by Walker herself, Barbara Christian, and Bettye J. Parker-Smith.

*Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction and Literary Tradition* (1985), edited by Marjorie Pryse and Hortense J. Spillers, apart from giving a helpful view of African American women's literature, has a section entitled, 'Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker and the "Ancient Power" of Black Women'.

From the extensive body of articles and essays on Walker that is available through journals, some may be noted as being particularly perceptive in their reading of Walker's fiction. These have been consulted in the writing of this thesis.

Valerie Babb's "*The Color Purple: Writing to Undo What Writing has Done*" argues convincingly of the damage that official historiography, mostly Euro-centric, has inflicted upon the history of African Americans. She observes that Walker, through her characters, implements the written word, which is the very tool that has been used to oppress women, to rewrite their own stories and histories.

Barbara Christian, a noted Walker critic, has written several essays, which are remarkable for their critical and creative insights. Among these are, 'The Contrary Black Women of Alice Walker' (1981) in *The Black Scholar*, 'Alice Walker: The Black Woman Artist as Wayward'(1984) in *Black Women Writers (1950- 1980)*. Both these essays focus on Walker's women as being unconventional women who often deviate from the norms of dominant forces, such as patriarchy, both white and black, in order to survive and find their own true selves.

Melvin Dixon in 'The Black Writer's Use of Memory' (1994) is a well-structured study of the significance of memory and history in the works of black

writers. He bases his arguments on the theories of “sites of memory” by French scholar, Pierre Nora.

Other noteworthy essays include Felipe Smith, ‘Alice Walker’s Redemptive Art’ (*African American Review*, 26:3, 1992); Cushing Strout, ‘“I, Too, Sing America”: Alice Walker’s Visible Woman, Meridian’ in *Making American Tradition: Visions And Revisions From Ben Franklin to Alice Walker*, (1990); Robert James Butler, ‘Making a Way Out of No Way: The Open Journey in Alice Walker’s *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*’ (*Black American Literature Forum*, 22: 1, Spring 1988); Arunima Ray, ‘The Quest For “Home” and “Wholeness” in *Sula* and *Meridian*: Afro-American Identity in Toni Morrison and Alice Walker’ (*IJAS*, 23:2, Summer 1993); Joseph a. Brown, ‘“All Saints Should Walk Away”: The Mystical Pilgrimage of *Meridian*’ (*Callaloo*, 12:2, Spring 1989). Also, Meera Vishwanathan and Evangelina Mancikam, ‘Is Black Woman to White as Female is to Male? Restoring Alice Walker’s Womanist Prose to the Heart of Feminist literary Criticism’ (*IJAS*, 28: 1 & 2, Winter 1998).

Scholarship on *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* includes essays, Trudier Harris, ‘Violence in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*’ (*CLA*, XIX: 2, December 1975); Karen C. Gaston, ‘Women in the Lives of Grange Copeland’ (*CLA*, XXIV: 3, March 1981); W. Lawrence Hogue, ‘History, the Feminist discourse and Alice Walker’s *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*’ (*MELUS*, 12:2, Summer 1985); and Theodore O. Mason, Jr., ‘Alice Walker’s the *Third Life of Grange Copeland*: The Dynamics of Enclosure’ (*Callaloo*, 12: 2, Spring 1989). Robert James butler has written an essay, ‘Alice Walker’s Vision of the South’ (*AAR*, 1993) and Kate Cochran has written on ‘“When Lessons Hurt”: *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* as Joban Allegory’ (*Southern Literary Journal*, XXXIV: 1, Fall, 2001).

On *Meridian*, Pamela E. Barnett has written “‘Miscegenation’, Rape and ‘Race’ in Alice Walker’s *Meridian* (*The Southern Quarterly*, 39: 3, Spring 2001); Roberta M. Hendrickson, ‘Remembering the Dream: Alice Walker, *Meridian* and the Civil Rights Movement’ (*MELUS*, Fall 1999); Alan Nadel, ‘Reading the Body: Alice Walker’s *Meridian* and the Archeology of Self’ (*MFS*, 34: 1, Spring 1988); Margaret Homans, “‘Her Very Own Howl’”: The Ambiguities of Representation in Recent Women’s Fiction’ (*Signs*, 9:2, Winter 1983); Rudolph P. Byrd, ‘Shared Orientation and Narrative Acts in *Cane*, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and *Meridian*’ (*MELUS*, 17:4, Winter 1991). Also, Anne M. Downey, “‘A Broken and Bloody Hoop’: The Intertextuality of *Black Elk Speaks* and Alice Walker’s *Meridian*’ (*MELUS*, 19:3, Fall 1994); and Janelle Collins, “‘Like a Collage’”: Personal and Political Subjectivity in Alice Walker’s *Meridian* (*CLA*, XLIV: 2, December 2000).

Marc A. Christophe reads *The Color Purple* as an existential novel (*CLA* XXXVI: 3, March 1993) while Thomas F. Marvin traces Walker’s blues connections in ‘‘Preachin’ the Blues’’: Bessie Smith’s Secular Religion and Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*’ (*AAR*, 28:3, 1994). Trudier Harris, ‘From Victimization to Free Enterprise: Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*’ (*Studies in American Fiction*, 14:1, 1986), Frank W. Shelton, ‘Alienation and Integration in Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*’ (*CLA*, XXVIII:1, September 1984), Candice M. Jenkins, ‘Queering Black Patriarchy: Masculine Possibility in Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*’ are also notable essays. Martha J. Cutter has written ‘Philomela Speaks: Revisioning Rape Archetypes in *The Color Purple*’ (*MELUS*, Fall-Winter, 2000).

Essays on *The Temple of My Familiar* include Ikenna Dieke’s ‘Toward a Monistic Idealism: The Thematics of Alice Walker’s *The Temple of My Familiar*’ (*African American Review*, 26: 3, 1992); Bonnie Braendlin’s ‘Alice Walker’s *The*

*Temple of My Familiar* as Pastiche' (*American Literature*, 68:1, March 1996) and Roland Walter's 'The Dialectics Between the Act of Writing and the Act of Reading in Alice Walker's *The Temple of My Familiar*, Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* and Toni Morrison's *Jazz*' (*Southern Quarterly*, XXXV:3, Spring, 1997).

Geneva Cobb More, George Olakunle, Angeletta K.M. Gourdine, Susana Vega, and E. Lale Demirturk have all written articles on *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, focusing on archetypal symbolism, globalization, postmodern ethnography and the womanist mission, the weight of tradition, and the black woman's selfhood respectively. Other essays include Stephen Souris', 'Multiperspectival Consensus: Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, the Multiple Narrator Novel, and the Practice of "Female Circumcision"' (*CLA*, XL:4, June 1997).

A majority of the essays on Walker's short stories focus on 'Everyday Use'. Essays on her short stories include Trudier Harris, 'Tiptoeing Through Taboo: Incest in 'The Child Who Favored Daughter' (*MFS*, 28: 3, Autumn 1982); Joan S. Korenman, 'African-American Women Writers, Black Nationalism, and the Matrilineal Heritage' (*CLA*, XXXVIII:2, December 1994); David Cowart, 'Heritage and Deracination in Walker's 'Everyday Use'' (*Studies In Short Fiction*, 33, Spring 1996); Maria V. Johnson, "'You Just Can't Keep A Good Woman Down": Alice Walker Sings the Blues' (*AAR*, Summer 1996); Neal A. Lester, 'Alice Walker's 'The Child Who Favored Daughter as Neo-Slave Narrative' (*Studies In Short Fiction*, 3: Summer 1997); Susan Farrell, 'Fight Vs Flight: A Re-Evaluation of Dee in Alice Walker's 'Everyday Use' (*Studies in Short Fiction*, 35:2, Spring 1998); David J. Mickelson, "'You ain't Never Caught a Rabbit": Covering and Signifyin' in Alice Walker's 'Nineteen Fifty Five' (*The Southern Quarterly*, 42:3, Spring 2004); Michael Hollister, 'Tradition in Alice Walker's 'To Hell With Dying'' (*Studies In Short*

*Fiction*, 26:1, Winter 1989) and Sam Whitsitt, 'In Spite of It All: A Reading of Alice Walker's 'Everyday Use' (*AAR*, Fall 2000).

Of sources available on the internet, *Aniina's Alice Walker Page*, <<http://www.luminarium.org/contemporary/alicew/>>, Aniina Jokinen (ed.), is the most relevant. It provides access to reliable links related to Alice Walker that are posted online. Created by Aniina Jokinen, the site offers links refereed essays, journal articles, and both bibliographical and biographical information on Alice Walker.

#### End Notes

1. (i) Refer to Introduction and Chapter 1 of: Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, (New York: Norton, 1997).  
 (ii) Alice Walker uses the term "black" to denote African Americans. Although "Afro-American" is also acceptable, "African American" has been used more frequently in the thesis except where such usage is not suitable in the context of the discussion. For example, the term, "black" was common during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, and therefore has been retained when writing in that context. Similar exceptions have been made in phrases such as "black and white", "black liberty", "black folk", "black revolutionary", "black church", "black folk", "black propaganda" and "black Motherhood" etc.
2. Alice Walker, 'Beauty: When the Other Dancer is the Self', *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, (Florida: Harcourt, 1984), p.244. Henceforth referred to in parenthesis as *Search*.
3. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and K.A. Appiah, *Alice Walker: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, (New York: Amistad), p. ix.
4. A complete bibliography of Walker's works is provided in the appendix.
5. Alice Walker, *Living By the Word: Selected Writings, 1973-1987*, (Florida: Harcourt, 1988), p. 40.
6. Alice Walker, 'To Hell with Dying', in Langston Hughes (ed.), *Best Short Stories by Negro Writers: An Anthology from 1899 to the Present*, (Boston: Little-Brown, 1967), pp. 490- 96.
7. Both stories appear in *In Love and Trouble*. Walker talks about the genesis of the story, 'The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff' in *Anything We Love Can Be Saved*, (New York: Random, 1997), p. 64, also discussed in *Search*, pp. 9-10.

8. Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men* [1935] in *Folklore, Memoirs and Other Writings*, (New York: Library of America, 1995), p.10; Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, (New York: Random, 1969), p. 9.
9. 'The Civil Rights Movement', Encyclopedia Britannica 2001 CD Rom Edition, Encyclopedia Britannica Inc., UK, 2001.
10. This theme is studied in detail in Chapter III.
11. Refer to (ii) of Endnote No.1.
12. Alice Walker, 'Oppressed Hair Puts a Ceiling on the Brain', *Living By the Word*, pp. 73-74.
13. bell hooks, *Ain't I A Woman: Black women and Feminism*, (Boston: south End Press), pp. 136-37.
14. Alice Walker, Interview, *New York Times Magazine*, January 8, 1984.
15. Gloria Steinem, "Womanism" in *Women's Encyclopedia*, (New York: Women's Press, 1994), p. 257.
16. A study of Walker's use of blues themes and techniques is presented in chapters I and IV.
17. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/blues>. June 16, 2007.
18. David Ewen, *Panorama of American Popular Music*, (Prentice Hall, 1957) pp. 142-43.
19. Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 223.
20. Bessie Smith, 'I Ain't Got Nobody', written by Graham, Clarence Williams and Spencer Williams, recording of 1924-1925 from *The Complete Recordings*, Vol. 2 (1924-1925), (Columbia/Legacy C2K-47471).
21. Billie Holiday, 'I've Got A Right To Sing A Blues', written by Harold Arlen and Ted Koehler, Arranged by René Hall, *Tribute To The Lady*, Vol. 2 (Keen EP B 2013), Sound Enterprises, January 21 1959.
22. Maria Lauret, *Alice Walker*, (London: Macmillan, 2000), p. 114.
23. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism*, (New York: OUP, 1988). Hereafter cited parenthetically as *Signifying*.
24. Carolyn Williams, 'The Revision of the Epistolary Address in *The Color Purple*' in Harold Bloom (ed.), *Modern Critical Interpretations: Alice Walker's The Color Purple*, (London: Chelsea House, 2000), p. 80.
25. Clara Juncker, 'Womanizing Theory', *American Studies in Scandinavia*, Vol.30, 1998) p.45.
26. *Ibid.*, p.46.
27. Alice Walker, 'For My Sister Molly, Who in the Fifties', *Revolutionary Petunias and Other Poems*, (New York: Harcourt, 1973).

28. Original emphasis, Alice Walker, 'A Woman Is Not a Potted Plant', qtd in 'What Can I Give My Daughters, Who Are Brave?', *Anything We Love Can Be Saved: A Writer's Activism*, (New York: Random, 1997), p.105.
29. "In the Closet of the Soul", *Living by the Word*, p.79.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 91.
31. 'Journal'. *Living By the Word*, p. 95.
32. My italics. Maria Lauret, *Alice Walker*, p. 20.
33. Clara Juncker, 'Womanizing Theory', p. 46.

## Chapter-I

### SIEVING THE PAST THROUGH WOMANIST EYES

Alice Walker's commitment to writing is linked to her social and political activism, which gives her work an added significance. In an interview reprinted in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*, she states:

I am preoccupied with the spiritual survival, the survival whole of my people. But beyond that, I am committed to exploring the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties, the triumphs of black women.... For me, black women are the most fascinating creations in the world.<sup>1</sup>

She views the role of the African American artist as multifaceted. One of the most crucial responsibilities of the artist is the presentation and representation of history:

The real revolution is always concerned with the least glamorous stuff. With raising a reading level from second grade to third. *With simplifying history and writing it down* (or reciting it) for the old folks. (Italics added. *Search*, p. 135).

Walker's preoccupation with history is shared by many other contemporary African American writers, such as Toni Morrison and Maya Angelou, as well as earlier writers like Zora Neale Hurston. Like Toni Morrison's use of 'rememory',<sup>2</sup> Walker constantly refers to the past in order to gain a better understanding of the present. The past that she delves into in her fiction is both the collective past of the African American race, as well as the personal pasts of individual characters. She repeatedly underlines the lasting impact that the past has over the present:

It is memory more than anything else, that sours the sweetness of what has been accomplished.... What we cannot forget and never will forgive. ('Choosing to Stay Home', *Search*, p. 166)

In order to explore the past and its impact on the present, Walker occupies herself with an examination of African American history. History, as defined by

Pierre Nora in his seminal essay, 'Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Memoire*'<sup>3</sup> is the method whereby "our hopelessly forgetful modern societies, propelled by change, organize the past". It is, therefore, subject to modifications and misrepresentations. This is particularly true of African American history, which is largely dependent upon the oral tradition for its historical records. Again, the oral tradition is one which relies heavily on the memory of the person who transmits the (his)story by word of mouth. Furthermore, early studies on African American history were mostly done by white scholars, and writers like Walker felt that there were serious misrepresentations in their studies. Through her works, we see a juxtaposition of the traditional, Eurocentric historical discourse with African-American representations of history. As an artist, she presents through her fiction an alternative to the existing official historiography regarding black people.

Walker "simplifies" history through the consciousness and experiences of her characters, who are predominantly African American women. African American women play an important role in the oral tradition because they were most often the storytellers within the family, and in effect, the transmitters of history. The relationship between history and memory is one that is explored in all its complexities by the author through her characters, often resulting in a radically different view of history as opposed to the traditionally accepted version, which often cannot accommodate the history of those who are marginalized along gender or racial lines. It is a history that has been purported by the dominant classes in society, and to quote Gayle Greene and Coppelia Kahn, the limitations of conventional historiography are such that,

What has been designated historically significant has been deemed so according to a valuation of power and activity in the public world. History has been written primarily from the perspective of the

authoritative male subject – the single triumphant consciousness- with a view to justifying the politically dominant west – individualism, progress, conquest – i.e., to providing pedigrees for individuals, rising classes, nations, cultures and ideologies. As long as the “transmission and experience of power” are its primary focus, as long as war and politics are seen as more significant to the history of humankind than child-rearing, women remain marginalized or invisible. Its androcentric framework...has excluded from its consideration not only women, but the poor, the anonymous, and the illiterate.<sup>4</sup>

Walker follows the pattern of traditional African American male discourse in her fiction by questioning omissions based on race in historical narratives. However, she goes a step further and persistently challenges this discourse by offering a feminine counter-discourse. Oral discourse, myths, demythologizing existing myths, and folklore constitute part of this alternative history offered by a womanist ideology. While the notion of broadly representing African American as an oppressed and marginalized race is a preoccupation of male and female to denote African American writers alike, it is not completely able to represent the intricacies of to denote African American women’s experiences. In the words of Elliot Butler-Evans,

Inscriptions of the feminine in Walker’s novels are marked by their difference from the racial history she invokes. Quite often, they become alternative narratives that disrupt or address, directly or indirectly, the omissions of the framing historical discourse. The peremptory movement of a feminine-feminist counterdiscourse becomes the dominant textual activity. These historical narratives of women, while contained within the framework of the racial historical narratives, become signifiers of sexual difference.<sup>5</sup>

In *The Color Purple*, Walker examines in depth the experiences of the African American female psyche and forwards an overt womanist discourse. The primary focus is on the perceptions of its female protagonist, Celie, who must confront her fears of her stepfather, of her husband, and of losing her children and her sister Nettie. Abused and raped by her stepfather from a very young age, Celie is perpetually scared of people and situations that have the potential to hurt her. She goes to extraordinary

lengths to avoid confrontations at the cost of her own integrity. It reaches a point where she ceases to live as a human being, existing only to please those whom she serves. She denies herself any sense of identity, and becomes meek, subservient and self-effacing in her attempt to please the very people who brutalize her. All this is a result, not of her behavior, but because of who, or what, she is, as articulated by Albert: "You black, you poor, you ugly, you a woman. Goddam, he say, you nothing at all."<sup>6</sup>

Celie's suffering is an account of an individual's trauma, but it is also symptomatic of much more than that:

*The Color Purple* is not only about the brutalization of one black 14-year old, but concerns a historical discourse of international politics which makes Celie's suffering possible; the novel shows how the structures of power which oppress her are institutionalized and historicized as 'natural'....One of the remarkable aspects of Walker's novel is the way it contextualizes Celie's suffering in terms of the entire history of Black Americans.<sup>7</sup>

History, as Celie and Nettie know it, is rewritten for them as they begin to widen their horizons and come into contact with new experiences. Nettie's travels and extended stay in Africa is an educative one in more ways than one. In Harlem, she learns, for instance, that there are African Americans "living in houses that are finer than any white person's house down home" (*CP*, p. 141), and that these black people are knowledgeable about, and proud of, their African descent. She also learns, before she arrives in Africa, that Jesus was not a European white:

Think what it means that Ethiopia is Africa! All the Ethiopians in Africa were colored. It had never occurred to me, though when you read the bible it is perfectly plain if you pay attention only to the words. It is the pictures in the bible that fool you. The pictures that illustrate the words. All of the people are white and so you think that all the people from the bible were white too. But really *white* people lived somewhere else during those times. That's why the bible says Jesus had hair like lamb's wool. Lamb's wool is not straight, Celie. It isn't even curly. (original emphasis, *CP*, p. 113)

Nettie also learns that white people in America come from Europe, that the Egyptians who built the pyramids were colored people, and that to denote African Americans were sold into slavery and came into America in ships. In coming to Africa, Nettie feels as though she has come home to “the land for which our mothers and fathers cried” (*CP*, p. 120-21) and despite finding that Africa is not a “place overrun with savages who didn’t wear clothes” (*CP*, p. 111) as she was taught in school, Nettie does not find Africa to be any kind of Utopia for black people. There are many disturbing parallels between culture and society in Africa and the Southern America states, and the exposition of these parallels is an important part of the novel’s structure and ideological freight. “The Olinkas do not believe girls should be educated... like white people at home who don’t want colored people to learn” (*CP* p. 132) and the Olinka husband has “life and death power over the wife”; moreover, they subject women to circumcision: “the one ritual they do have to celebrate women is so bloody and painful” (*CP*, p. 161).

Nettie’s educative journey has a direct bearing on many key aspects of Celie’s life. In Africa, Celie’s family history is uncovered when Samuel explains how he came to adopt Celie’s children. Perhaps even more importantly from the point of view of Celie’s wholeness and healing, her past, or her history, as she knows it, is revised and her sense of identity undergoes a fundamental change. She finds out the truth behind all the lies and guilt that have haunted her:

My daddy lynch. My mama crazy. All my little half-brothers and sisters no kin to me. My children not my sister and brother. Pa not Pa.  
(*CP*, p. 151)

It undoes the taboo of incest that Celie has lived with, and it offers her a different family lineage in which her real father was an entrepreneur so successful and

prosperous that the white merchants found it necessary to wipe him out by lynching him and his brothers. Her mother was a woman who had aspirations that her African American neighbors found “grander than anything they could ever conceive of for black people.” (CP, p. 149). Significantly, her neighbors shunned her “partly because her attachment to the past is so pitiful” (CP, p. 149) and she loses her sanity. This reconstruction of her personal past is an important tool that enables Celie to have self-confidence, to move forward and lay the past to rest. From being a victim, she becomes a successful entrepreneur, starting her own business and becoming whole as a woman again.


The demystification of Africa in Nettie’s sensibilities is echoed in *The Temple of My Familiar*, when, in Africa, Fanny finds that governments and ruling elites oppress minority peoples and suppress dissident opinions – like those of her father, the playwright Ola – in ways that are not so dissimilar from Western societies. Africa is thus not represented here as the homeland that Fanny as an African American can return to in order to find her true self, for her true self is more dynamic and variegated than that. As Terry Dehay puts it,

Fanny’s discovery of her African self and also of the truth of the socio-political nature of Africa, helps her to integrate the separate parts of herself and to reconstruct the nature of her relationship of the culture in which she lives. [...] She confronts her anger with white society by returning to the African country that represents *half* of her cultural heritage, where she learns that her anger is real but that in directing it at white people, she is missing the real target: any society that represses the enemy, regardless of color.<sup>8</sup> [emphasis added]

This inverts the Black Power/ Arts Movement’s philosophy of the 1960s, in which anything African tended to be glorified and Africa itself was seen as the ‘homeland’ to which its people must return to find themselves, an attitude that had already taken root in 1920s Harlem:

Black is beautiful  
 coined by Kwame Ninsin  
 popularized by the Black Panther Party

...they give and give and then reach out and give some more, when the name "Africa" is mentioned. They love Africa. They defend it at the drop of a hat....Even the children dredged up their pennies. Please give these to the children of Africa, they said. (CP, p. 114)

The disenchantment with Africa and all it stands for is further explored in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, where the 'cultural' practice of female genital mutilation in Africa is taken up. Walker's choice of the protagonist Tashi, who is a victim of such a horrifying practice, is significant. If Walker strongly condemns the racist acts of white people against African Americans, she is no less forgiving of the treatment the patriarchal society metes out to women in the African context. 

In *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, the text reveals the history of male characters such as Grange and his son, Brownfield, but as Walker puts it, it is "the women and how they are treated that colors everything". Thus, in this novel, there are two separate historical discourses co-existing with one another. The first is a broader racial history, exemplified in the hard life of Grange Copeland. He is a poor African American sharecropper in the south, who suffers racial and economic hardships. This has tragic consequences on himself as well as on his family. Like a blues song, the second discourse runs as on a minor key, but with no less importance. It is the history of the different women, Mem, Margaret, Josie and Ruth.

In *Grange*, we are given a Grange's personal history; yet, he is also representative of many other African American sharecroppers. As the central character of the novel, he dramatizes essential parts of the collective experience of his race. He faces total subjugation and discouragement at the personal and economic levels. His response to this kind of treatment is contempt for the white man and his norms. He expresses this at the beginning of the novel when he refuses to meet the eyes of Chipley, his white employer, a symbolic gesture of non-cooperation and

masked contempt in African American writing. Grange's contempt for the white man's norms is contrasted sharply with Brownfield's attitude, whose self-destructive hatred stamps him as a total victim of white domination.

Father and son are set up as contrasting figures embodying diametrically opposed options for the African American man under white supremacy. Grange's flight from the sharecropper's condition proves destructive for his family, but not with regard to himself. It turns self-aggression into what Alice Walker considers a constructive act of resistance against the norms of the south, initiating a learning process as a prerequisite for assuming a positive self-image. In his second life in the north, Grange interacts with different narratives and histories which lead him to a fuller understanding of himself, his race, and American society as a whole.

During this period, Grange gets to know extensively the form of discrimination specific to the north, i.e., the exclusion of black people through ignoring them. The text pointedly takes up Ellison's<sup>9</sup> metaphor of invisibility:

...to the people he met and passed daily he was not even an existence! The South had made him miserable, with nerve endings raw from continual surveillance from contemptuous eyes, but they knew he was there. Their very disdain proved it. The North put him in solitary confinement where he had to manufacture his own hostile stares in order to see himself. For why were they pretending he was not there?<sup>10</sup>

The story of Grange's life unfolds, and years later, his actions are eerily echoed and amplified in the life of his son Brownfield. His father's behavioral patterns begin to assert themselves in Brownfield's nature. He faces the same fears, frustrations, rage and helplessness that his father had, and his reaction is tragically repetitive of his father's, culminating in his murder of Mem, the beautiful, intelligent and loving wife of his youth. (Brownfield never gets the benefit of his father's re-education, which is also personal reconstruction, but his granddaughter.) Ruth, however, does, and it is she who gives Grange his third life, in which he has to learn

still more. He is shown trying to make amends for his past behavior by looking after his daughter-in-law, Mem, and after her death, her daughter, Ruth.

Grange Copeland's transformation and self-healing demonstrate the necessity and ability of black men to change the course of history, starting with the most intimate history of all, that of the black family in the American south. Contrary to what many black men of those times thought, the oppression of black women within the family is part of the problem, not the solution, because it is merely a link in the longer chain of mastery and subordination. Taking the traumatic history of violence and oppression of Afro-Americans in its entirety and going a step further, Walker internalizes the conflict as essentially having its impact on the family, and suggests a revision and rewriting of experience, offering an alternative domestic history. Personal transformation is at the heart of every one of Walker's novels, and in this sense, Grange Copeland's third life is only the first of many reincarnations to come. At the heart of Walker's conception of history is that "the culture of poverty, with its racial underpinnings, is essentially dehumanizing. Also she asserts that one has a "responsibility to transcend that dehumanization,"<sup>11</sup> a responsibility that Grange takes up whereas Brownfield fails to do so.

In *Grange*, Grange is the vehicle through which the portrayal of the broad racial experience of a community is narrated. The narrative is, however, displaced and challenged by subordinate narratives that focus specifically on the experiences of African American women. These secondary narratives rupture the framework in a significant way. Whereas Brownfield was first portrayed as a victim of his father's drunkenness and irresponsibility, his adult life shows him to be no longer a victim, but an oppressor of women. The poignant and pitiful picture of a young Brownfield left bare-bottomed and unattended by his parents is juxtaposed with the present

Brownfield, cruel, merciless, unforgiving and unforgivable. Many of his actions are calculated to hurt his father, his wife, and his children. And this is nowhere more apparent than in his insistence on taking his daughter Ruth away from her grandfather, despite the fact that neither he nor Josie are in any position to take responsibility for her.

Seen through the eyes of his victims, Mem, Ruth and Josie, it becomes necessary to re-evaluate Brownfield's character. It is no longer possible to see him as an object of sympathy. Unlike Walker's later heroines, Mem and Margaret do not become survivors in the way that Celie (*CP*) and Tashi (*Possessing*) become. Margaret commits suicide when Grange leaves her. Mem struggles to assert herself against her husband's *diktats*, but ultimately fails to do so. She has, however, sown the seeds of independence and resistance in her daughter Ruth, and it is she who will take measures to transcend the shadows of the oppressive past by taking assertive action along with the Civil Rights workers.

*Meridian*, published in 1976, is set against the Civil Rights Movement. It gives a simultaneous account of the events that occurred during this time, as well as the personal reactions of a young African American woman to them. The protagonist, Meridian Hill, is actively involved in the Movement. She is the medium through which history is told. The violence and political assassinations that mark this period are denoted in a section, which is simply entitled

MEDGAR EVERS/ JOHN F. KENNEDY/ MALCOLM X/ MARTIN  
LUTHER KING/ CHE GUEVERA/ PATRICE LUMUMBA/  
GEORGE JACKSON/ CYNTHIA WESLEY/ ADDIE MAE  
COLLINS/ DENISE MCNAIR/ CAROLE ROBERTSON/ VIOLA  
LIUZZO,<sup>12</sup>

an effective tool that Walker uses to explore both political and private histories, which in her womanist ideology are inextricably linked. She tells the story of a 10-year long

triangle of Meridian, Truman and Lynne and the contradictions of a relationship in which they flay and feed and comfort one another by turns. As Meridian's story unfolds, we see her in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement in New York. A group of African American women, veterans of marches and voter-registration campaigns in the South, are committing themselves anew to their cause. The question each must answer is whether they will kill for the revolution. This seems an easy, necessary question to ask. Anne-Marion, Meridian's friend from the past at a black women's college in Atlanta, presses Meridian to say yes, but Meridian is unable to do so. This issue becomes a central problem in the novel: whether killing for a political cause is ever justified. She parts ways with Truman and Anne-Marion, who abandon non-violence and, at least in theory, embrace violent militancy in New York, while she continues to work at the grassroots level in the South.

The novel's involvement with history penetrates deeper when the narrative explores the other interspersing historical layers, of slavery and even of an earlier era, the presence of Native Americans in Mississippi. In this presentation of the recent past and the distant past, Meridian takes off where *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* ends. Walker situates the history of the Copelands in the mutilations and miscegenation suffered by them from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries. Similar to *Grange*, *Meridian* also has a tripartite structure which moves from the South ('Meridian'), to New York ('Truman Held') and back again ('Ending'); like *Grange Copeland*, Lynne, Meridian, and Truman discover that the scars that marked their time together in the South cannot be healed by simply running away. The original trauma must be confronted by their voluntary return. A part of the healing process lies in the integration of, what may be recognized, as womanist and Black Civil Rights positions. It is an integration brought about by Meridian, who lives out Ruth

Copeland's philosophy of resistance without resentment. Like so many of her ancestors who are so good at this kind of resistance, Meridian's seeming passivity is in itself a mode of action whereby she leads by example rather than exhortation or authority.

A significant part of Walker's feminine counter-discourse is a personal version of historical events, using myth and folklore as alternatives to history. These myths provide alternative historical readings. The demystification of existing myths serves to challenge and reconstruct conventional versions of history. The mythological dimensions of *Meridian* appear at the very beginning of the novel, in the story of Marilene O'Shay. The townspeople have gathered to watch her body, which her husband has displayed on a circus wagon:

Marilene O'Shay, One of the Twelve Human Wonders of the World: Dead for Twenty-Five Years, Preserved in Life-Like Condition. Below this, a smaller legend was scrawled in red paint on four large stars: "Obedient Daughter" read one, "Devoted Wife" said another. The third was "Adoring Mother" and the fourth was "Gone Wrong." Over the fourth a vertical line of progressively flickering light bulbs moved continually downward like a perpetually cascading tear. (*Meridian*, p. 5)

The episode ends with the response of her husband, to whom she had been unfaithful: The oddest thing about her dried-up body, according to Henry's flier, and the one that – though it only reflected her sinfulness – bothered him most, was that its exposure to salt had caused it to darken. And, though he had attempted to paint her her original color from time to time, the paint always discolored. Viewers of her remains should be convinced of his wife's race, therefore, by the straightness and reddish color of her hair. (*Meridian*, p. 6)

Although the story of Marilene seems insignificant, it assumes symbolic proportions later when her roles as "Obedient Daughter", "Devoted Wife", "Adoring

Mother” and someone who has “Gone Wrong” become apt descriptions of Meridian herself, as well as many other young African American women. Further, “the racial ambiguity signified by Marilene’s skin coloring signifies the cross-cultural oppression of women. Thus Marilene becomes a dialectical metaphor, subsuming the major arguments of the text.”<sup>13</sup>

Other myths are also inserted in the novel. One concerns the myth behind a young abandoned child called Wile Chile who is often seen near Saxon College. Her mysterious and antisocial behavior marks her as the antithesis to society’s norms, especially when she becomes pregnant. She becomes a symbol of rebellion for the girls in the college. Another myth is that of the Sojourner Tree in the College campus, which is linked to the young slave girl, Louvinie. This myth forcefully underscores the power of narrative. Her art of storytelling proved fatal to one of her young wards, which resulted in her having her tongue cut out:

Louvinie’s tongue was clipped out at the root. Choking on blood, she saw her tongue ground under the heel of Master Saxon. Mutely, she pleaded for it, because she knew the curse of her native land: Without one’s tongue in one’s mouth or in a special spot of one’s choosing, the singer in one’s soul was lost forever, to grunt and snort through eternity like a pig.

...In her own cabin she smoked it until it was soft and pliable as leather. On a certain day, when the sun turned briefly black, she buried it under a scrawny magnolia tree on the Saxon plantation. (*Meridian*, p.33-34).

The tree was later known as The Sojourner, around which more myths accumulated. Students believed slaves of a hundred and fifty years <sup>before</sup> ago used it as a place to cohabit, and “so many tales and legends had grown up around The Sojourner that students of every persuasion had a choice of which to accept” (*Meridian*, p. 34). Yet, the tree is much more than an old tree surrounded by myths because all the girls in the college

have a special kinship with it. They observe their own rituals around it, one being “The Commemoration of Fast Mary of the Tower”:

It was related that during the twenties a young girl named Mary had had a baby in the tower off one end of Tower Hall. She had concealed her pregnancy and muffled her cries...as the child was being born. Then she had carefully chopped the infant into bits and fed it into the commode. The bits stuck and Fast Mary was caught. Caught, she was flogged before her instructors and her parents. At home she was locked in her room and denied the presence of a window. She hanged herself after three months.

Any girl who ever prayed for her period to come was welcome to the commemoration, which was held in the guise of a slow May Day dance around the foot of The Sojourner (which had been, it was said, Fast Mary’s only comfort and friend on Saxon campus). It was the only time in all the many social activities at Saxon that every girl was considered equal. On that day, they held each other’s hands tightly. (*Meridian*, p. 35)

Ironically, the Tree that they love so much is destroyed by the girls themselves in a fit of anger, after the first riot in the “impeccable history” of Saxon College. These episodes are digressions from the larger struggle of the Civil Rights Movement. They deliberately foreground the personal histories of these women. The symbolic silencing of each of these mythical figures in the novel, is connotative of the disempowerment of African American women.

Along with the validation of myths that are often rejected by official historiography, Walker also presents the demystification of existing myths, such as the myth of Black Matriarchy and romantic love. *Meridian*, contrary to popular notion, and as advocated by her mother and Truman, is not enthusiastic about being a mother. Both *Meridian* and her mother see motherhood as something that debilitates their freedom, but the similarity ends there. Mrs. Hill becomes a silent sufferer because she embraces the role of the black matriarch, a position reinforced by her religion as also by society. Much as motherhood feels oppressive to her, she would consider it blasphemous to reject her role as a mother. *Meridian*, undergoing similar

feelings of resentment and suffocation, rejects motherhood, only after her suffering borders on desperation. The conventional portrayal of a happy mother affectionately regarding her baby is defamiliarized in the depiction of Meridian and her baby :

She sat in the rocker Eddie had bought her and stroked her son's back, her fingers eager to scratch him out of her life. She realized he was even more helpless than herself, and yet she would diaper him roughly, yanking his fat brown legs in the air, because he looked like his father and because everyone who came to visit assumed she loved him, and because he did not feel like anything to her but a ball and chain.

The thought of murdering her own child eventually frightened her. To suppress it, she conceived, quite consciously, of methods of killing herself. She found it pleasantly distracting to imagine herself stiff and oblivious, her head stuck in an oven. Or coolly out of it, a hole through the roof of her mouth. It seemed to her that the peace of the dead was truly blessed, and each day she planned a new way of approaching it. (*Meridian*, p. 63)

Contrary to the assumptions that every woman revels in the role of motherhood, Meridian feels choked by it. Her position, if somewhat unusual, is one that the reader will come to terms with, and accept. As Eliot Butler-Evans puts it,

This joining of the motherhood myth with fantasies of murder and suicide heighten the argument against a romantic treatment of that institution and compels the reader to view it from a different angle. Thus, when Meridian decides to abandon her child in order to attend college, her mother's view of her as a "monster" for doing so is not sympathetically received by the reader. Inscribed in the text, then, is a historical examination of black women's changing views on motherhood: Mrs. Hill embodies the traditional position, largely self-effacing and destructive; and Meridian represents the emergence of a feminist dialectic.<sup>14</sup>

Similarly, glorified images of black revolutionaries and civil rights workers are questioned and re-examined. Meridian's earlier perception of Truman Held as a "conquering prince" (*Meridian*, p. 95) rapidly undergoes a change when he is shown to have serious shortcomings. He lacks a sense of responsibility, seen in his casual attitude towards both Lynne and Meridian, two women who love him very much. He seems incapable of seeing women as individuals, for he is fascinated by Lynne's

“whiteness” just as he is fascinated by Meridian, whom he calls “African woman” (*Meridian*, p. 113). The Civil Rights Movement itself is seen through the eyes of these young people, who actually participated in and lived through the era. Along with the political struggles, the monotony and drudgery of trying to enlist black voters, and the arrests, the novel gives an account of the private heartaches and traumas faced by the activists within the Movement. Such portrayals cannot be found in the official records of the Movement, although they are, nevertheless, extremely real.

A crucial tool of Walker’s womanist rendering of history is her utilization of the techniques and themes of blues music, a vital aspect of the African American tradition. It is interesting to note how Walker uses the blues techniques of contrast and juxtaposition to articulate discrepancies between appearance and reality, to reveal the contradictions and hypocrisies of the white world. She also uses of blues characters, forms, themes, images and linguistic techniques to convey the multi-faceted nature of black reality. The conjunction with blues music is a fictional ploy that she uses effectively. One notes that she has often credited blues singers such as Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith and Mamie Smith in her work.<sup>15</sup>

Blues music typically originates from everyday suffering, but like quilt-making, gives comfort in the making or performing of it. For a long time, blues was the only form of expression in which the thoughts and feelings of women could be expected to be heard by the people – mainstream white and black male – at large. For instance, the motif of childhood denied, a recurring theme in blues music, is a theme that Walker often explores in her novels. It is not only representative of individual suffering, but of the trauma of an entire race that was collectively robbed of its childhood, under slavery and segregation. Her characters echo the sentiments behind Louis Armstrong’s lyrics, “what did I ever do to be so black and blue?”<sup>16</sup>

As the blues singer improvises on the situation and experiences she meets with, so do these characters that Walker presents. Celie, for instance, creates an “audience” or someone who would listen to her, by writing to an invisible presence that she calls “God”. She uses the linguistic techniques of blues music, directly transcribing her speech in her letters, as opposed to Nettie’s somewhat stilted and anglicized use of language. Zora Neale Hurston had used African American English in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*,<sup>17</sup> thereby turning it into an art. Walker does the same by making Celie tell her own story, thus legitimizing the art of the oral tradition as one for “everyday use”.

Walker’s stories celebrate the African American woman’s tradition of creativity such as her needlework, quilting, storytelling and her music, both aesthetically pleasing as well as practically useful. This is true even in the case of blues music, which is sung by female singers to narrate the history of African American women through lyrics that articulate their sufferings and triumphs. In *The Color Purple*, these two strands of African American women’s artistic legacy come together as Celie, the seamstress, and Shug, the blues singer, join forces in their mutually healing and nurturing relationship.

Shug’s importance in the novel lies in the fact that she is the one who tells Celie about her ‘pleasure button’ and the significance of the color purple in the fields. She is able to do this precisely because she is a freer spirit than Celie is. Essentially, Shug is a liberated woman, and it is her art which enables her to be so. For women like Shug, blues singing was a ticket out of the oppressed condition of black women’s domestic, sexual or industrial-wage labor in the inter-war period. To quote Hortense Spiller, the blues singer

...celebrates, chides, embraces, inquires into, controls her womanhood through the eloquence of form that she both makes use of and brings into being. Black women have learned as much (probably more) that is positive about their sexuality through the practicing activity of the singer as they have from the polemicist. Bessie Smith, for instance.<sup>18</sup>

The cultural significance of Shug's occupation thus goes beyond the narrative, because Shug evokes a whole tradition of women's cultural activity and self-assertion, laying down the laws for sexual and economic independence. In many ways, she is a mouthpiece for Walker's womanist philosophy. Celie's role in the novel, however, is to assert the value of 'everyday use', for this is what she is to Albert: a doormat, nurse, nanny and cook combined. Michele Russel in 'Black Eyed Blues Connections' calls women's blues a 'coded language of resistance'.<sup>19</sup> She also says in another essay:

Blues, first and last, are a familiar, available idiom for black women, even a staple of life. [...] We all know something about blues. Being with us, life is the only training we get to measure their truth. They talk to us, in our own language. They are the expression of a particular social process by which poor black women have commented on all the major theatrical, practical, and political questions facing us and have created a mass audience who listens to what we say, in that form.<sup>20</sup>

Ultimately, much of Walker's writing, and especially *The Color Purple*, is a monument, not just to Bessie Smith and Zora Neale Hurston, but to the African American victims and survivors of sexual abuse who historically have been silenced in white (and black male) literature, but who have nevertheless expressed their pain in the blues vernacular. It is also a crucial 'monument in which the Black English of the oral tradition is forever carved in stone'.<sup>21</sup>

This treatment of history and memory is taken a step further in *The Temple of My Familiar*. Walker's offering of an alternate womanist history is at its most radical here, since it wholly rejects traditional linear history. It is a novel that is often bewildering and cryptic with its depiction of the mystical and spiritual journeys of the

characters. It takes on epic proportions, spanning centuries and continents. Through Miss Lissie, history is long and varied, since she can remember former lives stretching back to a time before humanity ever existed. In the extract below, she remembers a spell as a priestess in what is presumably Africa. She is visited by Suwelo, who, in his previous incarnation as a white explorer, is 'seemingly interested in [their] ways':

'Last night I dreamed I was showing you my temple', Miss Lissie said. [...] 'Anyway, my familiar - what you might these days, unfortunately, call a "pet" - was a small, incredibly beautiful creature that was part bird, for it was feathered, part fish, for it could swim and had a somewhat fish/ bird shape, and part reptile, for it scooted about like geckoes do, and it was all over the place while I talked to you. Its movements were very graceful and clever, its expression mischievous and full of humor. It was *alive!* You, by the way, Suwelo, were a white man, apparently, in that life, very polite, very well-to-do, and seemingly interested in our ways.'<sup>22</sup>

Further reading of the passage reveals that the "familiar" escapes as a result of Miss Lissie trying to imprison it so as not to be distracted from her conversation with the white explorer. The lesson Miss Lissie learns from this is that the urge to curb another's freedom always rebounds on the self, or as the epigraph of Part Two of the novel says: 'Helped are those who learn that the deliberate invocation of suffering is as much a boomerang as the deliberate invocation of joy.'

In her dream, Suwelo is a white man, alienated from his African American past as an academic historian. He has lost sight of his African heritage as well as his respect for the female, and this willful blindness accounts for his increasing emotional and intellectual confusion. Unable to teach history as anything other than that which is on record, as written in white men's books, he is a 'white man' by education and inclination. His initial conception of a book-learnable, linear history which can be taught and swallowed whole is obviously not acceptable to Walker. Miss Lissie's

parable of the “familiar” serves to reconnect him with unrecorded history. It is her personal memory which explains the epistemological break caused by colonialism, a break that discredited African tradition and orality and replaced it with Western rationality and written discourse.

The loss of Miss Lissie’s “familiar” is lamented not because of its beauty or its role as faithful companion or ‘pet’; nor is it simply a symbol of discredited knowledge. It also symbolizes humankind’s break from its unity with the natural world. As Maria Lauret observes, when “that unity was severed – first because of men’s domination over women, and then again because of colonialism – humans were set adrift, divided from each other along racial and gender lines and divided within themselves, their spirits broken.”<sup>23</sup> Snakes, fish, lions and monkeys populate Miss Lissie’s memories as well as her paintings. Zede and Arveyda are feathered creatures, both of Indian ancestry. As the histories of these characters become more intertwined, their identities and distinctive features begin to merge into one interracial and multicultural family, a hybrid organism like the “familiar”. Just as the novel fuses history with memory, book learning with spirituality, and humanity with the natural world, the “familiar’s” beauty, composed of the talents and traits of various species, thus metaphorizes and synthesizes the multiplicity of stories and characters in the novel.

As with the other novels, it is the women in the story, here notably Miss Lissie, who enable the others to see and understand the significance of embracing and accepting one’s hybrid ancestry, history, or past, in order to fully comprehend the present. Merlin Stone writes in *When God Was a Woman*:

The theory that most scientists were originally matrilineal, matriarchal and even polyandrous (one woman with several husbands) was the subject of several extensive studies in the late nineteenth and early

twentieth centuries. Scholars such as Johann Bachofen, Robert Briffault and Edward Hartland accepted the idea of ancient matriarchy and polyandry, substantiating their theories with a great deal of evidence, but they regarded these systems as a specific stage in evolutionary development. They suggested that all societies had to pass through a matriarchal stage before becoming patriarchal and monogamous, which they appear to have regarded as a superior stage of civilization.<sup>24</sup>

Carlotta's version of history follows along the same lines, when she explains that in another era, women were revered and even worshipped by men:

What the mind does not understand, it worships or fears. I am speaking here of man's mind. The men both worshipped and feared the women....For centuries, the male community revolved around the female one....The men grew sick of the women they worshipped. (*Temple*, p. 49-50)

The novel challenges history through memory and interrogates official historiography in several ways, most notably in its assured insistence that the study of ancient female-based religion is not some recent invention or simply a radical feminist idea. Scholarship, as Maria Lauret points out, "is not necessarily true and objective knowledge production, but rather a cultural practice invested with particular ideological interests".<sup>25</sup> As with Celie and Nettie in *The Color Purple*, history is revised and presented in a way opposed to the received knowledge passed on through the white-sanctioned text books that has conditioned the minds of such people like Suwelo and Fanny. Celie's letters are written, as Valerie Babb says, "to undo what writing has done".<sup>26</sup>

This revisioning of history by fact and fantasy to offer a counter-history is often done through the oral tradition, the notion of history as storytelling, a practice that is particularly popular in the South. To quote Eudora Welty:

As it happens, we in the South have grown up being narrators. We have lived in a place...where storytelling is a way of life. [...] We heard stories told by relatives and friends. A great many of them were family tales....If we weren't around when something happened, way

back, at least we think we know what it was like simply because we've heard it so long.<sup>27</sup>

Whether it is a reformed Grange who returns from the North and passes on his knowledge and history to Ruth, Nettie discoursing on her understanding of history as a result of her travels, Celie and Shug formulating their own perceptions of the African American woman's experience, Miss Lissie and Hal educating the other characters, and Tashi breaking the taboo of speaking out against ancient African practices, it is the *telling* that is significant. The oral transmission of knowledge, frequently discredited by academic and official historiography, is given credibility in Walker's womanist narrative.

Walker emphasizes on how the written word, appropriated by patriarchal forces, can be misleading and erroneous; history often failing to include the other version, *herstory*. Storytelling becomes a means of passing on submerged or discredited forms of knowledge, taking on the various forms of fantasizing, narration, entertainment, reminiscing, instruction and practical advice. Tashi, in particular, often takes off on 'flights of imagination' and is introduced to us as a storyteller: 'I did not realize for a long time that I was dead. And that reminds me of a story: there was once a beautiful young panther'.<sup>28</sup> For her, storytelling is a habit that constitutes a mode of escape, a form of denying her painful reality:

I mean, if I find myself way off into an improbable tale, imagining it or telling it, then I guess something horrible has happened to me and I can't bear to think about it. Wait a minute, I said, considering it for the first time, do you think this is how storytelling came into being? That the story is only the mask for the truth? (*Possessing*, p. 124)

This is not to say that Walker discredits all-forms of writing, for to do so would be to invalidate her own art. Alongside the validation of orality there are also passages in her novels which emphasize the value of writing - academic as well as creative -

because writing is also a way of preserving memory. Thus we see Celie and Nettie *writing* letters to record their experiences and memories, and Tashi symbolically breaking her silence and writing in huge, childlike letters at the end of *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. 'Scribbling my big letters as if I were a child. It had occurred to me on the plane that never would I be able to write a book about my life, nor even a pamphlet, but that write *something* I could and would' (*Possessing*, p. 103). Her sign says: 'If you lie about your own pain, you will be killed by those who will claim you enjoy it'. (*Possessing*, p. 102)

Like everything else that is characteristic of Walker's writing, even the value of orality does not escape questioning. Particularly in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, the much vaunted African oral tradition is not the medium of passing on a valuable cultural heritage, but the ideological instrument of what amounts to torture. In Olinka, mothers tell their daughters that they should comply with tradition, that to be 'bathed' – as the euphemism for clitoridectomy goes – will make them more valuable for their families, their future husbands and their people.

Maria Lauret observes that here, Walker breaks with two tenets of Afrocentric feminist thought at one stroke: first, that the oral tradition is a source of alternative knowledge which is to be revered, and second, that mothers always have their daughters' best interests at heart.<sup>29</sup> This female wisdom, that circumcision is necessary, or even desirable, Walker implies, is indeed, female folly. The fact that it is orally enforced in Olinkan society lends it cultural authority against the ideological incursions of the West. It also means that authority cannot be questioned from within African culture, for to question it amounts to betrayal of one's heritage. As the theorist Walter Ong explains in *Orality and Literacy*, oral cultures by their very nature tend to be traditionalist or conservative:

Since in a primary oral culture conceptualized knowledge that is not repeated aloud soon vanishes, oral societies must invest great energy in repeating over and over again what has been learned arduously over the ages. [...] By storing knowledge outside the mind, writing and even more, print, downgrade the figures of the old wise man and the wise old woman, repeaters of the past, in favor of younger discoverers of something new.<sup>30</sup>

Whether the revisiting and recounting of memory and history is presented through the oral tradition or the more formalized written discourse, what is important here is the necessity of recognizing and rediscovering the past, in terms of the personal and the national. Over and over again, Walker implies that the attitude of “national amnesia” that America often adopts with regard to African Americans as a race, and the complicity of African Americans themselves in their efforts to deal with pain, is a deterrent to self-knowledge and true healing. This is corroborated by Frederic Jameson’s insights into contemporary American society which, he says, is characterized by

...the disappearance of a sense of history, the way in which our entire contemporary social system has little by little begun to lose its capacity to retain its own past, has begun to live in a perpetual present and in a perpetual change that obliterates traditions of the kind which all earlier social formations have had in one way or another to preserve<sup>31</sup>

which, it may be said, is true of America’s attitude to the history of African Americans too.

In *The Temple of My Familiar*, Walker continues to voice her concern that the ideas valorized in her earlier fiction might become endangered. This threat occurs if women and people of color, who have earned a prominent place in the national mainstream, forget their history and its lesson of concerned community, a lesson more crucial than ever in the face of threats of human and global extinction.

Toni Morrison, whose interests also lie primarily in writing new histories aided by memory and imagination, writes:

Zora Neale Hurston said: 'Like the dead-seeming cold rocks, I have memories within that came out of the material that went to make me.' These 'memories within' are the subsoil of my work. But memories and recollections won't give me total access to the unwritten interior life of these people. Only the act of imagination can help me,<sup>32</sup>

an observation that finds parallel in Walker's understanding of history.

Walker's responsibility towards the presentation, representation and preservation of history must be achieved by the acts of remembering and retelling. Pierre Nora<sup>33</sup>, the French historian, states that certain incidents, objects, or people trigger our minds to remember things in the past, and these become *lieux de memoire* (sites of memory). What Walker does, in effect, is to create such sites through her characters and the stories that they live out. Sites of memory are landmarks of the past invested by an individual or a group with 'symbolic and political significance' as Genevieve Fabre and Richard O'Meally explain.<sup>34</sup> A site of memory can therefore be a monument, a photograph, a story, a book, a historical figure or almost anything that generates 'processes of imaginative recollection and the historical consciousness'. The study of material culture, of music (such as the blues), of vernacular language, of religious practices can therefore lead us, as sites of memory, into a forgotten, suppressed or even an unconscious past, but only if such sites are invested by a group or by an individual with symbolic significance and with the *intention* to remember. As a critic notes,<sup>35</sup> it may be worthwhile to point out the difference between Morrison and Walker in rewriting African American history. For both, sites of memory have a role to play in coming to terms with a traumatic past, but unlike Walker, Morrison's imaginative work in reconstructing the experience of slavery in *Beloved* cannot *redeem* the trauma of that experience. For Morrison, mourning remains necessary, and *Beloved*'s story is therefore 'not a story to pass on', even if, paradoxically, it is passed

on in the novel. Walker, on the other hand, seeks to dissolve such traumatic tension by creating a past to serve present needs.<sup>36</sup>

If one were to apply Nora's views about history and memory to *The Temple of My Familiar*, we can identify Miss Lissie as a fantasy figure in whom the *desire* for spontaneous memory going back thousands of years is personified. Alone she represents both ancient and more recent pasts, but even she is not immortal. After her death, she leaves various sites of memory behind: letters, tapes, diaries, photographs, conversations, paintings, music. Suwelo uses Miss Lissie's archive as a legacy with which to educate himself and those around him. He constructs from it an alternative history that has a redemptive force for African Americans.

The preoccupation with history and memory is further carried out in *By the Light of My Father's Smile*, where not surprisingly, the overbearing father of Susannah and Magdalena is an anthropologist. He masquerades as a missionary in order to secure funding for his research on the mixed African American/ Indian Mundo tribe. Childhood trauma plays a pivotal role in shaping the psychological and mental condition of the sisters when they become adults. The Mundo believe in "nonpossession of others"<sup>37</sup> and this lesson is one the father has to learn with regard to his daughters. Manuelito tells him that the

...dead are required to finish two tasks before all is over with them: one is to guide back to the path someone you left behind who is lost, because of your folly; the other is to host a ceremony so that you and others you have hurt may face eternity reconciled and complete. (*By the Light*, p. 150)

Hence, another aspect of this revisiting of the past is forgiveness - the asking and granting of forgiveness. In this particular novel, it is not the living who have to remember and honor their ancestors, it is the dead who have a duty to help the living, and atone for the wrongs committed whilst still alive. The girls' father has to make his

peace with both his daughters, and Manuelito's task of reconciliation lies in Vietnam, where he has to face the people he murdered during the war. Magdalena, the third narrator, who is also dead, has to be reconciled with her sister Susannah. In Walker's other books, it is often the protagonists themselves who need to give forgiveness in order to become whole again. Celie forgives the wrongs done to her by various oppressors, especially Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ / Albert. It is by relinquishing her fear and anger that she is able to transcend her circumstances and her oppressors, until harmony is finally restored at the end, when we see both sit side by side knitting companionably.

What is crucial is that in Walker's womanist writing, it is the women who are at the heart of this revisioning and reinterpretation of memory, history, and the past. What is implicitly suggested here is also that women are more inclined to accepting and adjusting themselves to change. With their intuitive knowledge and understanding of issues that the logical mind rejects, they are better equipped to chart out an alternative history that will enable them to understand, forgive and reposition themselves in their journey towards a more meaningful and comprehensive existence.

#### End Notes

1. Alice Walker, "From an Interview". *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*. (Florida: Harcourt, 1984), p. 250.
2. Toni Morrison uses this term to signify the act of remembering or recalling, in her novel, *Beloved* [1987], (London: Vintage, 1997).
3. Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Memoire*", *Representations* 26 (Spring 1989): 7- 24.
4. Gayle Greene and Coppelia Kahn, eds., *Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism*. (London: Methuen, 1985, pp. 12-13) qtd in Elliot Butler-Evans, "History and Genealogy in Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* and

- Meridian*" in Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and K.A. Appiah, eds., *Alice Walker: Critical Perspectives*, (New York: Amistad, 1993), p. 106.
5. Elliot Butler-Evans, "History and Genealogy in Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* and *Meridian*" in Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and K.A. Appiah, eds., *Alice Walker: Critical Perspectives*, (New York: Amistad, 1993), pp. 106-7.
  6. Alice Walker. *The Color Purple* (New York: Harcourt, 1982), p. 213. Henceforth referred to parenthetically as *CP*.
  7. Kenneth Millard, *Contemporary American Fiction*. (London: Oxford, 2000), p. 65.
  8. Terry Dehay. 'Narrating Memory' in Amritjit Singh, Joseph T. Skerett Junior and Robert E. Hogan (eds) *Memory, Narrative and Identity: New Essays in Ethnic American Literatures*. (London: Northeastern University Press, 1996), p. 33.
  9. Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, New York: Random, 1952. The experience of Ellison's protagonist in New York is similar to that of Grange Copeland's feeling of being invisible.
  10. Alice Walker, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, (New York: Harcourt, 1970), p. 192. Henceforth referred to parenthetically as *Grange*.
  11. Elliot Butler-Evans, 'History and Genealogy in Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* and *Meridian*', p.108.
  12. Alice Walker, *Meridian*, (New York: Harcourt, 1976) p. 21. Henceforth referred to parenthetically as *Meridian*.
  13. Eliot Butler-Evans, "History and Genealogy in Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* and *Meridian*", p. 118.
  14. *Ibid.*, p. 120.
  15. For a discussion of these women blues artists by Walker, see her essay, "Zora Neale Hurston" in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, pp. 83-92.
  16. Louis Armstrong. "Black and Blue (What Did I do To Be So)", New York: OKeh Recording, 8714. July 22, 1929.
  17. Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, [1937], (Urbana: U of Illinois, 1978).
  18. Hortense J.Spillers, 'Interstices: A Small Drama of Words' in Carole S. Vance (ed). *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*.2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Pandora, 1992), p.87
  19. Michele Russell, 'Black-Eyed Blues Connections: Teaching Black Women', in Gloria Hull et al (eds), *All the Women are White, All the Men Are Black, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies*, (Old Westbury: Feminist Press, 1982), p. 202.
  20. Michele Russell, 'Slave codes and Liner Notes. Gloria Hull et al (eds), *All the Women are White, All the Men Are Black, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies*, (Old Westbury: Feminist Press, 1982), p. 131.
  21. Maria Lauret, *Modern Novelists: Alice Walker*, Norman Page (ed), (London: Macmillan, 2000), p.120.

22. Alice Walker, *The Temple of My Familiar* [1989], (London: Phoenix, 2004), p. 118. Henceforth referred to parenthetically as *Temple*.
23. Maria Lauret, *Modern Novelists: Alice Walker*, p. 123.
24. Merlin Stone, *When God Was a Woman*, (London: Harcourt, 1976), p. 33
25. Maria Lauret, *Modern Novelists: Alice Walker*, p. 131.
26. Valerie Babb, "The Color Purple: Writing to Undo What Writing Has Done". *Phylon* XLVII:2 (June 1986), pp 107-16. Babb makes interesting observations regarding the power of the written word, and the appropriation and misuse of this tool by those who are in power. She states that throughout history, power has always resided in the hands of those who have control over the written word. Hence, the law against teaching blacks to read and write during times of Slavery. White people made the decisions as to who should be able to read and write, and in the same way, Celie's father decides who should have the benefit of schooling among her daughters. While Nettie is able to attend school, Celie can barely read and write because she has been made to stay home and help with the chores. This has far-reaching effects on the respective lives of the two sisters.
27. Eudora Welty, cited by Robert O. Stephens in *The Family Saga in the South: Generations and Destinies*, (London: Louisiana State UP, 1995), p.7
28. Alice Walker, *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, (New York: Harcourt, 1992), p. 3. Henceforth referred to parenthetically as *Possessing*.
29. Maria Lauret, *Modern Novelists: Alice Walker*, p 166.
30. Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 41.
31. Frederic Jameson. "Postmodernism and Consumer Society" in Hal Foster (ed), *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, (Port Townsend: Bay Press, 1983), p. 125.
32. Toni Morrison, 'The Site of Memory' in William Zinsser (ed), *Inventing the Truth: the Art and Craft of Memoir*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), p. 111.
33. Pierre Nora. "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Memoire*". *Representations* 26 (Spring 1989): 7- 24.
34. Genevieve Fabre and Richard O'Meally, *History and Memory in African-American Culture*, (New York: OUP, 1994), p. 22.
35. Maria Lauret, *Modern Novelists: Alice Walker*, p. 156.
36. *Ibid.*
37. Alice Walker, *By the Light of My Father's Smile*, (New York: Random, 1998), p.96. Henceforth referred to parenthetically as *By the Light*.

## Chapter II

### THE STORY OF “AMERICA’S GREATEST HEROES”

For these grandmothers and mothers of ours were not Saints, but Artists; driven to numb and bleeding madness by the springs of creativity in them for which there was no release. They were Creators, who lived lives of spiritual waste, because they were so rich in spirituality – which is the basis of Art – that the strain of enduring their unused and unwanted talent drove them insane. [...] What did it mean for a black woman to be an artist in our grandmothers’ time? In our great-grandmothers’ day? It is a question with an answer cruel enough to stop the blood.<sup>1</sup>

hyperbole  
without  
art

In her collection of essays, *In Search Of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose*, and in her other prose works, Walker talks about the heroic spirit of African American women who use every obstacle in their paths to create something good. Talking of her own mother, she says, “Like Mem, a character in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, [she] adorned with flowers whatever shabby house [they] were forced to live in.” (*Search*, p. 241) This inherent creativity is a subject of fascination to Walker, who often repeats the theme in her portrayal of African American women. She reclaims the legacy of African American women by focusing on their art forms such as quilting, gardening, story telling, singing, writing, as well as other forms of creativity.

200  
follow

In order to understand the heroic attributes of the African American woman and the magnitude of her courage, emphasis must first be laid upon the nature of what she has experienced and how she has survived. It is only in understanding her reality that there can be a justification for the term ‘heroism’ as applied to her. The African American woman’s reality, in this case, is studied in terms of the intense oppression and suffering she has undergone, thereby showing that it is no mean feat to even attempt to survive such circumstances, let alone claim victory. As Maya Angelou, another African American woman writer says:

These women have descended from grandmothers and great grandmothers who knew the lash firsthand, and to whom protection was nothing more than an abstraction. Their faces are here for the ages to regard and wonder, but they are whole women. Their hands have brought new life into the world, nursed the sick and folded the winding-sheets. Their wombs have held the promise of a race that has proved in each challenging century that despite threats and mayhem it has come to stay. Their feet have trod the shifting swampland of insecurity, yet they have tried to step neatly onto the footprints of mothers who went before. They are not apparitions; they are not superwomen; despite the enormity of their struggles they are not larger than life. Their humanness is evident in their accessibility. We are able to enter into the spirit of these women and rejoice in their warmth and courage.<sup>2</sup>

In an interview with Barbara A. Bannon, Walker says, "the black woman is one of America's greatest heroes.... She has been oppressed beyond recognition."<sup>3</sup> This oppression "beyond recognition" takes place in multiple and overlapping ways, at physical, emotional and psychic levels. In the book *American Pluralism*, the sociologist Hubert M. Blalock believes that oppression of one group by another results not when there is an inherent opposition to another race (racial, physical differences) but when the "majority group views discrimination as an effective tool for reducing the ability of the minority to act as a social competitor."<sup>4</sup> He further adds that prejudices, whether racial or social, arise when "the majority (dominant group) defines the minority's (the oppressed group's) variance from social norms (his norms) as a form of social deviance that threatens its sacred traditions."<sup>5</sup> Thus it may be stated that "the one single fundamental difference between oppressor and oppressed, between subject and object, to use existential terminology, is the dominant group's freedom in dictating the social norms by which the minority group must abide."<sup>6</sup> If we follow this line of thought the picture that emerges is two-fold. For the African American man, the white man is the person who determines his existence by setting the social norms and standards by which he is expected to live. As Walker puts it:

They [Black men] never examine their relationship to Black women and rarely to Black children. Because their whole thing is to be manly. Not only to be men, but to be white men. Their whole number is to be white men.<sup>7</sup>

What immediately follows is that, just as the white man is the one who sets the rules of existence for the African American man and is his oppressor, the African American man in turn becomes the oppressor or the object for the African American woman, who is the subject or the oppressed, by setting the norms for her existence. Hence the African American woman suffers a double oppression, first as a victim of a white-dominated, racist-ridden society, but also under African American men who vent their helplessness and frustration upon their women. Much of whatever creativity they have expressed is done surreptitiously, and the artists and their contributions have remained anonymous for the most part. In *Meridian*, Walker writes:

Mrs. Hill's great-grandmother had been famous for painting decorations on barns. She earned money for the man who owned her and was allowed to keep some for herself. With it she bought not only her own freedom, but that of her husband and children as well. In *Meridian's* grandmother's childhood, there were still barns scattered throughout the state that bloomed with figures her mother had painted. At the centre of each tree or animal or bird she painted, there was somehow drawn in, so that it formed a part of a pattern, *a small contorted face* – whether of man or woman or child, no one could tell – that became her trademark. (My italics, *Meridian*, p. 121)

Elsewhere in the same book, we find mention of the Saxon slave woman Louvinie, an avid storyteller who specialized in telling stories of “blood-curling horror” and the children in her master's house “adored her” for this. However, tragedy occurs when the youngest son of the Saxon household dies of a heart attack after listening to a particularly gruesome tale that Louvinie concocts. As punishment,

Louvinie's tongue was clipped out at the root. Choking on blood, she saw her tongue ground under the heel of Master Saxon. Mutely, she pleaded for it, because she knew the curse of her native land: Without

one's tongue in one's mouth or in a special spot of one's choosing, the singer in one's soul was lost forever, to grunt and snort through eternity like a pig. (*Meridian*, pp. 32- 34)

This effectively silences the would-be artist, killing "the singer" in her soul. In her writings, Walker delves into the plight of the African American woman artist, whether slave or free. She underlines the fact that in most cases, the artist has been rendered mute and her identity reduced to a "small, contorted face" devoid of individuality or gender.

One of the most crucial issues to be tackled is the way in which African American women have been forced to take on the yoke of forced identities. This compels them into paths that they have not chosen. Walker calls black women the "mules of the world" (*In Search*, p. 237) because they "have been handed the burdens everyone else – everyone else – refused to carry." The identities that have been foisted upon them include the assumption that they must fulfill certain stereotypical roles such as that of "matriarchs", "superwomen", "mean and evil bitches", "castrators" and "Sapphire's Mama". Walker further adds:

When we have pleaded for understanding, our character has been distorted; when we have asked for simple caring, we have been handed empty inspirational appellations, then stuck in the farthest corner. When we have asked for love, we have been given children. In short, even our plainer gifts, our labors of fidelity and love have been knocked down our throats. (*Search*, p. 237)

Walker asserts that only in their freedom can they find their true selves. Recognizing this, many women have attempted to find freedom by simply refusing to bow down. Like Walker's definition of who a "womanist" is, they have tried to "love themselves. Regardless."<sup>8</sup> Yet, their attempts have been met with hostility and resentment by the society in which they live, a society that fosters the spirit of oppression that these women seek to transcend. Maya Angelou writes:

The larger society, observing the women's outrageous persistence in holding on, staying alive, thought it had no choice but to translate the perversity and contradictions of the black woman's life into a fabulous fiction of multiple personalities....Surprisingly, above all, many women did survive as themselves.<sup>9</sup>

The denial of a valid identity is symbolized in the way that their most personal possessions and quintessential identifiers, their names, are changed or modified by others. Tashi, for instance, in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, is referred to as Tashi, Evelyn, Tashi-Evelyn, Evelyn-Tashi, and finally, Tashi-Evelyn-Mrs.Johnson, reflecting the multiple identity changes that she undergoes within the course of her struggle to make sense of, and bring to order, her fragmented world. The entire narrative in fact, is divided into sections that bear her multiple names as signifiers of the disparate and confusing experiences that confront her in her different personas and roles.

Similarly, Magdalena also undergoes a process of multiple name change in her almost futile attempt to cope with the changes in her world. Christened Magdalena, she is also called 'Mad Dog', whom the Mundo consider wise, MacDoc (a more 'acceptable' variation of 'Mad Dog'), Maggie, and June (*Possessing*, p. 21). Her father recalls:

There was not one as wild as MacDoc, as Maggie was by now called. She had wanted to be known as Mad Dog, but I drew the line there. (*Possessing*, p. 22)

Later when she needs a new name upon their return to Long Island in Sag Harbor, "a name others can relate to", she is seemingly indifferent and resigned and randomly decides, "I shall be called June" (*Possessing*, p. 22). This disconcerts her father, who surmises that "she must have planned and plotted to escape the corral of a new name, but in the end, without struggle, had given in." (Italics added, *Possessing*, p. 21)

'Squeak' is a nickname given to Mary Agnes in *The Color Purple*. Later, she insists on being called by her real name. (CP, p. 210), because she feels she can sing when she is Mary Agnes, but not when she is "Squeak". She takes possession of her name, and after her white uncle rapes her, she sings the enigmatic song about her own racial identity:

They calls me yellow  
Like yellow be my name.  
But if yellow is a name  
Why ain't black the same (CP, p. 86)

This song, inspired by racial sectarianism, puns on the word 'yellow'. It defiantly creates a blues lyric from pain. This involves the history of Mary Agnes, her race, and their suffering. It is through this creative synthesis that Mary Agnes attains fulfillment and a sustaining sense of identity. This identity is a specifically racialized one, one which is dependent on her racial identity and history. The creative acts of a woman, and especially the woman's voice, are the means of her salvation.<sup>10</sup>

The reality that these women face is brutally painful and often unrelentingly devoid of relief. It is only natural, then, that they would choose to respond and react to it in different ways. While some show immense heroism and determination to survive, there are others who give up their culture and embrace identities that deny their heritage. By refusing to recognize their ancestry, they become part of a society dedicated to the prosperity of whites. Nettie, for instance, emulates the white society that has given her a measure of formal education; the influence of this is apparent in the somewhat more stilted style of writing, which she adopts in her letters, as compared to Celie's vernacular use of language. Valerie Babb observes:

The most obvious formal distinction is that Nettie's prose, unlike Celie's orally-derived expression, is rendered in the standard.....after her missionary employers, Corinne and Samuel have had a hand in her education...Nettie's letters are rendered completely in the standard

[English]...Traditionally, the standard form of language is used primarily to impose unity on the community which employs it. In spite of cultural differences all groups within a community are urged to speak the same language, ostensibly for communication purposes; however, this goal of social unity can deteriorate into the standard language being used to classify groups different from the dominant cultural group, and exclude them from the dominant group's privileges because they are not versed in the standard language.<sup>11</sup>

Even her lifestyle, and that of Samuel and Corrine, is largely influenced by whites, which is not surprising since they are employed by the white-sponsored American and African Missionary Society. The stay in Africa, however, becomes an important eye-opener for Nettie. To her consternation, she finds that she and her friends are not accepted by the Olinkas because they have aligned themselves with the white people who symbolize colonization and materialism to them. White people, in the Olinkan experience, not only attempt to make them embrace a new religion, but more tragically, have also deprived them of their "roofleaf"; further, they have destroyed their villages by building roads that run right through the middle of their fields and houses. (CP, p. 144)

Notwithstanding the similarities in their facial and physical features, the Olinkas view African American missionaries as traitors who have sold out to the white way of life. (CP, p. 201) Nettie gradually begins to understand this and to value her history and ancestry, recording all that she sees and learns in her letters to Celie. As a result, she begins to understand and affirm her identity as an African American and a woman. From an insignificant and forgettable emulator of the dominant group's way of thinking, she evolves into a hero of sorts by using her creativity – her writing skills – to 'undo what writing has done'.<sup>12</sup> Nettie's writing ultimately frees the sisters from the confines of a world which has told them that they have no history, and that their culture is of little value. In as much as documenting African life, Nettie's record

also preserves the links which join African culture to African American culture. Her description of an exchange between Tashi, a child of the village, and Olivia, the missionary's child, provides insights into this link:

Sometimes Tashi comes over and tells stories that are popular among the Olinka children. I am encouraging her and Olivia to write them down in Olinka and English....Olivia feels that, compared to Tashi, she has no good stories to tell. One day she started in on an "uncle Remus" tale only to discover Tashi had the original version of it!...But then we got into a discussion of how Tashi's people stories got to America...[Tashi] cried when Olivia told her how her grandmother had been treated as a slave. (*CP*, p. 140)

In other words, she rewrites official historiography and educates her sister Celie about their shared heritage. Although her audience is not wide, her intentions and actions are no less heroic and noble. This has called for tremendous courage and conviction on her part, to embrace a belief absolutely alien to her conditioning.

By the end of the novel, Nettie and Samuel have made a paradigm shift in their view of God, no longer believing whiteness, and its implications, as a necessary attribute of God:

God is different to us now, after all these years in Africa... And not being tied to what God looks like, frees us....And perhaps Samuel and I will found a new church in our community that has no idols in it whatsoever, in which each person's spirit is encouraged to seek God directly, his belief that this is possible strengthened by us as people who also believe. (*CP*, p. 218)

Similar to Nettie, there are many African American women who measure their souls by the yardstick of a world which excludes them despite their efforts to belong. In the process they often find themselves unable to measure up to it. As a result, there often occurs a depersonalization of the self, which is not an uncommon reaction. Often, when people face insurmountable problems, they pretend to be other than what they are. They attempt to transcend their situation by transforming their reality:

...this depersonalization of the self results from the subject's impossibility to determine his/her life; it is a loss of feeling himself [/herself] as an organic whole...an alienation from the real self.<sup>13</sup>

It is only when they stop trying to fit into the moulds prescribed by others that they eventually find their true selves. The yoke of forced identities leaves them insecure and unable to find fulfillment. The profound impact that this kind of alienation from the self has had on African American women, has been shown with stark honesty.

Arunima Ray, in an article, says:

The cross of invisibility, of non-recognition as intelligent, aware, talented, responsive, creative individuals, is one that black women in America have long had to bear, both in society and literary depictions. Under the twin burden, often known as "double jeopardy" of racism and sexism, they have often been unrecognizable as individuals.<sup>14</sup>

Commenting on this, Gerda Lerner in *Black Women in America: A Documentary*

*History* writes:

Belonging as they do to two groups which have traditionally been treated as inferiors by American society – blacks and women – they have been doubly invisible. Their records lie buried, unread, infrequently noticed and even more seldom interpreted.<sup>15</sup>

Walker's female characters vary widely in personality, age, circumstances and outlook. Yet what links them all together is the oppression that they suffer at the hands of African American males, an ironic repetition of white people's oppression of the African American race. Clearly, Walker's preoccupation is not as much with the rampant racism of the American South, as with the dynamics of, the relationship between African American males and females which is a consequence of the black-white relationship. Both relationships are based on the subject-object equation. In her interview granted to *Sojourner*, she explains the reasons behind her emphasis on black gender conflicts:

Of course, the [whites] oppress us; they oppress the world. Who's got his big white foot on the whole world? The white man, the rich white man. But we also oppress ourselves. I think that one of the traditions we have in black women's literature is a tradition of trying to fight all the oppression....If someone is beating you up at home, you don't then just sit in the room afterwards and write a novel about the white man's rule. I mean to deal with the guy who beat you up in your own home and then see who's beating you up on the street. (*Sojourner*, p. 14)

This subject-object relationship<sup>16</sup> is vividly presented in the relationships between Margaret and Grange, and Mem and Brownfield in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*. Similarly, it is found in Celie's relationship with her stepfather and with Mr. \_\_\_ in *The Color Purple*, between Tashi and the Olinka men in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, and to a somewhat less obvious degree in the relationships between Harpo and Sophia (*CP*), Meridian and Truman (*Meridian*), Josie and Grange (*Grange*) and the sisters Susannah and Magdalena and their father (*By the Light*).

Whether the oppression is obvious or not, the effects remain similarly traumatic and destructive. Margaret, Mem, and Celie suffer physical abuse at the hands of the men in their lives. Their indoctrination into the prescribed codes of social conduct and hierarchy is so ingrained that they believe that this is their fate. They must, therefore, suffer and endure. Of the three, it is only Celie who is able to break out from the bonds of this psychic slavery after half a lifetime of silent endurance. Grange's inhuman treatment of Margaret ultimately leads to her destruction, and this same pattern is repeated in an even more exaggerated and horrific way in the relationship between Mem and Brownfield:

That was the year he first saw how his life was becoming a repetition of his father's....His crushed pride, his battered ego made him drag Mem away from school teaching. Her knowledge reflected badly on a husband who could scarcely read or write. It was his great ignorance that sent her into white homes as a domestic. His need to bring her down to his level....His rage could and did blame everything, *everything* on her. (original emphasis, *Grange*, pp. 54-55)

The identities that these women are coerced into accepting result in the emergence of personalities that are alien to them. These forced identities become so deeply ingrained that there is only a vague recollection of what they originally were. In the case of Celie, Squeak and Mem especially there is no desire to be anything other than what they have been all their lives. They become fragmented and lose sight of their true selves. Early on in *The Color Purple*, Celie says "... I don't know how to fight. All I know how to do is stay alive." (CP, p. 17) This sums up the attitude of many of the women in the novels before they realize that life could be more fulfilling than trying to live out a stereotype, and that all they have to do is assert themselves. Men have certain notions of what women should be. As Harpo puts it:

Women work, he say.  
 What? she say.  
 Women work. I'm a man. (CP, p. 20)

These expectations and assumptions are placed upon women. In the eyes of their men, their ability to meet these expectations has a direct bearing on the value of the women. Magdalena's father beats her up to stifle her budding sexual awareness, which is displayed in her friendship and consequent affair with Manuelito, a young Mundo boy. She is made to embrace "some religious bullshit [she] didn't even subscribe to, enforced by [her] own father, who didn't really believe it either" (*By the Light*, p. 135). In accordance with the religion practiced by her father, 'MacDoc' (Mad Dog) Magdalena is forcibly made to renounce the only experience of love that she has ever had in her young life which has an immense impact on her life. Without believing in the norms she is made to embrace, she lives a lie that denies her her desires. As a result, she spends the rest of her life resenting her father's actions, unable to forgive him, choosing to remain single and broken hearted. She takes revenge by hurting her sister Susannah, "a revenge so subtle Susannah would not realize its damage to her for

Their journey to self-discovery is aided by the ability to find expression in a creative way. To Walker, the creative spirit is a vital tool that enables these women to cope with and rise above, and to resist the impositions of society upon them. "Therefore, we must fearlessly pull out of ourselves and look at and identify with our lives the living creativity some of our great-grandmothers were not allowed to know." (*Search*, p. 237) Creativity affords them a measure of power, something that they have never been allowed to possess. In its resemblance of the acts of the divine Creator, the act of creating something has a sense of divinity in it. Creativity is given a new dimension in the hands of these women. It becomes a tool of re-emergence, revitalization, renewal, retrieval and rebirth. Celie, for instance, now has "a needle and not a razor" (*CP*, p. 125) in her hands. Whether in life or in death, their efforts are not in vain, as the placard that the women hold up before Tashi's execution reads: "RESISTANCE is the secret of joy". (Original emphasis. *Possessing*, p. 264). The crucial point is that these women have made efforts to resist, using resources available to them. In the process, they find a measure of joy.

The denial of creativity is seen as a means of subjugation, of power enjoyed by the dominant class. This is seen very clearly in the relationships between African American and whites, where self-expression is not permitted to African Americans. They are expected to act out stereotypes, deviation from which may have dire consequences. The dominated are not expected to have any outlet for personal expression. Similarly, the silencing of creativity is reflected in the man-woman relationships within the setup of the African American family.

In *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, Brownfield notices that his father's face "froze into an unnaturally bland mask, curious and unsettling to see" in the

presence of a white man (*Grange*, p. 8). The white master is an ominous force who turns Grange into “a stone or robot”. W. Lawrence Hogue comments:

...the American social system, whose power is exercised by the white male, crushes and emasculates the black man. It stifles his feelings and emotions and it destroys his dreams, hopes and chances for a better life. The American social structure turns the black man into a beast – suppressing his human qualities and accenting his animal tendencies. The black man, in turn, reflects his violent relation with his white landowner in his relation with his wife and son. He takes his anger and frustration out, not on the social system or the people who exercise its power but on his children and on the black woman, who, as he does in the master-servant relation, remains loyal and submissive. Just as the white man becomes the symbol of his oppression, the black man becomes the symbol of the black woman’s oppression.<sup>17</sup>

Another instance of this silencing is seen in the manipulation of the art of writing, one of the most widely-accepted creative forms of expression, which was first denied to African Americans as a whole. As Valerie Babb<sup>18</sup> points out, it was a crime in times of slavery to teach a black person to read and write. Later on, access to reading and writing was either arbitrarily denied or sanctioned by African American men over their women. For various reasons, Nettie is granted a better education than Celie, who can barely read and write. Yet the courage of these characters lies not in whether they are great artists in the professional sense of the word, but in that they, like Walker’s mother, “who made a way out of no way”, (epigraph to *Grange*) are able to use whatever resources they have at hand, to bring some sort of an order to an otherwise chaotic world.

Thus, Celie continues to write her letters. Syntax and grammar become irrelevant as her story unfolds. At first she addresses her letters to ‘God’ because her stepfather warns her to tell “nobody but God” (*CP*, p. 3) of his sexual abuse. There emerges through her writing the picture of a confused, wretched and lonely girl who attempts to make sense of her world. Her letters portray the consequent development of the self into a mature, well-adjusted and tenacious adult who has survived in spite

of the odds. By the time the novel draws to a close, she has formed a new-found relationship with herself, her friends, and the world at large. Her last letter is addressed to "God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God." (CP, p. 242)

Like Walker's mother, Mem in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, despite her obvious discomfort, adorns with flowers every derelict and decrepit house that Brownfield forces his family to move into:

Being forced to move from one sharecropper's cabin to another was something she hated.... She hated leaving a home she'd already made and fixed up with her own hands. She hated leaving her flowers, which she always planted whenever she got her hands on flower seeds. (Grange, pp. 77-78)

Shug vents her heartache, anger, frustration and disgust at the world through the blues that she sings with such vehement emotion in the "jook joints"; later on Squeak follows in her footsteps and becomes a singer too. The jealousy and bitterness between Celie and Shug (CP) is first overcome when Shug begins to take an interest in the quilt that Celie is sewing, and contributes her "old yellow dress" for the pattern that Celie works on, aptly named "Sister's Choice" (CP, p. 53). Shug also sings a blues song inspired by Celie:

Shug saying Celie. Miss Celie. And I look up where she at.  
She say my name again. She say this song I'm about to sing is call  
Miss Celie's song. Cause she scratched it out of my head when I was  
sick.  
First she hum it a little, like she do at home. Then she sing the words.  
It all about some no count man doing her wrong, again. But I don't  
listen to that part. I look at her and I hum along a little with the tune.  
First time somebody made something and name it after me. (CP, p. 65)

For Tashi (*Possessing*) her art becomes her savior. She comes back from the brink of insanity by concretizing the images imprinted in her subconscious and painting them

on the walls of her bedroom. Her art becomes therapeutic thus. It eventually helps her to regain her sanity. She recalls:

Are you better for having done it? he [Mzee] asked, finding and lighting his pipe. Do you feel better in yourself?  
Immeasurably, I said. (*Possessing*, p. 76)

Art as a means of salvation is most evident in the life of Celie, the protagonist of *The Color Purple*. After years of subjugation and victimization at the hands of her husband, she, with the help of the other women, notably Shug, achieves fulfillment through her creativity. Kenneth Millard observes:

The role model for the women's creative endeavor is Shug Avery, the blues singer whose power and independence is also derived from her creative talent. Shug's singing gives her the authority and self-esteem that the other women lack, but it is a form of singing, the blues, which has its origins in suffering. Significantly, when Shug sings the song about Celie it is 'all about some no count man doing her wrong' (*CP*, p.77) and it is a song inspired by Celie which was written while Celie was attending to Shug's hair....Shug Avery embodies the classic blues aesthetic which black women are uniquely positioned to articulate.<sup>19</sup>

Celie had always been a good seamstress, and this stands her in good stead when she eventually decides to leave Albert and find her own feet in Memphis. She starts sewing as if her life depended upon it. In a sense, it does, because what she creates out of her own fingers gives her a sense of independence, achievement and satisfaction, which in turn affects those from whom she has been alienated. The luxury to express her creativity gives her a heady sense of liberty she has never before experienced:

I sit in the dining room making pants after pants. I got pants now in every color and size under the sun. Since us started making pants down home, I ain't been able to stop. I change the cloth, I change the print, I change the waist, I change the pocket. I change the hem, I change the fullness of the leg. I make so many pants Shug tease me. I didn't know what I was starting, she say, laughing. Pants all over her chairs, hanging all in front of the china closet. Newspaper patterns and cloth all over the table and the floor. [...] Then finally one day I made the perfect pair of pants. (*CP*, p. 180).

Donna Haisty Winchell notes that, in essence, Celie enters into creation by becoming a creator herself.

Tempted at one point to slit Mr \_\_\_\_'s throat for all the evil he has done, she chooses the needle over the razor and takes advantage of her skill as a seamstress to enter the world of business. As God does when his efforts are taken for granted, she sets out to create something new.<sup>20</sup>

She says "every stitch [she] sew(s) will be a kiss"<sup>21</sup> and names her company "Folkspants, Unlimited", a name that echoes the limitless possibilities that her foray into the creative domain offers her. In fact, her decision to give voice to her creativity is an epiphany of sorts, for this is what truly, in a practical sense, makes her a survivor. It is at this moment too, that she is able to look Albert in the eye and curse him for all the sufferings he has inflicted upon her. (*CP*, p. 214) On the other hand, Tashi/Evelyn's creativity unleashes the hidden "evil she was encountering" deep in her soul:

She began to paint a chicken. Over and over. On larger and larger paper. She grew frenzied as the size of the paper she held in her hand seemed to shrink in comparison to the monstrous bird she had in her mind. Then there was the question of how to blend the paints she had...to make something she called a black chromium green. She was frantic to manufacture this color, and this color alone, for the tails of the feathers of the beast. Her mood was impatient, foul, as she tore the smaller drawings into bits and tore her hair as well.... Opening the door, I was confronted with Evelyn, still busily painting, after twelve hours or more. (*Possessing*, p. 75).

Later, Tashi herself reveals that this experience, though physically and emotionally exhausting at the time, has a cathartic effect:

When at last I completed my painting of "The Beast," as the three of us would subsequently refer to it, my mind and body were beyond exhaustion. I fell backward onto the bed and slept. It was late evening of another day when I awoke to the sound of the wind in the trees, the waves of the lake lapping the shore, and the muted sound of voices. I lay as I had fallen, merely turning apprehensive eyes slowly left, toward the wall, to look fully into the wicked gaze of my creature. It no longer frightened me. Indeed, I felt as if I were seeing the cause of my

anxiety itself for the first time, exactly as it was. The cock was undeniably overweening, egotistical, puffed up, and it was his diet of submission that had made him so. (*Possessing*, p. 76)

She is able to remember and come to terms with her sister Dura's death, which she had uncomprehendingly witnessed as a child, the memory of which her conscious mind has rejected all along. "There was a boulder lodged in my throat. [...] I knew what the boulder was; that it was a word; and that behind the word I would find my earliest emotions. Emotions that had frightened me insane....I remembered my sister Dura's *murder*, I said, exploding the boulder." (original emphasis, *Possessing*, p. 79). From this point onwards, she embarks upon a journey towards self-discovery and self-healing. It ultimately leads her to seek justice for herself by killing M'lissa, the woman who performed the clitoridectomy on both herself and her sister Dura. Her action costs her her life, but she achieves in death what was denied in life, a meaning and purpose to her existence. In becoming a martyr to the injustice meted out to women by tribal codes, she in turn inspires many women to speak up and resist in their own ways.

In a slightly different way, Susannah (*By the Light*) deals with her painful reality by becoming a writer and ordering her world through the stories that she writes. As Manuelito tells Susannah's father, the Mundo believes in stories instead of ideas, because

It is as if ideas are made of blocks. Rigid and hard. And stories are made of a gauze that is elastic. You can almost see through it, so what is beyond is tantalizing. You can't quite make it out; and because the imagination is always moving forward, you yourself are constantly stretching. Stories are the way spirit is exercised. (*By the Light*, p. 214).

The horror of a disjointed family life that the two sisters have known result in mistrust of people and relationships that are "rigid and hard". Susannah, in particular, who is

the younger one, is necessarily influenced by her sister's bitterness and anger. She is torn between her loyalty to her sister and the last remnants of a grudging love that she still retains for her father. She is unable to reconcile the two images of her father: the one who loves and spoils her, and the other, who thrashes her sister for disrespecting his religious values. It is only in her fantasy world of stories that she is able to integrate a fragmented world. Even here, she is unable to make references to sex, (*By the Light*, p. 31) a legacy of the rigid moral code that their father brought them up on.

Similarly, in *The Temple of My Familiar*, Miss Lissie gives free rein to her creative urge through the stories that she spins, combining fact, fiction, myth, dream, and fantasy. The novel, in fact, revolves around Miss Lissie's stories, which variously serve as parables and history lessons, infused with the kind of magic realism that educates and helps revise the perspectives of all those who listen to them. Her historical perspective is different, to say the least:

The first witches to die at the stake were the daughters of the Moors....It was they (or rather, we) who thought the Christian religion that flourished in Spain would let the Goddess of Africa "pass" into the modern world as the "Black Madonna". After all, this is how the gods and goddesses moved from era to era before, though Islam, our official religion for quite a long time by now, would have nothing to do with this notion; instead, whole families in Africa who worshipped the Goddess were routinely killed, sold into slavery, or converted to Islam at the point of the sword. (*Temple*, p. 222)

To presume that the expression of their inherent creativity relieves them of all pain and suffering, however, would be to deny the magnitude of what they undergo. To be able to sing, tell stories, sew, write, create gardens, or make themselves attractive by dressing up, does not automatically transport them to a utopia that negates all hardships. In fact, these women often face opposition in the form of their fathers, brothers, and even other women. This is most apparent in *The Color Purple*, when out of pettiness Albert hides Nettie's letters from Celie for years altogether. In this sense,

Nettie's creative output via her letters, is almost rendered meaningless, until the letters are discovered later on by Shug. Before they realize that they must stand together, the women themselves hamper each other's growth because of their jealousy and insecurity. When Harpo has marital problems because he cannot make Sophia "mind", Celie's advice is that he should "beat her" (*CP*, p. 35). Later Albert vehemently opposes Celie's plans to move to Memphis in order to stand on her own feet. Celie by now has garnered enough courage to make a bid for independence and survival by supporting herself through her sewing. Harpo, too, opposes Squeak's desire to follow in Shug's footsteps by becoming a singer. Both men are opposed to the possibility of artistic self-expression that these women have always yearned for. Walker's essay, 'In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens' talks at length about the problems faced by the African American woman artists in the community. She asks:

How was the creativity of the black woman kept alive, year after year and century after century, when for most of the years black people have been in America, it was a punishable crime for a black person to read or write? And the freedom to paint, to sculpt, to expand the mind with action did not exist.... But it is not the end of the story, for all the young women – our mothers, our grandmothers, *ourselves* – have not perished in the wilderness. (original emphasis; *Search*, p. 234).

She further adds, that "to be an artist and a black woman, even today, lowers our status in many respects, rather than raises it: and yet, artists we will be." (*Search*, p. 237). Not everyone is able to overcome the obstacles in their path. Margaret, Grange's wife, is a case in point. Margaret is one of the women whom Walker describes as being suspended:

...suspended in a time in history when the options for black women were severely limited... [who] either kill themselves or...are used up by the man, or by the children, or by...whatever the pressures against them.<sup>22</sup>

Klauss Ensslen, in this regard, writes:

Margaret drastically exemplifies this state of suspension without creative outlet, devoid of real options, when we see her driven in to the radical moral resignation of suicide. On the other hand, Margaret's spontaneous reaction to her husband's desertion already contains the seed for an as yet unseized opportunity for self-definition equating or even transcending Grange's self-estimate at that point: while he goes through the accelerating motion of flight, she seems to be able to discover – even if only fleetingly – a positive form of self-directed joy in living, in sexual self-assertion – comparable to what Alice Walker has described in other women when they take recourse to flower gardens or the knitting of quilts. Margaret thus embodies a kind of germinal unconscious attempt at feminine self-realization.<sup>23</sup>

If Margaret's attempt at self-realization is unconscious, it is also unsuccessful. She does not achieve the independence from Grange that will enable her to feel she can survive without him. Her protest against her circumstances is short-lived. Once she realizes Grange is gone for good, she crumples in defeat :

“Well. He's gone,” his mother said without anger at the end of the third week. But the following week she and her poisoned baby went out into the dark of the clearing and in the morning Brownfield found them there. She was curled up in a lonely sort of way, away from her child, as if she had spent the last moments on her knees. (*Grange*, p. 26)

Mem, Margaret's daughter-in-law keeps alive the seeds of Margaret's faint attempts at survival. She makes a heroic effort to surmount the vicious cycle of abuse that she faces at the hands of her husband, Brownfield. With her education and determination, she manages to achieve more than Margaret does. For a time, she even succeeds in cowering Brownfield into hostile submission. Fed up with her husband's constant abuse and irresponsibility she decides to take charge of a life that even her husband had assumed would be her only destiny. Infuriated that her husband “knocked over her flower boxes, spilling flowers and dirt” (*Grange*, p. 101), she thinks she “ought to jump on him and kill him dead” (*Grange*, p. 102). Later, she realizes that she need not continue to be a victim:

I don't have to stand here and let this nigger spit in my face, she thought, more or less calmly, and for the first time, very seriously (*Grange*, p. 115).

From here on, for a brief period, Mem achieves a measure of independence and a sense of identity by taking matters into her own hands. Violence being the only power that the cowardly Brownfield recognizes and understands, she too, wields power through the use of violence:

*"Open your eyes!"* Mem's voice was even as a dammed-up river. Slowly he stopped turning and opened his eyes, squinting them stickily to keep out the light. Mem was propped up against the wall on her side of the bed, holding a shotgun. At first he saw only the handle, smooth and black and big, close to his head like that. One of Mem's long wrinkled fingers pressed against the trigger. (original emphasis, *Grange*, p. 123)

She dictates in no uncertain terms the new "rules" which she expects him to abide by, and tells him, "Me and the children is moving to town to the house I signed that lease on. We is moving in with you or without you." (*Grange*, p. 128)

Mem's victory, however, is short-lived. Brownfield plots his revenge, knowing "he could bring her back to lowness she had not even guessed at before" (*Grange*, p. 133) by impregnating her as soon as their marriage regains relative stability. Without the support of her husband and the constrictions of her growing belly, she is unable to continue working, and eventually she has to submit to Brownfield's will again. They move back into Mr. J.L.'s sharecropper cabin which is still "half full of wet hay" (*Grange*, p. 140). At this point, Mem, weak with ill-health, realizes that she cannot fight such overwhelming odds any longer, and gives up the struggle. She dispiritedly decides, "Never again did she intend to plant flowers in boxes or beds" (*Grange*, p. 149). Yet her desolation and hopelessness is not as complete as Margaret's, for she continues caring for and loving her children until the day she is murdered in cold blood by her now- psychotic husband. In keeping with

Walker's observations about other "suspended"<sup>24</sup> women, the seeds of self-fulfillment that Margaret has nurtured will come to fruition only later, in her granddaughter Ruth<sup>25</sup> and later on in the adult Meridian.

Meridian's mother, another "suspended" woman, fails to find any outlet for her stifled creativity. However, in her case, this failure seems to be one of choice, a mode of protest against the Establishment:

She never learned to cook too well, she never learned to braid her hair prettily or to be in any other way creative in her home. She could have done so, if she had wanted to. Creativity was in her, but it was refused expression. It was all deliberate. A war against those to whom she could not express her anger or shout. 'It's not fair!' (*Meridian*, p. 51)

Her few artistic efforts are failures. Out of crepe paper and wire hangers, she fashions useless artificial flowers, and out of scraps of cloth, prayer pillows large enough for one knee only. Such an attitude as hers is self-defeating, and we see her ultimately unable to reconcile with life, with her daughter or with her husband. She does not find redemption because she has willingly denied creativity for herself, thus sealing off the only way of finding the peace that is available to her. The half-hearted efforts she does make are described as useless, in total contrast to the creativity that characterizes the typical African American woman's art, which, as well as being aesthetically appealing, serves a useful purpose too.

The practical and utilitarian aspect of art is something that the womanist always takes into consideration, consciously or unconsciously, a theme that Walker explores more fully in her short story, 'Everyday Use' which will be studied in greater detail in Chapter IV. An instance of the synthesis of art and practicality that the African American woman is so adept at is in the quilts that she makes. Quilting is an art form that creates beauty as well as serving a practical purpose. The peculiar form

of quilting, which African Americans carried over from Africa, constitutes a very important part of the African American consciousness.

Apart from its obvious practical use, the quilt is also a repository of the family's history and experiences. The different patterns in quilting often embody and depict scenes from the family's past. Moreover, the art of quilting often involves collective participation; often, women would work together on a particular pattern and help each other out with the actual sewing, as well as by contributing scraps of cloth and sharing patterns. Walker herself is much influenced by the art, and she describes *Meridian* as a "crazy quilt".<sup>26</sup>

In *The Color Purple*, we see Celie and Shug overcome their animosity by collaborating on a quilt that Celie has set out to make. Towards the closing of the book, we also see Celie and Albert sitting on the porch companionably sewing together (*CP*, p. 238). At first he is a little reluctant because of his conditioning, but gender lines soon disappear as Albert learns to express himself artistically with the help of Celie:

When I was growing up, he [Albert] said, I used to try to sew along with mama cause that's what she was always doing. But everybody laughed at me. But you know, I liked it.

Well, nobody gon laugh at you now, I said. Here. Help me stitch in these pockets.

But I don't know how, he say.

I'll show you, I said, and I did. (*CP*, p. 230)

It is not surprising, however, that some of these women who have faced insurmountable hardships have been unable to survive or claim victory. Maya Angelou, in her essay, 'They Came to Stay' writes:

Black women whose ancestors were brought to the United States beginning in 1619 have lived through conditions of cruelties so horrible, so bizarre, the women had to reinvent themselves. They had to find safety and sanctity inside themselves or they would not have been able to tolerate such torture. They had to learn quickly to be self-

forgiving, for often their exterior actions were at odds with their interior beliefs. Still they had to survive as wholly and healthily as possible in an infectious and sick climate. Lives lived in such cauldrons are either obliterated or forged onto impenetrable alloys. Thus, early on and consciously, black women became realities only to themselves. To others, they were mostly seen and described in the abstract, concrete in their labor but surreal in their humanness.<sup>27</sup>

The real survivors are those who, like Shug, Celie and Tashi, refuse to have their individuality and self-expression "suspended" forever. What prevents them from "perishing in the wilderness", is that despite the lack of "a room of one's own" and despite the lack of "money to support oneself", which Virginia Woolf stipulated as the two things a woman must have in order to write,<sup>28</sup> they have made the best use of everyday things to create beauty. The creative act itself becomes an essential strategy for survival, as well as a means to an alternate world view. This alternate view enables men and women to transcend gender divides and respect each other to the point where they can validate and accept each other's worth. Their courage and heroism thus attain majestic proportions, but, like their art, is accessible and practical, for these heroes are comprised of 'everyday' women, who use their creativity for 'everyday use' in a world that demands constant reinventing of themselves in order to survive each new day. Maya Angelou, in her book, *Even the Stars Look Lonely*, says:

The heartbreaking tenderness of black women and their majestic strength speak of the heroic survival of a people who were stolen into subjugation, denied chastity and refused innocence.<sup>29</sup>

The heroism that Walker talks about, thus, is the kind of heroism that is displayed by ~~the African American woman's strength of character.~~ To stand up against hardship and opposition of various kinds, to be an artist in spite of them, calls for tremendous courage. Hence, she calls the African American woman one of America's greatest heroes, even if she remains unsung. Her achievements may not be immediately

obvious in political or social terms, but it is great nonetheless, for it brings about not only the “survival whole”<sup>30</sup> of a people, but also a sense of integrity and harmony. In asserting her individuality through her imagination and creative expression, be it quilting, singing, cutting hair, painting, writing, or presenting a “performance”, as Meridian’s political actions are often described, she creates an identity for herself, and a space of her own. Whether the African American woman is slave, wife, mother, sister, daughter, lover or object, and regardless of whether she is subject to physical, psychical, emotional or mental subjugation, or all of them, what stands out is the resilience of her spirit, and her refusal to bow down to circumstances. This is what ultimately affords her real liberty and peace, be it in death, like the sisters Magdalena and Susannah, or in life, like Celie:

Now, is this life or not? I be so calm. If she [Shug] come, I be happy. If she don’t, I be content. And then I figure this the lesson I was suppose[d] to learn. (*CP*, p. 240).

### Endnotes

1. Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose*, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992), p. 233.
2. Maya Angelou, ‘They Came to Stay’, *Even the Stars Look Lonesome*. (London: Virago, 1999), p. 45.
3. Barbara A.Bannon, Interview with Alice Walker, *Publishers’ Weekly*. <http://www.publishersweekly.com/> 19 September 2001.
4. Hubert M. Blalock, in William M.Newman (ed.), *American Pluralism: A Study of Minority Groups and Social Theory*, (New York: Harper, 1973), p.219.
5. *ibid.*
6. Marc A-Christophe, ‘*The Color Purple: An Existential Novel*’, *CLA Journal*. Vol XXXVI: 3, March 1993, p.283.

7. 'Alice Walker is a Free Woman', *Sojourner*, Jan 1983, p.13. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.
8. Walker's definition of a "womanist" is given in the Introduction.
9. Maya Angelou, 'They Came to Stay', *Even the Stars Look Lonesome*, p. 43.
10. Kenneth Millard, *Contemporary American Fiction: An Introduction to American Fiction Since 1970*, (New York: OUP, 2000), p.72. Hereafter cited parenthetically.
11. Valerie Babb, "The Color Purple: Writing to Undo What Writing Has Done", *Phylon*, XLVII (2), Summer 1986, pp. 113-114.
12. *ibid.*
13. Frederick A. Weiss, 'Self-Alienation: Dynamism and Therapy', in Eric and Mary Josephson (eds.), *Man Alone*, (New York: Dell, 1962). p.464.
14. Arunima Ray, 'The Quest For "Home" and "Wholeness" in *Sula* and *Meridian*: Afro-American Identity in Toni Morrison and Alice Walker', *IJAS*. 23:2, Summer 1993, p. 59.
15. Gerda Lerner (ed.), *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History*, (New York: Pantheon, 1972), pp xvii-xviii.
16. Hubert M. Blalock, in *American Pluralism: A Study of Minority Groups and Social Theory*, talks of the subject-object relationship, the subject being the dominant class, or the person with power, and the object being those upon whom this power is wielded.
17. Lawrence Hogue, 'History, the Feminine Discourse, and Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*', *MELUS* 12:2, Summer 1985, pp.45-62.
18. Valerie Babb, 'The Color Purple: Writing to Undo What Writing Has Done', p. 108
19. Kenneth Millard, *Contemporary American Fiction*, p.71.
20. Donna Haisty Winchell, 'Letters to God: *The Color Purple*', *Alice Walker*, (New York: Twayne, 1992), p.93. Hereafter cited parenthetically.
21. For an observation on the relationship between creativity and sexuality, see Kenneth Millard, *Contemporary American Fiction*. p.73.
22. Alice Walker, quoted in Mary Helen Washington, "An Essay on Alice Walker," in *Sturdy Black Bridges: Visions of Black Women in Literature*. Roseanne P. Bell et al (eds.) (New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1979), pp 133-56.
23. Klaus Ensslen, 'Collective Experience and Individual Responsibility: Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*' in *The Afro-American Novel Since 1960*. Peter Bruck and Wolfgang Karrer (eds.), (Amsterdam: B.R.Gruner, 1982), pp 199-200.
24. Alice Walker observes, 'And so our mothers and grandmothers have, more often than not anonymously, handed on the creative spark, the seed of the flower they themselves never hoped to see: or like a sealed letter they could not plainly read' in *Search*, p.240.

25. Donna Haisty Winchell, *Alice Walker*, (New York: Twayne, 1992), p. 46.
26. 'Alice Walker' in Claudia Tate (ed.), *Black Women Writers at Work* [1983] (Harpending: Oldcastle Books, 1989), p. 176.
27. Maya Angelou, 'They Came to Stay', *Even the Stars Look Lonesome*, pp. 41-42.
28. Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* [1929], (London: Random House, 1991).
29. Maya Angelou, 'They Came to Stay', *Even the Stars Look Lonesome*, p.43
30. Alice Walker's statement that she is preoccupied with the 'survival whole' of her people, appears in 'From An Interview', *Search*, p. 250.

## Chapter III

### THE POLITICS OF WOMANIST SURVIVAL

There is always a moment in any kind of struggle when one feels in full bloom. Vivid. Alive. One might be blown to bits in such a moment and still be at peace.<sup>1</sup>

African American history has had a long line of courageous women who have attempted, even if not always successfully, to rise above the political and personal oppression in their own ways, as mothers, writers, orators, and activists. To the African American woman, survival is often possible only when the struggle is supported by the existing political powers. Walker's fiction repeatedly depicts the struggle of the African American woman against forces that subjugate her, forces that are rendered powerful because they are often backed by political authority. This is true at any given point in African-American history, whether during Slavery or after Slavery. For the African American woman, the political struggle is also an intensely personal struggle, since any oppression and effort at surviving and triumphing over that oppression echoes what she has long fought against in her personal life.

Although names such as Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth stand out, Walker points out the fact that there were countless nameless women forgotten and unsung, who valiantly, relentlessly and sometimes, ruthlessly, fought against the dehumanizing forces that tended to overwhelm them. These women suffered and survived. They devised methods of survival as they went along, bringing their creative gifts into play, and succeeded in planting the seeds of revolution in the generations that would follow. It was a revolution that had its roots in the defiance of mothers and grandmothers, who were slaves; a revolution that gained momentum in the despair,

poverty and exhaustion of the women who kept their families together during the Harlem years, and which finally culminated in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s.

As an African American woman who grew up in the South and came of age in the 1960s, Walker was influenced by the Women's Movement that grew out of it. She is, thus, uniquely placed to interpret the Civil Rights Movement and its aftermath, in fiction. According to Roberta M. Hendrickson, Walker is "the only major African American woman writer who came of age during the Civil Rights Movement and participated in it, and the only one to write a novel about the Civil Rights Movement."<sup>2</sup>

Alice Walker lived in the midst of this tumultuous era, and was a student activist in the Civil Rights Movement. Much of her womanist sensibilities includes and reflects her political ideology, which was shaped during this time. She says, "My activism – cultural, political, spiritual – is rooted in my love of nature and my delight in human beings." (*Anything*, p. xii) As a young African American woman who was married to a white Jewish lawyer during a time when interracial marriage was illegal, she experienced firsthand the trauma and brutalization that racism entails. According to her, the couple were victims of such racist groups as the Ku Klux Klan. The stress of their situation proved detrimental to their marriage, which subsequently ended in divorce (*Search*, p. 269). Her participation in the Civil Rights Movement influenced and molded much of what she was later to become. In her essay, 'The Civil Rights Movement: What Good Was It?' (written during Winter 1966-67), she writes:

Because of the Movement, because of an awakened faith in the newness and imagination of the human spirit, because of "black and white together"...because of the beatings, the arrests, the hell of battle during the past years, I have fought harder for my life and for a chance

to be myself, to be something more than a shadow or a number, than I had ever done before in my life.<sup>3</sup>

The protagonist in *Meridian*, like Walker herself, is a young black activist working in the South. Walker uses the story of the physically frail, emotionally intense, and politically charged Meridian to delve into the politics of race and gender, issues that were brought to the forefront especially during the Civil Rights Movement. Meridian's political consciousness is awakened when, as a high school student, she takes part in an oratorical competition,

...reciting a speech that extolled the virtues of the Constitution and praised the superiority of The American Way of Life. The audience cared little for what she was saying, and of course they didn't believe any of it, but they were rapt, listening to her speak so passionately and with such sad valor in her eyes. (*Meridian*, p. 119)

In the midst of her speech, the implications of what she is saying suddenly becomes clear to her, and she almost faints. She simultaneously gains and loses "consciousness" on comprehending the horrible joke that American National ideology has played on her. The irony behind the discourse of "inalienable rights" is exposed to her. She opposes the American assertion that it is a privilege just to be able to utter these words unconsciously. To Meridian, Black Nationalism must dedicate itself to constructing a political and cultural context in which one might, enjoy a positive relation to national identity, rather than a negative relation to a race perennially marked by its status as a social "problem".<sup>4</sup>

Walker also explores how the struggle for African American liberty reverberates in the life of the African American woman's personal struggle for emancipation at social and psychological levels. "Unlike many white women writers of this period, African-American women writers related the personal issues of their

communities to global political issues. In effect, they insisted that personal and political issues could not be separated into exclusive categories.”<sup>5</sup>

Women played a crucial role in the Movement, and yet there were certain gender issues within it that became increasingly disturbing and detrimental to the relationships between African American men and women. Side by side with the growing political awareness, there was a focus on African American cultural nationalism, largely propagated in its literary program, the Black Aesthetic. While initiating a radical redefinition of literary ‘blackness’, Black Aesthetic discourse, consolidated itself around the constructs of race, discouraged any literary exploration of gender and other differences that might complicate a unitary conception of the black experience. As Deborah Mc Dowell observes, the Black Aesthetic discourse constructed race as “the sole determinant of being and identity, subsuming sexual difference.”<sup>6</sup>

The Black Aesthetic emphasized upon a ‘positive’ black self, a self that was expected to be always coherent, stable, and aware of itself, a concept that African American women writers of the time like Alice Walker, Toni Morrison and Gayl Jones, among others, could not identify with. By 1970, black nationalists, whose slogan had become “Black Power” urged African American women, who had struggled for freedom along with African American men in the Civil Rights Movement, to subordinate themselves to African American men, to ‘make themselves less’ for the good of their people. In an essay published in 1973 while she was writing *Meridian*, Walker quotes Barbara Sizemore, who had written in *The Black Scholar*, about the new “nationalist woman”:

The nationalist woman cannot create or initiate. Her main life’s goal is to inspire and encourage man and his children. Sisters in this movement must beg for permission to speak and function as servants

to men, their masters and leaders, as teachers and nurses. Their position is similar to that of the sisters in the Nation of Islam. When Baraka is the guiding spirit at national conferences only widows and wives of black martyrs such as Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. and Queen Mother Moore can participate. Other women are excluded.<sup>7</sup>

Walker further comments that this is “heartbreaking. Not just for black women who have struggled so equally against the forces of oppression, but for all those who believe subservience of any kind is death to the spirit.” (*Anything*, p. xv)

Attempting to subordinate African American women was also a response by some African American men to the growing feminist consciousness of young African American women in the SNCC toward the end of the Civil Rights Movement. At that time, some African American women, like their predecessors in the Anti-Slavery Movement, began to see in their relationship with African American men, an analogy in the racist oppression of African Americans. Many of them balked at the idea of being mere supporters whose main goal in life was to ‘inspire and encourage man and his children’. This was by no means a new issue, although it became more strongly felt during the Movement. As early as in 1867, Sojourner Truth, in a speech before the Convention of American Equal Rights Association in New York, addressing the audience on the issue of African American women’s rights, had said that:

If colored men get their rights, and not colored women theirs, you see the colored men will be masters over the women, and it will be just as bad as before.<sup>8</sup>

African American women writers like Alice Walker set out to redefine the parameters of the Black Nationalist construction of femininity. In particular, they began to rewrite the existing beliefs propagated by Black Aestheticians regarding the relationships between ‘individual and community, oppressive past and revolutionary future, and absent and present subjectivity’.<sup>9</sup>

The African American man was the center of Black Nationalist discourse. The African American woman was marginalized. The contemporary government played a crucial role in this marginalization, especially with the publication of the notorious Moynihan Report in 1965.<sup>10</sup> Moynihan argued that the African American male's "natural" tendency to exercise his masculinity was inhibited by the stronger social and economic position of the African American woman. Several black nationalists echoed the sentiments of the Moynihan Report. Nathan Hare, for instance, wrote that "historically, the white oppressor has pitted male against female and...forced and seduced the female to take on his values and through her emasculated and controlled the man."<sup>11</sup> Eldridge Cleaver argued that the African American woman was the silent ally of the white man's oppression of black man:

That's why, all down through history, he has propped her up economically above you and me, to strengthen her hand against us.<sup>12</sup>

The matriarchy myth effectively split the racial discourse of Black Nationalism along gender lines, aligning African American men with white men in their commitment to a patriarchal family system. Perhaps in an effort to contain the supposed power of the matriarch, many Black Nationalist organizations prescribed clearly restricted roles for African American women in the movement. In addition to secretarial and nurturing work, the other responsibility delegated to African American women was the production of male warriors for the revolution, a thought articulated by Truman Held when he says to Meridian: "Have my beautiful black babies". Meridian is repulsed and reacts violently:

...she drew back her green book bag and began to hit him. She hit him three times before she even knew what was happening. Then she hit him again across the ear and a spiral from a tablet cut his cheek. Blood dripped onto his shirt. When she noticed the blood she turned and left him to the curiosity of the other students crowding there.<sup>13</sup>

As Florynce Kennedy has remarked, "breeding revolutionaries is not too far removed from a cultural past where black women were encouraged to be breeding machines for their masters."<sup>14</sup>

African American women further faced problems within the Women's Movement that had emerged during this time. On the surface, both white, as well as African American women were united in a common cause: the emancipation of women at all levels. However, in reality, what they were fighting for was, of necessity, extremely different, simply because of the vast differences that existed in their economic and social conditions. In a way, the Women's Movement proved highly productive for African American women. The white feminist revaluation of traditional conceptions of white femininity provided a strong impetus for African American women activists to reconsider their own identities. But it was difficult for black and white women to find a common cause as "sisters" in oppression as long as whites were "ladies" whereas African Americans were "women", a point noted by Toni Morrison.<sup>15</sup> For instance, white women sought employment as a means of escaping domesticity and as a means of asserting their independence; ironically, African American women had always been workers out of economic necessity rather than choice. For them, labor was not a liberating force. Moreover, the Women's Liberation movement targeted the patriarchal family structure as the primary site of women's oppression, but for African American women, due to economic and emotional reasons, maintaining a stable family structure was high priority.<sup>16</sup>

These differences created enormous tension between African American and white women, a tension that was felt more acutely by the African American woman, who was in a less advantageous position than her white 'sister'.<sup>17</sup> This tension was also present within the Civil Rights Movement, between African Americans and the

white women participants. Walker reflects on her own feelings at the time of the Movement:

We were black and very young: we knew no one in White America paid the slightest attention to the deaths of such as us. It was partly because of this that we sometimes resented the presence of the white people who came to stand, and take their chances, with us. I was one of those to whom such resentment came easy. (*Anything*, p. xxiv)

In *Meridian*, then, the dynamics of the triangular relationship portrayed is complicated. It tackles at once the interrelationships between blacks and whites within the Movement, as well as the relationship between the women of these two races. It traces relationships between Meridian and Truman, both African Americans; and Lynne, a white activist who has left her family and home to participate in the Movement, casting in her lot with the black workers of the South. Meridian struggles with feelings of bitterness when Truman stops seeing her in order to date white exchange students, particularly Lynne. After having had an intense romantic relationship with Meridian, Truman enters into a relationship with Lynne, whom he subsequently leaves. That Truman dated white women “so obviously because their color made them interesting – made her [Meridian] ashamed, as if she were less” (*Meridian*, p. 106). Meridian tells Lynne, “I tried very hard not to hate you. And I think I always succeeded.” (*Meridian*, p. 175)

Meridian’s inner strength and her complete dedication to the freedom struggle help her to rise above personal pettiness and rivalry. In what may be seen as characteristically Walker, Meridian has created herself in the image of her black foremothers. She has a positive sense of herself as an African American woman, and knows herself to be strong, independent and adventurous:

...Meridian appropriated all the good qualities of black women to herself, now that she was awake enough to be aware of them....At times she thought of herself as an adventurer. It thrilled her to think she

belonged to the people who produced Harriet Tubman, the only American woman who'd led troops in battle. (*Meridian*, p. 106)

Among African American women,

...only the rejects – not of men, but of experience, adventure – fell into the domestic morass that even the most intelligent white girls appeared to be destined for. There seemed nothing about white women that was enviable. Perhaps one might covet a length of hair. But that was all. And hair was dead matter that continued – only if oiled – to shine. (*Meridian*, p.106)

Thus, for her, white women are bland, uninteresting, and unworthy of envy. This confidence in her own worth helps Meridian to rise above the hatred that characterizes the attitude of many African Americans towards white people.

Although Meridian herself is able to resist the impulse to 'hate' Lynne, many other black women feel resentment against their white counterparts, and their feelings are barely masked. In the South, Lynne too, is as much a victim of racism as the African American women are, because of her whiteness. Having worked closely with black activists and having seen the injustice and atrocities carried out by a white racist society, she carries the guilt of her race on her shoulders.

By being white Lynne was guilty of whiteness. [...]Then the question was, is it possible to be guilty of a color? Of course black people for years were 'guilty' of being black. (*Meridian*, p. 131)

The fact that Lynne is "guilty of whiteness" prevents her from taking action when a group of African American men rape her, because she knows fully well that it would lead to certain death for the rapists.

In her realistic portrayal of the interrelationship between young blacks and whites, as well as men and women during the Civil Rights Movement, Walker also raises the question of what the struggle really was like and what it was all about. It is significant that Meridian gains inner strength and inspiration by situating herself in the genealogy of her African American foremothers like Harriet Tubman and

Sojourner Truth. Walker has always stressed on the importance of one's maternal influences; "And so our mothers and grandmothers have, more often than not anonymously, handed on the creative spark, the seed of the flower they themselves never hoped to see..." (*Search*, p. 240). She lauds the contributions of innumerable nameless women whose courage and relentless spirits have sown the seeds of revolution.

Walker's emphasis has always been on the portrayal of "incorrect" African American women "who will not cram themselves into any ideological or racial mold".<sup>18</sup> They struggle to transcend the stereotypical molds constructed for them by the dominant patriarchal forces. The concept of Black Motherhood, idealized by African American men, is put under close scrutiny. Walker presents the ambivalence that African American women have towards motherhood. Contrary to the ideal of the African American woman who produces and rears brave African American children who will one day liberate and make a difference for African American people, Walker makes it a point to denote the crippling consequences of pregnancy for African American women. She also portrays the mutual antagonism that commonly exists between parents and children. In *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, for instance, the relationship between Grange and Brownfield, Brownfield and Ruth, and between Josie and her daughter are fractured beyond repair. The complexities of racism intrude into their personal lives to the extent that they erode their chances of forming harmonious relationships.

Moreover, her women characters are debilitated by the fact that they are pregnant, or because they are mothers already. Margaret, Mem and the unnamed woman whom Grange indirectly kills in New York all suffer, in part, because they are pregnant. Mem's life represents the most striking instance of reproduction as an

oppressive force that defeats the woman's quest for self-determination. Pregnancy is described as Mem's "weakness".<sup>19</sup> Determined to take control of her life and change her destiny, her plans and dreams are nullified by the "return" of her reproductive "cycle" (*Grange*, p. 143). The two pregnancies that follow are not only unproductive; they destroy her health and render her unfit for work, which in turn makes her once more entirely dependent on her husband. Of all the pregnant women featured in the novel, Helen, the wife of a Civil Rights worker named Quincy, is the only one whose pregnancy appears to be a source of pride, pleasure and hope in the future.

In *The Temple of My Familiar*, Lissie and Hal's marriage takes on a sour note when Lissie becomes pregnant and has a very difficult delivery. Hal, who helplessly witnesses her pain, cannot get over the guilt that he is the one who has made her suffer like this by impregnating her, and he is thenceforth unable to have any physical relationship with her<sup>20</sup>. Lissie herself is described by Hal as "a good mother, but aloof. She didn't seem to be present for the child. Always off somewhere roaming through the ages." (*Temple*, p. 114). This loss of physical intimacy has serious repercussions on their relationship. Their marriage begins to fall apart, and all efforts to salvage it seem hopeless:

We seemed to be just going through the motions of living; and even though we loved each other with true devotion, we knew we had lost something precious. The grief we felt was almost too hard to bear. Sometimes, beaten, she'd creep into my arms, or I would creep into hers, and the two of us would just lay together, look out over the bay, and remember how it used to be and cry. (*Temple*, p. 112)

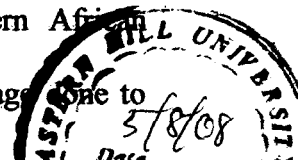
For Celie in *The Color Purple*, both her pregnancies are a result of her step-father's rapings. At fourteen, she is unable to grasp the implications of her "becoming big", and displays emotion only when her stepfather gives both the children away soon after they are delivered. Stepping in as a surrogate mother to Albert's children, she

does her duty of looking after them, but has suffered victimization for too long to be able to provide sympathy for the children.<sup>21</sup> They are one more responsibility that she must shoulder in her already over-burdened life. She has no part in the rearing of her own children as they are adopted by Samuel and Corinne, missionaries in Africa among the Olinkas. Later we are told, however, in *The Temple of My Familiar* that she, along with her partner Shug Avery, had an active part in the raising of her granddaughter Fanny Nzginga, in a loving, if somewhat unconventional way. Hence, there seems to be a gap between the idealized and celebrated picture of the Black Mother who nurtures, protects and upholds, as popularized by black nationalists, and the reality of the aftermath faced by women who carry out the actual duty of reproduction.

A relevant point that Walker raises in *Meridian* is the relationship between Motherhood and revolution. She questions whether the nurturing and protecting qualities of motherhood might in fact be necessary qualities for a revolutionary. The legacy of heroic and all-embracing motherhood, embodied by Sojourner Truth, who bore thirteen children and saw them sold off into slavery, and who then made herself into a spiritual and political "mother of the race", haunts Meridian. It haunts her because she feels unworthy of this legacy. She had failed to love her son Rundi/Eddie Jr., and has an abortion when she becomes pregnant by Truman.

The confusion Meridian feels regarding motherhood is a result of the conflicting models of motherhood that she is confronted with. Neither the white ideal of feminine beauty and domesticity, nor the African American model of the heroic, self-sacrificing mother who also works outside the home and has a role to play in the collective welfare of the community are viable images for a modern African American woman like Meridian.<sup>22</sup> She is also deeply aware of the damage

17 2 880



children by mothers who never wanted to have them in the first place, but who are resigned to 'duty', such as her own mother, Mrs. Hill:

She [Mrs. Hill] could never forgive her family, her community, her family, his family, the whole world, for not warning her against children. For a year she had some increase in her happiness....But in her first pregnancy she became distracted from who she was. As divided in her mind as her body was divided, between what part was herself and what part was not. Her frail independence gave way to the pressures of motherhood and she learned – much to her horror and amazement – that she was not even allowed to be resentful that she was “caught”. That her personal life was over. There was no one she could cry out to and say “It’s not fair!” And in understanding this, she understood the look she saw in the other women’s eyes. The mysterious inner life that she had imagined gave them a secret joy was simply a full knowledge of the fact that they were dead, living just enough for their children. (*Meridian*, p. 40)

Though dissatisfied with her role as mother, Mrs. Hill has nevertheless fulfilled her “duty” by assuming that role in a martyred way. This is also, however, characterized by gaps in communication and unspoken resentments which has serious consequences in her relationship with her daughter. On Meridian’s part this results in an unresolved feeling of guilt for not being able to live up to her mother’s so-called standards of motherhood. She is expected by her mother to sacrifice personal aspirations and desires at the altar of motherhood, something that Mrs. Hill herself had practiced somewhat resentfully. Since she is unable to reconcile to the varying models of motherhood before her, Meridian feels confused, and her confusion further intensifies her guilt. She is haunted by “a voice that cursed her existence - an existence that could not live up to the standard of motherhood that had gone before.” (*Meridian*, p. 88) She has a sense of being a disappointment to her mother and also to collective Black Motherhood.

Meridian found, when she was not preoccupied with the Movement, that her thoughts turned with regularity and intensity to her mother, on whose account she endured wave after wave of primeval guilt. She imagined her mother in Church, in which she had invested all that was

still energetic in her life, praying for her daughter's soul, and yet, having no concern, no understanding of her daughter's *life* whatsoever; but Meridian did not condemn her for this. Away from her mother, Meridian thought of her as Black Motherhood personified, and of that great institution she was in terrible awe, comprehending as she did the horror, the narrowing of perspective, for mother and for child, it had invariably meant. (Original emphasis. *Meridian*, pp. 92-93)

As an attempt to expiate her guilt, she welcomes the physical punishments she suffers in the Movement:

While other students dreaded confrontation with the police, she welcomed it, and was capable of inner gaiety, a sense of freedom, as she saw the clubs slashing down on her from above. Only once was she beaten into unconsciousness, and it was not the damage done to her body that she remembered when she woke up, but her feeling of yearning, of heartsick longing for forgiveness, as she saw the bright lights explode behind the red blood that curtained her face, and her feeling of hope as the harsh light of consciousness began to fade. (*Meridian*, p. 93)

Concerning motherhood, it would be wrong to assume that the politics of Black Nationalism and that of womanism<sup>23</sup> are completely at odds with one another. In the *Third Life of Grange Copeland*, Grange, especially in his second life, is a character who may be said to represent Black Nationalist manhood. For many African American men, violating the white woman, the epitome of what was sacrosanct to the white man, was often a means of asserting their power and masculinity. Following in the footsteps of many Black Nationalist men, Grange firmly grasps his masculinity only after he murders a white woman. Grange's political rhetoric, propounding violence and hatred of whites, unmistakably echoes the Black Nationalist impatience with the Civil Rights ethos of love and non-violence. He says, "The gun is important. I don't know that love works on everybody." (*Grange*, p. 204). He envisions racial solidarity among blacks only if it is cemented by absolute, "necessary hate" for whites. (*Grange*, p. 204).

Yet Walker chooses Grange to represent the nurturing mother, a figure whose absence is strikingly noticeable throughout the novel. In his third life, he becomes Ruth's caregiver, and gives her the guidance and love that has been missing for the better part of her life. Madhu Dubey notes that the amalgamation of the Black Nationalist with the displaced mother in Grange's character produces a 'curious ideological hybrid':

The novel's grafting of the mother onto the male nationalist serves two important ideological functions. Most obviously, Grange's characterization neutralizes the novel's womanist recovery of the mother. But the amalgamation, in Grange's character, of the opposed ideological senses of nationalism and womanism may also be read as an attempt to integrate the womanist power of the mother with the masculine power of the nationalist, and thus to resolve the tension between the two ideologies.<sup>24</sup>

Further, Walker supplements Grange's concept of a nationalist community joined by hatred, with a womanist vision of community inspired by love and forgiveness. She does this by investing womanist ideology in the maturing Ruth's concept of community. Grange fails to instill in Ruth his "necessary hate" because of her strong belief in the power of forgiveness. Love and forgiveness are qualities invested in all of Walker's major "womanist" characters such as Margaret, Mem, Ruth (*Grange*), Meridian (*Meridian*), Celie (*CP*) and Lissie (*Temple*). Ruth's ability to forgive is later tested in chapter forty six, when she spurns Brownfield's offer of reconciliation. Thus, the nationalist credo of aggressive resistance is not summarily rejected. Dubey suggests that the womanist's creed of love can be nullified as an unsentimental, viable value only after it is tempered by the "necessary hate" of the Black Nationalist.<sup>25</sup>

Similarly, if Meridian cannot reconcile herself to motherhood at a personal level, she nevertheless fulfills the role of communal mother by giving support and care to those around her. She gives moral and spiritual encouragement to the African

Americans in the small town of Chicokema where she has based herself, helping to articulate and protest the injustice that is meted out to them. In the opening pages of the novel, we see her in this role, protesting the fact that African American children are not allowed to see an absurd show because it is not yet Thursday, the day allotted for colored folks. Her protest is not only about big political issues, but the small, seemingly insignificant injustices which she will not ignore, even if it poses danger to herself:

Meridian did not look to the right or to the left.... As she approached the tank ...settled directly toward her chest. As she drew nearer the tank, it seemed to grow larger and whiter than ever and she seemed smaller and blacker than ever. And then, when she reached the tank she stepped lightly, deliberately, right in front of it, rapped smartly on its carapace – as if knocking on a door – then raised her arm again. The children pressed onward, through the ranks of the arrayed riflemen and up to the circus car door. The silence, as Meridian kicked open the door, exploded in a mass exhalation of breaths, and the men who were in the tank crawled sheepishly out again to stare. (*Meridian*, p. 8)

Ironically, the show which they have been banned from seeing is a “rip-off”, an exploitative piece of entertainment in which a man displays his embalmed wife for a price:

In tall, ornate gold letters over the side were the words, outlined in silver, “Marilene O’Shay, One of the Twelve Human Wonders of the World: Dead for Twenty-Five Years, Preserved in Life-Like Condition.” Below this, a smaller legend was scrawled in red paint on four large stars: “Obedient Daughter” read one, “Devoted Wife” said another. The third was “Adoring Mother” and the fourth was “*Gone Wrong*”. Over the fourth a vertical line of progressively flickering light bulbs moved continually downward like a perpetually cascading tear. (Emphasis added, *Meridian*, p. 5)

The notion of a woman who has “gone wrong” is symptomatic of the novel’s preoccupation, and is a recurring theme in Walker’s work. A woman’s deviation from the norms laid out for her by the socially and politically dominant – often patriarchal- forces ensures her being labeled as a sinner and held up as an example of

what should not be done. The consequences of such a deviation could be devastating for the woman herself, as well as for those around her, whose happiness she seems to be largely responsible for. In the case of Marilene O'Shay, her sin is in her infidelity and her unwillingness to be satisfied with her lot:

According to the writer, Marilene's husband, Henry, Marilene had been an ideal woman, a "goddess," who had been given "everything she *thought* she wanted." She had owned a washing machine, furs, her own car and a full-time housekeeper-cook. All she had to do, wrote Henry, was "lay back and be pleased." But she, "corrupted by the honeyed tongues of evildoers that dwell in high places far away," had gone outside the home to seek her "pleasuring," while still expecting him to foot the bills. (Original emphasis, *Meridian*, p. 6)

We are told later that because of her infidelity to him, her husband shot her lover, strangled her, and threw them both into Salt Lake. He was subsequently forgiven by the judicial and religious authorities, as also the community in general, because he had committed the crimes as a result of her unfaithfulness:

Just because he caught her giving some away, he shot the man, strangled the wife. Threw `em both into Salt Lake. Explained everything to the `thorities up there and they forgive him, preacher forgive him, everybody forgive him. Even her ma. (*Meridian*, p. 8)

Of all Walker's characters, Miss Lissie in *The Temple of My Familiar* is the epitome of a woman who deviates from the norms laid out by society. In the many lives that she has experienced mystically, she has been a slave brought from Africa, a pre-historic cave-dweller, a pygmy, a goddess, a white man, and even a lion, among other things. She has also lived with two men, one of whom is her husband, and the other her lover, in a neighborhood that is predominantly white. Miss Lissie has seen the world and its civilizations unfolding through her various lives, most of which she remembers. Yet a majority of her memories are unhappy ones, for she has almost never known acceptance and understanding. Her inability to conform marks her out as

a victim of people's ignorance and fear even when she does nothing to antagonize them.

Some people don't know it is in the nature of the eye to have seen forever, and the nature of the mind to recall anything that was ever known. (*Temple*, p. 65)

Much of the richness of these women's experiences are garnered from their mobility, their ability to locate and adjust to disparate mental situations, but more obviously, their ability to physically move, relocate and adapt to their new surroundings. In fact, in Walker's writings, geographical and spatial movements are often used as metaphors for individual growth and change, whether they are men or women. Grange Copeland, for instance, has to go the full circle of moving from the South up to the North, and back to the South again before he can fully comprehend the nature of his existence, and forge a new awareness of his individual identity as well as of the world around him. The plot of *Meridian* is cyclic in more ways than one, and moves from location to location. It traces the spiritual and physical journeys of the protagonist, born in the South, coming of age in the North, and eventually settling down to work with the folk of the South. Each step she takes toward a fuller self-realization is accompanied by a corresponding shift in location.

In the same way, Nettie in *The Color Purple* is made to undergo an extensive journey into the heart of Africa, among the Olinka tribe, in order to gain the knowledge, about herself and her race that cannot be found in any textbook that she has studied in America. Through her letters, in which she gives detailed accounts of her travels and the new experiences and insights gained therein, Celie and Shug are vicariously taken to new places and also gain new perceptions about life, which, in turn, brings enormous changes to their lives. In *By the Light of My Father's Smile*, the sisters Magdalena and Susannah are exposed to different cultures by virtue of their

parent's anthropological interests. This takes them to Mexico, to the Mundo tribe and then back to relocation in the United States.

The resultant clash of cultures brings with it pain as well as revelation. In the case of Tashi in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, there is a clash between the tradition-steeped Olinka culture, which expects blind adherence to such cultural practices as female genital mutilation/clitoridectomy, and the modern American way of life, which is often bewilderingly superficial. Often, women's bodies themselves become sites of struggle for predominance by the widely differing, but equally insistent cultural and social practices and expectations of different cultures.

In *The Temple of My Familiar*, Carlotta and Zede are smuggled out from "the old country in South America", a place that represented peace for them until political struggles tore it apart and colonialism rendered their lives miserable. Rescued by a wealthy and rebellious young white woman, Mary Jane, they begin a new life in San Francisco, and the trauma of adjusting to a new life takes a heavy toll on both mother and daughter:

It was in San Francisco that Carlotta's own memories began. She was a dark, serious child with almond-shaped eyes and glistening black hair. In a few years she spoke English without an accent, a language her mother at first had difficulty understanding, even when Carlotta spoke it to her....They lived in a shabby, poorly lighted flat over a Thai restaurant in an area of the city populated by the debris of society....Her mother found work in a sweatshop around the corner. There was no man in her mother's life....School was a misery to [Carlotta], but like so many bad things that happened, she never told her mother. Zede, stooped, a twitch of anxiety on her face at thirty-five, was a grim little woman, afraid of noise, other people, even of parades. (*Temple*, pp. 5-6)

Yet they do survive the transition, and Carlotta eventually finds herself. She flourishes in her adopted country while Zede chooses to return to her homeland to be among her people once more.

The notion of geographical movement as a metaphor for spiritual and psychic change and growth is not alien to literature, particularly African American literature, where the North, for example, has traditionally been a symbol of freedom and high expectation. The mass exodus of slaves of the Southern States to the North during and after Emancipation, is often compared by African Americans to the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt into Canaan. Like the Israelites, many African Americans did not live to see their dream of moving up North towards freedom fulfilled, but for many, the reality did not match up to the dream. Ralph Ellison's protagonist in *Invisible Man* projects the heartrending bewilderment of the invisibility of the African American in the urban North, a sentiment echoed by Grange Copeland when he stays in New York. Whereas people in the American South take enough notice of African Americans to dole out insults and humiliations, in the North they simply look through them, never seeing or acknowledging their presence, which to Grange, is worse than the active abuse found back home (*Grange*, p. 192). He, like so many others, however, does not share his sense of disillusionment and disgust with others. Instead he chooses to express his sentiments in anger more bitter and deep-rooted, because of his new insight into this aspect of the African American reality:

When he had come back from the North...there was no way for her [Josie] to understand the changes he felt. When he had gone through Baker County on his way North he was a baby in his knowledge of the world...He had not even comprehended what he was running to. He was simply moving on to where people said it was better. Josie had no way of knowing how revulsed he was by what he found in that world...He had tried countless times to initiate her into the hatreds of the world, the irrepressible hatreds he contained, barely, in himself. (*Grange*. p. 187)

For Grange, as also for many of Walker's other characters, geographical dislocation or relocation, then, plays a major role in their re-education. A change in the physical environment often serves as an eye-opener, and they begin to see the world through

different eyes. However, having their eyes opened can be a painful process when the reality they see is, itself, painful. Their mental anguish at times nearly destroys them physically. Celie, Nettie, Mem, Margaret, Josie and Carlotta are all at one time or another unable to withstand the pressure of their knowledge. Tashi, Fanny, and Magdalene undergo extensive psychiatric treatment, Miss Lissie does not retain much hope that the world will become a better place, and is therefore often embittered and cynical of other people (though always believing in herself), and the same knowledge takes a heavy toll on Meridian's health. A person of weaker emotional build like Lynne (*Meridian*) is more or less wrecked by her encounters.

For many of these women, a way to cope with such traumatic experiences, is to embrace spirituality. Alice Walker increasingly expresses her spirituality<sup>27</sup> in her writings, most notably in *The Temple of My Familiar*. Again, this reaction is not one that is unique to her writings, nor to her characters. Religion and faith have always been an important part of African American consciousness, particularly so during the Slavery era. In *The Color Purple*, Nettie's impassioned letters talk about this concept of a white God, and the inability of African Americans to feel comfortable with a God who, like their oppressors, is white, remote and unapproachable. Having gone to Africa as missionaries, Nettie and her husband Samuel eventually decide to leave the highly institutionalized Christian sect that they belong to, to establish their own church. Celie's conception of God, too, undergoes a change. From seeing God as a monolithic white construct, she ultimately sees God, or the hand of God, in all nature, and thus her last letter is addressed to 'Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God.' (*CP*; p. 292).

Similarly, Meridian's spirituality deviates from the traditional Christianity identified with the black churches of her formative years in the South. Much of her

guilt as an adult is a result of her inability to conform to the expectations of her church, emphatically stressed by her mother, who considered that the church was “literally God’s house”. Meridian has difficulty in accepting the intense religious experiences that she has witnessed from childhood, experiences that she cannot appreciate except as expressions of artistic and poetic talents. They were “majestic” and “passionate” “musicians” and “poets” (*Meridian*, p. 72). In much the same way as Lynne is interested in black people as “art”, so is Meridian similarly interested in the black church and the faith that it preaches:

Whenever she was in church, she felt claustrophobic, as if the walls were closing in....The music she loved. Next to the music, she had liked only the stained-glass windows, when there were any... (*Meridian*, p. 202)

Her refusal to do what her mother exhorts her to do in church because she does not believe in it, incurs her mother’s displeasure, and contributes to the disintegration of their relationship:

...she remembered her mother and the day she lost her. She was thirteen, sitting next to her mother in church, drunk as usual with the wonderful music, the voices themselves almost making the words of the songs meaningless....[Her mother had said] “Say it now, Meridian, and be saved...” But she had sat mute, watching her friends watching past her bench, accepting Christ, acknowledging God as their Master, Jesus their Savior, and her heart fluttered like that of a small bird about to be stoned. (*Meridian*, p. 16)

Her relationships with people often suffer as a result of the choices she makes. Her reluctance to commit herself to killing for the revolution makes her lose her comrades’ respect. In both cases, this unwillingness to commit herself to something she cannot fully comprehend or appreciate is the wedge that drives her irrevocably apart from them.

Meridian harks back to the faith of her ancestor, Feather Mae, her father’s grandmother, who had fought to save the Sacred Serpent, a plot of burial land that

once belonged to the Indians and had since passed into the hands of Meridian's father. Feather Mae had had "something extraordinary" happen to her while standing in the pit of this sacred burial ground, whereby "she felt renewed, as from some strange spiritual intoxication". Later she had renounced all religion that was not "based on the experience of physical ecstasy" shocking her Baptist church and its "unsympathetic congregation" (*Meridian*, p. 50).

Years later, Meridian struggles to understand the spiritual experiences shared by both her grandmother and her father. Eventually, she is able to partake of the experience too. It proves to be the most intense spiritual and physical experience that she has ever had:

From a spot in at the back of her left leg there began a stinging sensation, which, had she not been standing so purposely calm and waiting she might have dismissed as a sign of anxiety and fatigue. Then her right palm, and her left, began to feel as if someone had slapped them. But it was in her head that the lightness started. It was as if the walls of the earth that enclosed her rushed outward, leveling themselves at a dizzying rate, and then spinning wildly, lifting her out her body and giving her the feeling of flying. And in this movement she saw the faces of her family, the branches of trees, the wings of birds, the corners of houses, blades of grass and petals of flowers rush toward a central point high above her and she was drawn to them, as whirling, as bright, as free, as they. Then the outward flow, the rush of images, returned to the centre of the pit where she stood, and what had left her at its going was returned. When she came back to her body – and she felt sure she had left it – her eyes were stretched wide open, and they were dry, because she found herself staring directly into the sun. (*Meridian*, pp. 50-51)

Meridian realizes that she has the same reverence for dead people and lost civilizations that her great-grandmother and her father had, a "madness" (*Meridian*, p. 49), shared by all the other women who have had similar experiences, although expressed in different ways. Later, Meridian finally stumbles across a church that she can truly identify with, a church that has changed with the times. Instead of talking about vague spiritual notions she cannot understand, the speakers directly address the

pain and struggles of her race. Eschewing exhortations to be meek and submissive, the preacher here talks of political wrongs, martyrdom and Revolution in a tone that is consciously imitative of Martin Luther King Jr. It is here that she finally realizes that African Americans have been using their religion as a means by which they weave their stories into its traditional format of songs, sermons, addresses made to a "brother and sister", in order to awaken people into affirmative action:

...the music, the form of worship that has always sustained us, the kind of ritual you share with us, these are the ways to transformation that we know. We want to take this with us as far as we can. (*Meridian*, p. 204)

She becomes receptive to the idea of the role of the black church in the African American person's consciousness and sensibilities, in the same way that she becomes reconciled to the idea that sometimes, one may have to kill for the Revolution. This is a question that has been haunting her over a long period of time. In fact, it is this new revelation that she experiences in church, this alternative spiritual insight, which finally enables her to reassess her own position regarding violence. For the womanist, Walker seems to suggest that there can neither be any sharp delineation between the past and the present, nor the personal, the political and the spiritual:

...even the contemplation of murder required incredible delicacy as it required incredible spiritual work, and the historical background and present setting must be right. Only in a church surrounded by the righteous guardians of the people's memories could she even approach the concept of retaliatory murder. Only among the pious could this idea both comfort and uplift. (*Meridian*, p. 205)

She finally finds peace in the realization that she does not have to follow in the footsteps of those who have made decisions in the hope of a better future. However, she now understands and appreciates why it may be necessary to commit acts of violence. The poverty and suffering that she witnesses, makes her angry enough to think that she would be willing to wield the same weapons over her oppressors. This

wages an inner war with her naturally peaceable instincts. Ultimately, she stays true to herself, but respects the need for occasional drastic measures. She comes to understand her role in the revolution thus:

...perhaps it will be my part to walk behind the real revolutionaries – those who know they must spill blood in order to help the poor and the black and therefore go right ahead – and when they stop to wash off the blood and find their throats too choked with the smell of murdered flesh to sing, I will come forward and sing from memory songs they will need once more to hear. For it is the song of the people, transformed by the experience of each generation, that holds them together, and if any part of it is lost the people suffer and are without soul. If I can do that, my role will not have been a useless one after all. (*Meridian*, p. 206)

That she does not consider herself to be one of the “real revolutionaries” poses a disturbing question. Yet, a closer look at the book reveals that this is how she perceives herself. She has never been a radical person. She has, however, never been afraid to follow the path of what she considered to be right. As noted above, her courage is amply demonstrated in her ability to resist people who have tried to influence her. Therefore, she must be convinced that her stance of non-violence is the correct one as far as she is concerned, or she would not dedicate her life to the Movement. It is here that Meridian, the revolutionary artist steps in, when the political revolutionaries are too worn out to sing the ‘songs’ that inspire, narrate and record.

Walker herself remarks:

As a writer, I used to think being an activist and writing about it “demoted” me to the level of “mere journalist”. Now I know that, as with the best journalists, activism is often my muse. (*Anything*, p. xxiv)

When existing institutions fail to answer all her needs and questions, like the true artist she is, Meridian improvises and creates a niche that encompasses all she believes in. This is the path that Shug too, follows, by creating a new religion, as seen in the *Temple of My familiar*. When institutionalized faith fails to meet her spiritual

hunger, she promptly formulates what is known as 'The Gospel According to Shug' which include tenets like:

Helped are those who are enemies of their own racism: they shall live in harmony with the citizens of this world, and not with those of the world of their ancestors, which has passed away, and which they shall never see again.

Helped are those who strive to give up their anger; their reward will be that in any confrontation their first thoughts will never be of violence or of war. (*Temple*, pp. 289-90)

In a discussion about 'God' that Celie and Shug have in *The Color Purple*, Shug "decolonizes" Celie's conception of a white God, "big and old and graybearded and white" who might wear "white robes and go barefooted". Shug teaches her that God is "everything that is or ever was or ever will be". She says:

God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God. But only them that search for it inside find it. (*CP*, p. 166)

Walker suggests that religion need not necessarily be institutionalized. True spirituality is reflected in the faith of Celie and Shug. It is able to see God in every creation in the universe:

And what is the result of decolonizing the spirit? It is as if one truly does possess a third eye, and this eye opens. One begins to see the world from one's own point of view; to interact with it out of one's own conscience and heart. One's own "pagan" Earth spirit. We begin to flow, again, with and into the Universe. And out of this flowing comes the natural activism of wanting to survive, to be happy, and the creative joy that arises when we bring our collective stones of resistance against injustice together. We begin to see that we must be loved very much by whatever Creation is, and to find ourselves on this wonderful Earth. We begin to feel our sweet, generously appointed place in the makeup of the Cosmos. We begin to feel glad, and grateful to be here. (*Anything*, p. 26)

Having been marginalized and excluded throughout their existence, be it in religion, politics or family administration, these women seek a faith that is all-embracing and inclusive of everything and everyone. Anything less would make them uneasy, and would not do justice to their own expansive and absorptive natures, which, after all,

have been able to adapt to innumerable changes down history. Conventional religion is rejected in favor of a larger and more inclusive spirituality that encompasses all areas of their experience, whether personal or political.

The African American womanist is mother, daughter, and wife. She has also been soldier, warrior, activist, priestess, and artist. Like Grange's three lives, she has led many lives, a product of the winds that have blown about her, and impacted her life. Through it all, she has attempted to remain true to who she is.

The nature of the reality that she faces is often harsh and unrelentingly painful, and she has had to learn to survive, "regardless"<sup>26</sup>. The political struggle can never be separated from the personal, since the two are intricately intertwined. Her struggle for a voice, freedom and life is indeed her political struggle. Many times, her body becomes the tool of this struggle and the site upon which it is fought. Tashi's struggle in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* is a struggle to reclaim her body from the ravages of the battles that are fought on her body. The claims of her culture, which urge her to mutilate her genitals in a physical act of conformity to tradition; and the teachings of her friends, the missionaries, who are against it, compete with each other for her body. She becomes confused and ultimately decides to undergo clitoridectomy despite her fear, after her sister Dura's death, of the ritual. She is as much a victim of her tribe's gender and cultural imperialism as of the white man's imperialism. Later, after many years of silence, she breaks the cultural taboo and speaks of her unspeakable suffering. It is in speaking out for herself that she is finally able to reclaim herself. In so doing, she formulates her own political protest by resisting all that she feels has oppressed her and her people. She becomes the voice for other women who have undergone the same process in the name of patriotism, some of whom have died under the knife of the *tsungas*, the circumcisers. Tashi, then, like many other women,

has no choice but to speak out, for silence would mean annihilation and death to countless women. For her, political activism is survival. In a symbolic act, she kills M'Sukta, the female *tsunga* who has helped to enforce these crimes against women by circumcising Tashi and all the other girls in her village. Thus, she does what Meridian (*Meridian*) only theoretically and reluctantly concedes to: she commits an act of retaliatory murder.

Walker vehemently believes that unless the African American woman attains political emancipation, the race itself cannot be free, for she is the mother of the race, and to chain her would also mean to keep her children in bondage. At the same time, she cannot wallow in hatred and bitterness, for that would render her immobile and helpless. Thus, her political struggle becomes an intensely personal mission that remembers the lessons of the past, and moves beyond it towards a progressive future that will proclaim freedom for African American, white, woman, man, and child.

Whatever you have done, my brother... know I wish to forgive  
 you...love you  
 it is not the crystal stone of our innocence  
 that circles us  
 not the tooth of our purity  
 that bites bloody our hearts (*Meridian*, p.228)

Whatever course of action that the African American woman lays out for herself, her participation is a means and proof of her survival. As Walker observes, simply withholding participation because she believes that she has not made a significant change, is dangerous:

For we can do nothing substantial toward changing our course on the planet, a destructive one, without rousing ourselves, individual by individual, and bringing our small, imperfect stones [of activism] to the pile. (*Anything*, Intro. p. xxiii)

The womanist then, painstakingly creates a monument of freedom by creating beauty, by educating people, by being true to herself, by preserving history, and by maintaining fidelity to truth in whatever she does. This fidelity to truth also entails an acceptance of blackness as wanting in perfection. With such perception comes wisdom, and this in the end would bring the political and personal liberty denied to the African American woman, who in Walker's words, is:

Rebellious. Living.  
 Against the Elemental Crush.  
 A Song of Color  
 Blooming  
 For Deserving Eyes.  
 Blooming Gloriously.  
*Revolutionary Petunia.*<sup>28</sup>

#### Endnotes

1. Alice Walker, *Anything We Love Can be Saved: A Writer's Activism*, (New York: Random, 1997) p. xxiii. Henceforth parenthetically referred to as *Anything*.
2. Roberta M. Hendrickson, 'Remembering the Dream: Alice Walker and the Civil Rights Movement', (*MELUS*. Fall, 1999), p. 111.
3. Alice Walker, 'The Civil Rights Movement: What Good Was it?' in *Search*, p. 125.
4. Lauren Berlant, 'Race, Gender and Nation in *The Color Purple*' in *Alice Walker: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, Henry Louis Gates Jr., and K.A. Appiah (eds.), (New York: Amistad, 1993) p. 212.
5. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (New York: Norton, 1999), p. 2016
6. Deborah Mc Dowell, 'Boundaries: Or Distant Relations and Close Kin', *Afro-American Literary Studies in the 1990s*, Houston A. Baker Jr., and Patricia Redmond, (Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1989) p. 53.
7. Alice Walker, 'Choosing to Stay at Home' in *Search*, p. 169
8. Sojourner Truth, 'Convention of the American Equal Rights Association, New York City 1867, in Lerner (ed). *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History*, (New York: Panther, 1972).

9. Madhu Dubey, *Black Women Novelists and the Nationalist Aesthetic*, (Indiana: Indiana UP, 1994), p. 21.
10. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action, 1965*. rptd in *The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy*, Lee Rainwater and William L. Yancey (eds.), (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1967). Henceforth referred to parenthetically as *Moynihan*. This report represented black women, statistically the most economically powerless group in the country, as a dominant force that hindered the economic progress of black men. According to Moynihan, the "pathology" of ghetto blacks derived from the "deviant" matriarchal structure of the black family. At some places in his report, Moynihan acknowledged that there was no absolute reason for preferring a patriarchal family structure, but that the matriarchy "seriously retards the progress" of blacks only because "it is so out of line with the rest of American society" (*Moynihan*, p. 75). Elsewhere, however, he appealed to natural instinct as a means of validating the patriarchal family: "The very essence of the male animal, from the bantam rooster to the four-star general, is to strut" (*Moynihan*, p. 62).
11. Nathan Hare, 'Will the Real Black Man Please Stand Up?' *The Black Scholar* 2: 10, 1971, p. 32.
12. Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice*, (New York: Dell, 1968. p. 162, qtd in Madhu Dubey, *Black Women Writers*).
13. Alice Walker, *Meridian*, p. 113.
14. Florynce Kennedy, cited in Robert Staples, *The Black Woman in America*. (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1973) p.147.
15. Toni Morrison, 'What the Black Woman Thinks about Women's Lib', (*New York Times Magazine*. August 22, 1971), p.xi.
16. Inez Smith Reid, "*Together*" *Black Women*, (New York: Emerson, 1972), p. 43.
17. It has been suggested that Walker chooses to use the word 'womanist' rather than 'feminist' to express her feeling of separation from white feminists who fail to consider race, and her feeling of exclusion as a woman and a feminist, by black nationalist men (Hendrickson, 'Remembering the Dream: Alice Walker and the Civil Rights Movement'). It is also suggested that it could be an attempt to integrate black nationalism into feminism, to articulate a distinctively black feminism that shares some of the objectives of black nationalist ideology (Dubey, *Black Women Novelists and the Nationalist Aesthetic*, p.107).
18. Alice Walker in John O' Brien, 'Interviews With Black Writers', (New York: Liveright, 1973), pp. 207-208.
19. Alice Walker, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, p. 143.
20. Alice Walker, *The Temple of My Familiar*, p.108.
21. \_\_\_\_\_, *The Color Purple*.
22. Maria Lauret, *Modern Novelists: Alice Walker*, Norman Page (ed), (London: Macmillan, 2000) p.81.
23. I use the term "womanism" to denote Alice Walker's womanist ideology, which is discussed in detail in the Introduction.

24. Madhu Dubey, *Black Women Novelists and the Nationalist Aesthetic*, p. 115.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 115.
26. This is a reference to Walker's definition of "womanist", discussed in the Introduction.
27. Note: Walker's 2004 novel, *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart*, not included among the novels discussed in this thesis, focuses extensively on spirituality.
28. Original emphasis, 'The Nature of This Flower Is to Bloom', *Revolutionary Petunias & Other Poems*, (New York: Harcourt, 1973), p. 235.

## Chapter IV

### MOTIFS OF DISCORDANCE IN THE WOMANIST PERSONALITY

*Be nobody's darling/ Be an outcast. / Take the contradictions/ Of your life/  
And wrap around/ You like a shawl, / To parry stones/ To keep you warm.<sup>1</sup>*

This chapter will deal primarily with issues found in her two collections of short stories, *In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women* (1973)<sup>2</sup>, which contains a total of thirteen stories, and *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down* (1981)<sup>3</sup> which has fourteen stories. In many of these stories, she explores and summarizes the problems of being a colored person in predominantly white America. Many of the themes found in her two volumes of short stories are explored in greater detail in her novels. The themes of racial identity, culture and heritage have been subtly dealt with in 'Everyday Use' (*In Love*), one of her best-known and most anthologized stories. These themes have also been explored in novels such as *Meridian* (1976), *The Color Purple* (1982), and *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992).

The predominant theme of *In Love and Trouble* is the psychic displacement that women face as a result of the many demands that society places upon them. This psychic displacement further brings on a fragmentation and inner turmoil that cannot be fully remedied by white institutions, notwithstanding the many stamps of approval that their norms bear. One of the two epigraphs of *In Love* is an extract from *The Concubine* by Elechi Amadi, which depicts a girl, Ahurole, who is prone to fits of sobbing and "alarmingly irrational fits of argument". From her behavior, her parents have concluded that she is unduly influenced by *agure*, her personal spirit. It is not until the end of the extract that Amadi casually mentions that Ahurole "was engaged to Ekwueme when she was eight days old".

In the light of what follows in *In Love*, it forms a suitable epigraph. As Alice Petry notes, the women in this early volume are truly “in love and trouble” due in large measure to the roles, relationships, and “self-images” imposed upon them by a society “which knows little and cares less about them as individuals.”<sup>4</sup> The concubinage depicted in the novel suggests that, far from being a pagan, foreign phenomenon, it is practiced in a slightly modified form in contemporary America, especially in the world of the African American. The women who are in love, depicted in this volume do not fare much better than concubines with regard to the status that their lovers and husbands give them. In these stories, one is given accounts of women who behave in dysfunctional and bizarre ways.

In ‘Roselily’, the title character marries an unnamed African American Muslim from Chicago in part to give her three illegitimate children a better chance in life, and in part to obtain for herself some measure of social and economic security. Yet, it is not a relationship that she voluntarily enters into. She barely listens to the wedding ceremony, and the vows they exchange trigger off images of bondage. In another story ‘The Flowers’, Myop’s childhood is abruptly put to an end by the blunt social reality of lynching. Venturing outside the safety of her home, she goes off to gather flowers and accidentally comes across the severed body of a lynching victim.

Many of the women portrayed in the collection suffer mental anguish. This is often manifested in behavior that is socially unacceptable. The protagonist of ‘Really, Doesn’t Crime Pay?’ attacks her husband with a chain saw, while another sets fire to herself (‘Her Sweet Jerome’). To avenge a racial insult meted out to her by a white lady, one hires voodoo practitioners (‘The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff’) and yet another locks herself away in a convent (‘The Diary of An African Nun’). These women behave in the way that they do, not because of any evil spirit that guides and

influences them, or because they are mentally deficient, but because they are “responding to the stress of situations not of their own making.”<sup>5</sup> In such a situation, the traditional sources of comfort, whether they be marriage, faith or voodoo, do not offer them any hope of salvation.

The failure of the established institutions of the white world to offer any alleviation or redemption is a recurring theme in Walker's fiction. Rannie Mae Toomer in ‘Strong Horse Tea’ puts her trust in the curative powers of the new miracle drugs to cure her little boy. She rejects the old home remedies, insistent that her child should have the benefits of modern medicine. However, the boy never gets the help of the medicine that her mother puts so much faith in. The mother realizes this only too late, and despite going out into the rain to collect the horse's urine which is the traditional cure for whooping cough, she cannot save him. What she does not realize is that such institutions do not cater to the needs of people like her. She ignores the words of old Aunt Sarah, who knows better than to trust such institutions:

“He coming all right,” Rannie Toomer said firmly, looking, straining her eyes to see through the rain.

“Let me tell you, child” the old woman said almost gently, “he ain't.”....When would this one know, she wondered, that she could only depend on those who would come. (*In Love*, p. 93)

The old woman of ‘The Welcome Table’ finds that, when she is physically ejected out of the white church that she tries to attend, church or religion is closed to her. Close to death and seeking refuge in the sanctuary of the church, she is denied entry, and we are told that she meets her ‘God’ outside the doors of the church. In both cases, the exclusion of women, based on race and economic status is always apparent in Alice Walker's short stories.

It is not only institutions that fail these African American women. African American men, too, fall short of women's expectations. Often, larger social issues intrude into the lives of African American men and women to become an excuse for cruelty. In 'The Child Who Favored Daughter', a man, who is haunted by the inappropriate love that he has for his sister, transfers that love to his daughter. To quiet the spirits of incestuous desire raging inside him, he slashes off his daughter's breasts. The excuse for such inhuman behavior is his anger at her stubborn insistence on having an affair with a white man. To him, this is a repetition of what he has already experienced with Daughter, his sister:

He was struck down, too, and cried many nights on his bed; for she had chosen to give her love to the very man in whose cruel, hot, and lonely fields he, her brother, worked. Not treated as a man, scarcely as well as a poor man treats his beast....That she had given herself to the lord of his of own bondage was what galled him! And that she was cut down so! He could not forgive her the love she gave that knew nothing of master and slave. For though her own wound was a bitter one and in the end fatal, he bore a hurt throughout his life that slowly poisoned him. (*In Love*, pp. 33-40)

In 'Her Sweet Jerome', Jerome's wife, Mrs. Washington gets trampled upon in the course of the larger struggle that her man is involved in, that is, the emancipation of African Americans. Her marriage deteriorates as she sees her husband becoming increasingly indifferent and abusive to her. She blames his behavior on the extramarital affairs that she imagines him to be involved in. She is shaken to the core when she realizes that her rivals are not other women, but books on black propaganda:

Coated with grit, with dust sticking to the pages, she held in her crude, indelicate hands, trembling now, a sizeable pile of paperback books....She dusted them carefully one by one and looked with frowning concentration at their covers. Fists and guns appeared everywhere. "Black" was the one word that appeared consistently on each cover. *Black Rage, Black Fire, Black Anger, Black Revenge, Black Vengeance, Black Hatred, Black Beauty, Black Revolution*. Then the word "revolution" took over. *Revolution in the Streets, Revolution From the Rooftops, Revolution in the Hills, Revolution and Rebellion,*

*Revolution and Black People in the United States, Revolution and Death. (In Love, pp. 33-34)*

It is ironic that while he invests so much of himself in the issue of freedom for African Americans, his wife is denied liberty under his own roof. She is often seen attending to her customers at the beauty shop with signs of her husband's physical abuse on her body, while she valiantly pretends that nothing is amiss. She is given no other identity except "Mrs. Jerome Franklin Washington III". Jerome himself is a fraudulent revolutionary. In his intellectual fight against oppression in general, he feels no remorse for his cruel and literal oppression of his wife. Further, there is no evidence that he does anything more than read and talk about revolution.

Donna Haisty Winchell notes that much of the suffering that these African American women undergo is a result of their misplaced loyalty and misplaced love<sup>6</sup>. They let African American men decide and define what they should be, and suffer the consequences, both physical and psychological. Many of these women remake themselves into what their husbands expect them to be. Myrna ('Really, Doesn't Crime Pay?') proves to be one of these women whose loyalties are misguided and destructive. She errs in her choice of both husband and lover. Fulfillment comes for Myrna through her writing, yet her middle-class husband scorns her creative efforts: "No wife of mine is going to embarrass me with a lot of foolish, vulgar stuff" (*In Love*, p.15). He wants a mindless beauty accompanied by sweet smells, and prefers that she goes shopping or have a baby if she needs something to occupy her time. Later, she takes a lover, Mordecai, who betrays her not only by deserting her but also by stealing and publishing one of her stories in his name. She finally loses her mind, tries to kill her husband with a chainsaw and is committed to a mental institution. Upon her release, she ostensibly follows her husband's wishes and becomes the

fragrant piece of fluff that her husband has always wanted. Yet she has sweetened her body to such an extent,

that even he (especially he) may no longer touch it...I wait, beautiful and perfect in every limb, cooking supper as if my life depended on it. Lying unresisting on his bed like a drowned body washed to the shore. But he is not happy. For he knows now that I intend to do nothing but say yes until he is completely exhausted. (*In Love*, pp. 22-23).

On the surface, it looks like she has gained victory over her husband, but as Barbara Christian remarks, even the small victory over her husband is earned at the loss of self:

In saying *yes* to mean *no*, Myrna uses the manipulative power of the word and secures some small victory. But it is a victory achieved from the position of weakness, for she has no alternative. Like countless southern belles, she has found that directness based on self-autonomy is ineffectual and that successful strategies must be covert. Such strategies demand patience, self-abnegation, falsehood. Thus at the end of the story, Myrna has yet to act.<sup>7</sup>

In Walker, the act of loving is not always easy; often, the love that a person has for different people, cultures, beliefs or institutions clash with one another. This brings about an inner conflict that results in divided loyalties. This causes further fragmentation of the African American identity. The African nun in 'The Diary of an African Nun' is torn between the faith which she has embraced, Christianity, to whose service she has devoted her entire life, and the pagan practices of her village that she has left behind, but which still holds a deep, primeval attraction to her. Cloistered within the walls of her nunnery, 'shrouded in the whiteness' of the nun's habit, she is still able to hear the primitive chants and drumbeats of the pagan revelers. Her prayers are chanted in ironic contrast to the festive chants outside. She lays down on her bed in an unarticulated agony of confusion, torn between her calling as a "wife of Christ, a wife of the Catholic church" and her heritage, symbolized by the ancestral beliefs and practices of her fellow-villagers:

Do I care? Must I still ask myself whether it was my husband, who came down bodiless from the sky, son of a proud father and flesh once upon the earth, who first took me and claimed the innocence of my body? Or was it the drumbeats, messengers of the sacred dance of life and deathlessness on earth? Must I still long to be within the black circle around the red, glowing fire, to feel the breath of love hot against my cheeks, the smell of love strong about my waiting thighs! Must I still tremble at the thought of the passions stifled beneath this voluminous rustling snow! (*In Love*, p. 115)

She finds it difficult to identify with an abstract God, a God to whom she is “wed”, a “pale lover who never knew the dance [of her people, the dance of love that is being performed ritualistically outside] and could not do it” because it is too much at odds with the passionate traditions that she has grown up with. The ritual of love that is taking place outside awakens a hunger in her that cannot be assuaged by the clinical detachment of her ecclesiastical environment. To give voice to her confusion would be to invite the reproachful reaction of her superiors in the Church. Their interpretation of faith is disassociated from any human desire and hunger for an ecstasy “fierce and sweet”:

“Sweet? Sister,” they will say. “Have we not yet made a convert of you? Will you yet be a cannibal and eat up the life that is Christ because it eases your palate?” (*In Love*, p. 117)

Behind the African nun’s disquiet lies a bigger problem that Walker repeatedly tackles in many of her works, that of colonialism and its impact on the colonized. In Africa, colonization was to have a long-lasting impact in the area of religion, with conversion to Christianity carried out on a big scale. Embracing an alien religion entailed denouncing traditional or indigenous religious practices. Since many of the religious and cultural practices were intertwined, it also meant rejecting many cultural practices, since these were looked on with disapproval by the white missionaries. In order to be a ‘good’ believer, then, one had to disown many aspects of the culture that one had grown up in, and embrace the culture and religion of the white people. A rite

such as the one described in the story would not have been acceptable at all by the Catholic Church. Thus the African nun has to turn her back, as it were, on the primordial love-dance enacted outside, and ignore the wave of longing that it kindles in her.

Walker talks about “spiritual colonization” consequent upon political colonization. She refers to the white Christian god<sup>8</sup> who has been elevated through this process of spiritual colonization. A result of this is the inevitable sense of inferiority on the part of the African Americans whose blackness alienates them from a “white” God. Walker, thus, underlines the necessity of “decolonizing the spirit”:

What is happening in this world more and more is that people are attempting to decolonize their spirits. A crucial act of empowerment, one that might return reverence to the Earth, thereby saving it, in this fearful-of Nature, spiritually colonized world. (*Anything*, p. 4)

Spiritual colonization brings about psychic displacement. The psychic displacement, as Walker repeatedly notes in her works, brings on fragmentation and inner turmoil. With it, the entire history of a race is denied, and only just escapes obliteration, as in the case of African Americans. It raises the question of identity and gives rise to the search for roots, a search that continually takes them back to the very practices and beliefs of their ancestors that they have renounced and perhaps, forgotten. Walker writes:

It is fatal to love a God who does not love you. A God specifically created to comfort, lead, advise, strengthen and enlarge the tribal borders of someone else. We have been beggars at the table of a religion that sanctioned our destruction. Our own religions denied, forgotten; our own ancestral connection to All Creation something of which we are ashamed. I maintain that we are empty, lonely; without our pagan-heathen ancestors; that we must lively them up within ourselves, and begin to see them as whole and necessary and correct: their Earth-centered, female-reverencing religions, like their architecture, agriculture, and music, suited perfectly to the lives they led. And lead, those who are left, today. (*Anything*, p. 25)

This quest for one's roots and history is a manifestation of the inner search for psychological wholeness that haunts these women. Even if, like the African nun, they have shed their old ways and cloaked themselves in the garb of dominant cultures, some questions simply cannot be answered. The mountains that she sees from her windows are snow-covered, and at first glance, look like white mountains: white, like the color of her nun's habit. Yet, the true color of the mountains is black, and "it is the snow that gives them their icy whiteness". It is only in the spring, when the "hot black soil" melts the snow that these mountains become productive and useful:

In the spring, the hot black soil melts the crust of snow on the mountains, and the water as it runs down the sheets of fiery rock burns and cleanses the naked bodies that come to wash in it, it is when the snows melt that the people here plant their crops; the soil of the mountains is rich, and its produce plentiful and good. [...] What have I or my mountains to do with a childless marriage, or with eyes that can see only the snow...? (*In Love*, p. 117)

The obvious analogy here is between the nuns and priests who at first seem so productive, "full of intense, regal life", but who, she realizes, are barren for they "never shall" produce children, and the beautiful, snow-capped mountains, regal and white, which are nevertheless, useless until they return to their original black form. Having dedicated her life to this service, the nun chooses to remain quiet, and her mouth "must be silent, then, though [her] heart jumps to the booming of the drums, as to the last strong pulse of a dying world" (*In Love*, p. 118). She is fully aware that by maintaining this silence, she is helping to muffle the voice of her people forever. Paradoxically, she knows that she must keep quiet, because her conformity to the dominant hegemonic white structure also ensures the survival of her people. To bring discordance by refusing to abide by "civilized" norms would mean eventual annihilation for her people. Caught between these two worlds, fiercely proud of her heritage and yet painfully aware that survival entails compromising, she chooses to

stay in the path that she has chosen, a path that preaches peace. Ironically, this does not seem to bring her any peace:

For the drums will soon, one day, be silent. I will help muffle them forever. To assure life for my people in this world I must be among the lying ones and teach them how to die. I will turn their dances into prayers to an empty sky, and their lovers into dead men, and their babies into unsung chants that choke their throats each spring. (*In Love*, p. 118)

Walker often portrays the unique position of women who have had the privilege of a white education and a degree of exposure to white culture. Often, their personalities are shaped by the clash of cultures that they have experienced. This is characterized by anxiety and the subsequent dilemma caused by loyalty to race on one hand, and on the other recognition of the need for tools of survival. This often mistakenly translates into an acceptance of white values.

The clash of cultures and the tension inherent in the differences between black and white values is problematized in the character of Dee in 'Everyday Use'. Briefly put, the story is about a woman, Mama, and her two daughters, Dee and Maggie. They are poor African Americans living in the south. While Mama and Maggie stay home, Dee ventures out into the world, gets herself a college education and returns home for a visit. She has changed her name to the more African-sounding "Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo". She comes home with a friend, "Hakim-a-Barber" (Hakim-al-Baba), and a newfound appreciation of her African American roots and heritage. She displays this by laying claim to the artifacts that have always been in her home, such as the butter dasher, the churn top and most especially the quilt that has been passed down in the family. She wants these items for display in her New York apartment, as "priceless" pieces of art, and is appalled that Mama insists on giving the quilt to Maggie as her marriage dowry, for Maggie will "probably be backward enough to put

them to everyday use.”(*In Love*, p. 57) Mama has her way, and Dee leaves without the quilt. A detailed study of this most-anthologized of Walker’s short stories is crucial since it encapsulates much of what Walker’s womanist philosophy is concerned with.

Critics have generally seen this as an indictment against a superficial appreciation of art, symbolized by Dee’s attitude. It exploits for economic gain or values heritage and history, only because it is fashionable to do so, without really understanding it.

She now styles herself to the dictates of a faddish Africanism and thereby demonstrates a cultural Catch-22: an American who attempts to become an African succeeds only in becoming a phony. In her name, her clothes, her sunglasses, her patronizing speech, and her Muslim companion, Wangero proclaims a deplorable degree of alienation from her rural origins and family.<sup>8</sup>

Whereas Dee, who rejected Mama’s offer of a quilt when she was off to college, saying that they were “old-fashioned” and “out of style” now wants to hang the quilt and frame it for display, Maggie and Mama have a more utilitarian use for it. Art, it is implied, is not meant for viewing as an artifact, but should be used for everyday purposes. This is very much in keeping with Walker’s views on the creativity of older African American women who were artists despite the deprivations they faced in every way, women who made beautiful flowers bloom where there was no beauty. She talks at length about the resilience and creative gifts of these women in her essay ‘In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens’.<sup>9</sup>

David Cowart reads the story as one that addresses itself to the dilemma of African Americans who, in striving to escape prejudice and poverty, risk terrible deracination, a sundering from all that has sustained and defined them.<sup>10</sup> Dee’s reason for changing her name to Wangero is that she “couldn’t bear it any longer, being named after the people who oppress [her]” (*In Love*, p. 53). What Dee fails to realize

is that simply changing her name to an African one does not make her any more of an African or any less of an American. Whereas the name that she adopts is most probably in a language that she does not even understand, her given name, "Dee", has been in her family for generations. Mama tries to explain this to her:

"You know as well as me you was named after your aunt Dicie," I said. Dicie is my sister. She named Dee. We called her "Big Dee" after Dee was born.

"But who was *she* named after?" asked Wangero.

"I guess after Grandma Dee," I said.

"And who was she named after?" asked Wangero.

"Her mother," I said, and saw Wangero was getting tired. "That's about as far as I can trace it," I said. Though in fact, I probably could have carried it back beyond the Civil War through the branches. (*In Love*, p. 54)

In the light of this conversation, it seems ridiculous for Dee to reject her name because it belongs to her oppressors. She has ignored the fact that even if Grandma Dee was given her name by a white slave-owner, her family have very clearly appropriated it as their own for at least four generations, and thus is very much part of their family history and heritage.

Dee/Wangero is a symbol of the cultural struggles of a generation, a person who has left her rural home for higher education, who has immersed herself in the liberating culture of the white world. She tries to force this culture on her mother and sister, and later denounces it as oppressive. Now, she has progressed to an idea of nationalism that is radically at odds with what has hitherto defined the racial identity of African Americans.

Maggie, on the other hand, represents the multitude of African American women who must suffer while the occasional "lucky black sister" escapes the ghetto. Her scars are physical as well as psychological. She is described as "a lame animal, perhaps a dog run over by some careless person rich enough to own a car, sidle up to

someone who is ignorant enough to be kind..." She has her "chin on her chest, eyes on ground, feet in shuffle, ever since the fire that burned the other house to the ground." (*In Love*, p. 49) In the fire that broke out in the first house, Maggie was literally burned, "her hair smoking and her dress falling off her in little black papery flakes."

Blinded in the eye at the age of eight while playing with her brothers, Walker was physically and psychologically scarred too.<sup>11</sup> It may be said that Walker is projecting, part of the self-consciousness and shyness she felt as a result of this incident, onto Maggie's character. When Dee comes home, Maggie cowers behind Mama, and cannot reciprocate Hakim-a-barber's attempts at a warm embrace:

Scarred, graceless, "not bright" and uneducated, Maggie is a living reproach to a survivor like her sister. Maggie is an aggregate underclass that has been left behind as a handful of Wangeros achieve their independence – an underclass scarred in the collective disasters Walker symbolizes neatly in the burning of the original Johnson home.<sup>12</sup>

Dee embraces each new ideology, be it assimilation, torching the ghetto, Islam, or the Africanist vision, as an attempt to restore a sense of identity "terribly impaired by the wrongs visited on black people in the new world"<sup>13</sup>. However, at the same time that she recognizes the importance of one's heritage and the preservation of the few concrete artifacts of this heritage, Dee fails to properly appreciate or understand the value of her heritage. The objects that she covets and appropriates so vehemently are not much more than objects or artifacts for her. She sees them only as the sum total of her history and heritage, and does not want to delve too deeply into their meaning. To Mama and Maggie, however, much as they value the quilt, for them it represents the actual history that they have kept alive in their hearts: the memory of Grandma Dee,

who pieced the quilt, and Big Mama Dee, who helped to frame it. The quilts themselves are a repository of their family history:

In both of them were scraps of dresses Grandma Dee had worn fifty and more years ago. Bits and pieces of Grandpa Jarrell's Paisley shirts. And one teeny faded blue piece, about the size of a penny matchbox, that was from Great Grandpa Ezra's uniform that he wore to the Civil War. (*In Love*, p. 56)

Maggie and Mama are aware not only of this family history, but know how to quilt, thus keeping the art and the tradition alive. Maggie values the quilt and the memories it represents, but can do without it if need be, for she can “[re]member Grandma Dee without the quilts.” (*In Love*, p. 58) Dee, on the other hand, is aghast at the idea of Maggie putting the quilts to everyday use. She considers them irreplaceable, even when Mama assures her that Maggie can make some more if they become worn out. She tries to make her mother understand that “the point is these quilts, *these* quilts!” (original emphasis, *In Love*, p. 58). What she wants to do with them is to display them, “as if that was the only thing you *could* do with quilts.” (original emphasis, *In Love*, p. 58).

However, critics like Susan Farrell<sup>14</sup> give an alternative interpretation of Dee's character. Though not flawless, she embodies the courage and fighting spirit necessary for survival. Mama and Maggie are more faithful to their tradition and heritage because they are caught in a time warp as it were.

In Dee, then, we see the return of the “worldly-wise” and sophisticated daughter who has shaken off the shackles of a rural upbringing characterized by poverty and endless struggle. Years later when she returns, she finds that the house that Mama and Maggie live in is an exact replica of the one that she left behind all those years ago. Where she has changed, her family has not changed much. Even after she leaves them, there is not much reason for assuming that they ever will. Dee is

ambitious and upwardly mobile. Mama and Maggie lead predictable lives with hardly any surprises to upset the status quo. Mama gives a brief outline of what the future looks like for them:

[Maggie] will marry John Thomas (who has mossy teeth in an earnest face) and then I'll be free to sit here and I guess just sing church songs to myself. Although I never was a good singer. Never could carry a tune. (*In Love*, p. 50)

Susan Farrell notes that behind the seeming complacency and easy satisfaction of Mama's uneventful life, there lurks a vague dissatisfaction:

Not quite sure what she will do with herself when Maggie marries, Mama can only imagine herself alone, engaging in an activity which she feels she is not even very good at.<sup>15</sup>

Dee on the other hand, even as a child, had always been different, never accepting her underprivileged life as a preordained plan of destiny. She is the one who strikes a discordant note by daring to be different:

Dee wanted nice things. A yellow organdy dress to wear to her graduation from high school; black pumps to match a green suit she'd made from an old suit somebody gave me. She was determined to stare down disaster in her efforts. Often I fought off the temptation to shake her. Sixteen she had a style of her own: and knew what style was. (*In Love*, p. 50)

She attempts to change her mother and her sister, sharing whatever she learned and read from her books. Her efforts are in vain, mainly because she antagonizes her family by her aggressiveness and lack of patience:

She used to read to us without pity; forcing words, lies, other folks' habits, whole lives upon us two, sitting trapped and ignorant underneath her voice. She washed us in a river of make-believe, burned us with a lot of knowledge we didn't necessarily need to know. Pressed us to her with the serious way she read, to shove us away at just that moment, like dimwits, we seemed about to understand. (*In Love*, p. 50)

Although her efforts may have produced nothing but resentment and bewilderment, the point is that she has at least made an effort to change the rather limited

perspectives of her family. As Farrell remarks, “rather than simply abandon her mother and sister in their ignorance and poverty, in their acquiescence to an oppressive system, Dee tries her best to extend her own education to them, which is surely not a bad thing.”<sup>16</sup> Unlike them, she has never shied away from the unknown and the unfamiliar. “She would always look anyone in the eye. Hesitation was no part of her nature.” (*In Love*, p. 49)

It is this very nature, so alien to that of her mother, her sister, and the countless African American women who suffer in silence, that will ensure the African American woman’s survival in the world. Mama and Maggie, rooted as they are in their home and tradition, seem incapable of changing with the times. Dee, stumbling along in her search for an authentic identity, and committing mistakes all along the way, is the most likely one to make her mark in the world. She will give voice to the voiceless women of her race, among whom are her own mother and sister, to find expression as an individual as well as an artist.

With characteristic honesty, Walker examines her own position as an artist and an African American woman, who transcended her poverty-stricken sharecropper background and went to Sarah Lawrence college on a scholarship. The artist bears a huge responsibility towards one’s race. This was an issue that was stressed upon by pioneers in the Black Arts Movement.<sup>17</sup> The ‘sister’ or ‘brother’ privileged with an education bears the burden of giving voice to those who have remained voiceless for too long. At the same time, this obligation is looked upon with mixed feelings by the African American artist who, if she is a true artist, must move beyond issues of race and politics to truly understand life. Zora Neale Hurston talks with candor about this kind of pressure in her book *Dust Tracks on a Road*:

Negroes were supposed to write about the Race problem. I was and am thoroughly sick of the subject. My interest lies in what makes a man or a woman do such-and so, regardless of his color.<sup>18</sup>

In her essay 'Saving the Life That Is Your Own', Walker also says:

Black writers and white writers seem to me to be writing one immense story – the same story, for the most part – with different parts of this immense story coming from a multitude of different perspectives. (*Search*, p. 5)

The artist must give voice to the voiceless, but on her own terms, because her fidelity must be foremost towards her art, which is universal and crosses all boundaries of race. Thus, when Dee is seen as a budding artist, albeit an imperfect one whose sensibilities need honing, she becomes a more sympathetic figure. Her seeming lack of sympathy may not be so much a lack than a difference in perspective. In fact, like an artist, she has already, despite herself, given them voice by arguing with them over the quilts. Her strong-willed and insensitive insistence on owning the quilts finally pushes Mama to assert her will. Mama experiences a revelation of sorts and for the first time, favors Maggie over Dee by physically snatching the quilts from Dee's hands and giving them to a dumbfounded Maggie. Ultimately, Walker is both Maggie and Dee, and it is the combination of Maggie's sensitivity with Dee's self-assertiveness and spirit of adventure that goes into the making of the complete artist. Whereas most of the women characters in *In Love* may be seen to be thwarted artists, Dee embarks on the road to self-assertion as an artist. This is a journey that reaches completion in the women of the second volume.

What differentiates the second volume, *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down* from *In Love* is that the women depicted in *You Can't Keep* have advanced to a higher plane, personally and socially. As Barbara Christian observes, there truly is a clear progression in the two volumes, from an emphasis on "trouble" to an emphasis on

self-assertiveness.<sup>19</sup> Commenting on this, Alice Petry notes that the women of *You Can't Keep* “embody the product, not the process: where a mother in *In Love* (‘Everyday Use’) can only fantasize about appearing on *The Tonight Show*, a woman of *You Can't Keep* (‘Nineteen Fifty Five’) actually does it.”<sup>20</sup> Similarly, a dying old lady in *In Love* (‘The Welcome Table’) is literally thrown out of a segregated white church, but in *You Can't Keep* (‘Source’), two black women get to sit in an integrated bar in Anchorage, Alaska. Whereas *In Love* chronicles the victimization and struggles of women, *You Can't Keep* puts more stress on women who have moved beyond and achieved a measure of success and affluence. Male characters wield less influence or power over women characters. These male characters have not been given much significance. According to Trudier Harris, the women of *You Can't Keep* seem “superficial and static” and now that they are “free to make choices, they find themselves free to do nothing or to drift.”<sup>21</sup> Donna Haisty Winchell, on the other hand, sees this collection as a book that “explores the hidden, beautiful, whole, free selves that [Walker’s] fictional black women discover or rediscover when they, like Grange Copeland, realize that definition of self must come from within.”<sup>22</sup> In her essay, ‘Beauty: When the Other Dancer Is the Self’ Walker dreams that her two “selves” are dancing together. One part of her is the one who cringes when she sees her daughter focusing on her damaged eye and braces for childhood’s cruel response to physical differences. The other “self” is the one that was innocent and beautiful. It died when her eye was scarred by the BB gun that left her feeling ugly and disfigured. However, she finds peace when her daughter sees in her eye not a disfiguring scar, but a “world”. In the dream that comes to her that night, she dances happily with her other self:

We dance and kiss each other and hold each other through the night.  
 The other dancer has obviously come through all right, as I have done.  
 She is beautiful, whole and free. And she is also me. (*Search*, p. 393)

Often, in *You Can't Keep*, the women characters find their identity, their "selves" as they call it. Once they arrive at this knowledge, they are no longer dictated by others. To Winchell, this collection celebrates women's fighting spirit and their search for definition. This is reflected in the epigraph to the collection which has been taken from Hermann Hesse:

It is harder to kill something  
 that is spiritually alive  
 than it is to bring the dead  
 back to life. (Epigraph, *You Can't Keep*).

The issue of self-definition is forcefully illustrated in 'The Abortion'. Imani, finding herself with an unwanted pregnancy, flies to New York for an abortion. Her husband Clarence is too busy to go with her. She resents his lack of emotional support as much as her own need for support. Returning from her trip, she makes it clear to Clarence that he must have a vasectomy. Clarence obliges but is too late. Their marriage falls apart two years later, in part brought about by Clarence's inconsistency. He is deeply involved in race politics but his commitment to the cause of black liberty does not seem to be a consistent one. Whereas he is occupied with government policies regarding African Americans, yet the significance of a young African American girl's murder escapes him. Imani is shocked at his callous attitude where he is too busy to attend the funeral of Holly Monroe, a young African American girl who was shot dead on her way home from her high school graduation. Sitting in the stifling heat of the church, the pain in her uterus increasing, Imani realizes that in a sense, Holly Monroe is every young African American girl. "And an even deeper truth was that

Holly Monroe was herself. Herself shot down, aborted on the eve of becoming herself.” (*You Can't Keep*, p. 73)

Unlike Mrs. Jerome Washington, Imani does not hold on to her loyalty to the African American man to the point of self-abnegation or self-destruction. She acknowledges her marriage for the farce that it is. She knows that she must be the one to walk away from it because in the long run, Clarence is only too willing to accept self-deception whilst she is not. Mrs. Washington can accept neither living a lie nor continuing to live without her husband, and ultimately resorts to destroying his books and then torching herself up with them. Imani, however, though not happy at the way her relationship turns out, knows that she has a choice, and chooses to live. She, thus, leaves her husband.

Walker's women refuse to have their sexual identity defined by a man's sexist or racist fantasies. Two stories in the collection deal with the threat that pornography poses to relationships between African American men and women. One story, 'Porn', shows a successful sexual relationship destroyed by pornography. Another, which may be read almost as a direct indictment of pornography, entitled 'Coming Apart: By Way of Introduction to Lorde, Teish and Gardner', records one woman's fight against the dehumanizing effects of pornography. Both show that the dignity of the African American woman need not be sacrificed to the African American man's view of sexuality. The women of these two stories take positive action and articulate their resentment, making a visible effort to reform their husbands. At the end of the story, the husband in 'Coming Apart' is no longer dreaming either of England or of any other woman, black or white, but accepts his wife as she is, in her own dark beauty.

The self-assertion and “fighting spirit” of African American women is again portrayed in the story, 'How Did I Get Away with Killing One of the Biggest Lawyers

in the State? It Was Easy.' The protagonist, an impoverished African American teenager with a mother who works as a maid, and a father whom she never knew, is not a born fighter. Her response to being raped at the age of twelve is, "I never told anybody. For what could they do?" (*You Can't Keep*, p. 23) When she is fourteen, her mother's employer, a prominent white lawyer, tricks her into his car, drives her to his office and rapes her, she again tells no one. Two days later, she willingly gets into his car again, for he is at least clean and generous with gifts and money. The affair continues, and when her mother tries to stop them, the lawyer persuades the daughter to commit her to an insane asylum. After three months the mother really becomes insane. Waking up to reality, the narrator tries to get her lover to release her mother, but he refuses. When her mother dies, she takes his gun and kills him. She steals his money from his safe. The money will guarantee the college education he has always promised her.

Another "fighter" in the collection is Elethia, the character after whom the story has been called. Elethia discovers that the dummy that decorates the window of a restaurant, "Uncle Albert", is not, in fact, a dummy. It is the stuffed body of an African American man. Its intense smile with its shining false teeth belies the brutality of the life that it had led as a slave: "Hell, all Albert's teeth was knocked out before he was grown" (*You Can't Keep*, p. 30). One night Elethia and her friends steal Uncle Albert's body and burn it in the high school incinerator, each keeping a bottle of his ashes. Although this act of rebellion leaves Elethia shaken and scared, yet she feels that in burning the corpse, they were doing what Albert Potter would have wanted. The tragedy is that she soon learns that there are 'Uncle Alberts' all over the world:

But everywhere she looked there was an Uncle Albert (and many Aunt Albertas, it goes without saying). But she had her jar of ashes, the old-timers' memories [of Albert] written down.... And she was careful that, no matter how compelling the hype, Uncle Alberts, in her own mind, were not permitted to exist. (*You Can't Keep*, p. 30).

The story has autobiographical links. Walker herself recalls that there was, "until a few years ago", in her hometown Eatonton, Georgia, an Uncle Remus restaurant that catered only to whites. It featured in its window a dummy of an African American man, "an elderly, kindly, cottony-haired darkie, seated in a rocking chair". Walker fantasized about liberating him, "using army tanks and guns."<sup>23</sup> It may be observed that through the character of Elethia, she realizes her fantasy.

Walker feels the necessity of provoking people out of their complacency. An apt tool that she uses to bring this message across, is the use of blues music<sup>24</sup> techniques and themes in her fiction, combined with the use of signifyin(g). 'Signifying' is a term brought into critical usage by Henry Louis Gates Jr. in his book, *The Signifying Monkey*.<sup>25</sup> Briefly put, it is a literary trope whereby there is an 'encoded intention to say one thing but to mean quite another', denoting a gap between intention and expression.

Alice Walker signifies on the title of Perry Bradford's composition, 'You Can't Keep a Good Man Down' recorded by Mamie Smith, a legendary blues singer of the 1920s for her collection of short stories, entitled *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down*. Mamie Smith's recording of this song, together with another song, 'This Thing Called Love' on February 14, 1920 is the first documented recording of an African American woman singer<sup>26</sup>. Walker's title also makes close reference to another song, 'You Just Can't Keep a Good Woman Down' (1928), a 12-bar blues sung and composed by blues woman Lillian Miller, which also signifies on

Bradford's song. Miller's song testifies to the blues roots of Walker's title, theme and use of signifyin(g):

*If you catch me stealin', Papa please don't tell on me  
 My new man has quit me and I'm stealin' back to my used to be  
 You may see me smilin', and you may think I'm glad (as, but you don't  
 know)  
 But you can never tell, the trouble sweet Mama have had  
 I don't want no man that's gonna play me and stall (don't mean  
 maybe)  
 I don't want no man that's gonna play me and stall  
 I just want a Daddy, really let me have it all.  
 All of you men are, [ever] so hard to please  
 You got old and young women, wearin' dresses up above their  
 Oh- Just can't keep a good woman down  
 If you throw me down here Papa, I rise up in some other town.*

As a book, the various stories in *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down* talk about "good" women who refuse to be "kept down". Like the lyrics of the song, even when they seem defeated at a particular place or time, they "rise up in some other town".

Alice Walker has been profoundly influenced and inspired both by African American music and musicians, as well as by writers whose works are grounded in the music and the expressive folk traditions of African Americans. Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and the music of blues women like Bessie Smith rank among Walker's most significant musical and literary influences. In her words:

*Music is the art I most envy....Musicians [are] at one with their cultures and their historical subconscious. I am trying to arrive at that place where Black music already is; to arrive at that unself-conscious sense of collective oneness; that naturalness, that (even when anguished) grace. (Search, pp. 259, 264)*

To Walker's mind, "Zora Neale Hurston, Billie Holiday, and Bessie Smith form a sort of unholy trinity. Zora belongs in the tradition of black women singers, rather than among "the literati"" (*Search*, p. 91). Walker has explored the role of women blues singers in the character of Shug Avery in *The Color Purple*, a character who seems to

have been modeled along the lines of these three women. Walker was especially influenced by Hurston who had “extreme highs and lows, her undaunted pursuit of adventure, passionate emotional and sexual experience, and her love of freedom. Like Bessie and Billie she followed her own road, believed in her own gods, pursued her own dreams, and refused to separate herself from “common” people.” (*Search*, p. 91)

In signifying, following Henry Louis Gates’ usage, Walker “repeats with a difference traditional material, revising and personalizing it”, giving, in the words of Shirley Anne Williams, “a traditional statement about a traditional situation a new response.”<sup>27</sup> Her blues influences can be clearly seen in ‘Nineteen Fifty-Five’, a story from *You Can’t Keep*.

The plot outlines the relationship between Gracie Mae Still, an African American blues singer, and Traynor, a white singer, who, when the story opens is a merely a “boy” who is “about five feet nine, sort of womanish looking, with real dark white skin and a red pouting mouth. His hair is black and curly and he looks like a Loosianna creole.” (*You Can’t Keep*, p. 4) Traynor and his agent visit Gracie Mae and buy the rights to one of her songs. Traynor records this song, and history is made. He becomes famous and wealthy, always best-known for his cover of Gracie Mae’s song. However, he has not found meaning in his life, a lack symbolized by his failure to understand the real meaning of the song which has made him so famous.

In his attempt to find some sort of meaning in life, he hounds Gracie Mae, towards whom he also has a sense of guilt. He has appropriated her song, making a fortune for himself, while she has gained only five hundred dollars from it. But there remains an unbridgeable and ever-widening gap between the sheer ordinariness of her life (TV, fishing, losing weight) and the white star’s dogged attempt to uncover what her song means. Like his fans, Traynor is “getting the flavor of something but [he]

ain't getting the thing itself (p. 17)". He remains an outsider to her world. He gives her expensive gifts every once in a while, and despite their obvious differences, a relationship of sorts is formed between them, with Traynor looking on to Gracie Mae almost as a mentor. However, his failure to find coherence and meaning in his life finally leads to his degeneration, and he dies in the year 1977, the reason for his death uncertain:

Some said fat, some said heart, some said alcohol, some said drugs.  
(*You Can't Keep*, p. 20)

The story is Walker's version of Elvis Presley's relationship with Willie Mae Thornton, the African American singer who first popularized the song, 'Hound Dog':

*You ain't nothin' but a hound dog  
Cryin' all the time.  
Well, you ain't never caught a rabbit  
And you ain't no friend of mine.*

*When they said you was high classed,  
Well, that was just a lie.  
You ain't never caught a rabbit  
And you ain't no friend of mine.<sup>28</sup>*

The song of Gracie Mae's that Traynor sings is never named in the story. Ironically, the words of 'Hound Dog' seem to be an apt description of Traynor. He "hounds" Gracie Mae precisely because he never is able to get to the meaning of the song, or of his life. The "rabbit" always eludes him. Despite his star-status, which is purportedly "high-classed", Gracie Mae does not seem to have much respect for him, and at best she feels vaguely sorry for him. For all his attempts, she might have said, "you ain't no friend of mine" even to the end. Her only comment after watching footage of his death, the mass mourning and "crying rampage" by his fans is that, one day, "this is going to be a pitiful country" (*You Can't Keep*, p. 20).

David J. Mickelson<sup>29</sup> talks about the difference between the acts of ‘covering’ and ‘signifying’, both of which Walker makes use of in this story. Covering has its most immediate relevance in the music industry, when an artist ‘covers’ the song of another. A common phenomenon in twentieth century popular music, it took on special significance in the 1950s as white artists covered African American rhythm and blues songs, an example of which is Presley’s cover of ‘Hound Dog’. When applied to literature, covering has metaphoric applications, both among characters and among readers. The attempt to understand, to grasp, to reproduce another person or text might be understood as a kind of covering, a replication, a version inevitably inflected by the person doing the covering. Traynor himself models this kind of extension beyond music when he laments that his experience of marriage is “like singing somebody else’s record”. Mickelson notes that

‘Nineteen Fifty Five’ involves not just Traynor covering Gracie Mae’s song, but also Walker covering (characterizing) Elvis and critics covering (interpreting) Walker. As a kind of cover, paraphrase is the most faithful and least informative version of the reading process, but even less literal accounts seek to provide an accurate “true” rendering: in short, a cover. And in its broadest application, “covering” might be taken to emblemize a powerful mainstreaming: the tendency of those in control to appropriate artifacts and attitudes from those less empowered.<sup>30</sup>

Signifying, on the other hand, is a practice deeply rooted in African American culture. It encompasses a whole range of figurative, rhetorical strategies featuring stylistic play. It is also profoundly intertextual. For instance, Gracie Mae’s repeated, seemingly casual reference to Traynor as “boy” signifies on a common, demeaning form of interracial address. She uses it in the uncommon context of African American woman addressing a white man. In this case, it is suitable, however, because Gracie Mae is older than Traynor. At first reading, Gracie Mae calling Traynor “boy” does not seem contrived. Yet, the connotation that this form of address brings to mind, is a

conscious effort on the part of Walker. One may say that even if Gracie Mae is not conscious of her usage of the term, Walker certainly is. She ironically manipulates Gracie Mae to use it unconsciously, thereby making an important statement. It may be noted from this example that signifying reworks existing texts or forms by exploiting repetition and difference.

Like covering, then, signifying utilizes imitation. However, while covering was conventionally initiated by and to the principal benefit of the dominant white community, signifying has been a primary device for African American resistance and revision. The principal difference between these two tropes is that signifying disrupts appropriation and challenges the dominant values whereas covering generally panders to them.

Elvis Presley began his career by doing covers, and he continued to do them periodically. His background provided him with ample opportunity for exposure to black music:

...Mississippi had a higher proportion of black people than any other state in America, and it was inevitable that poor white people, like the Presleys, would live very near to poor blacks, and share similar experiences and cultural backgrounds. Elvis' home was very near to the Tupelo black ghetto called Shakerag, and he would later recall hearing black men playing guitars and singing country blues on their front porches. Elvis found black music exciting...<sup>31</sup>

The man credited with having discovered him, Sam Phillips, had been raised in a plantation. He had always enjoyed the singing of the African American workers, who seemed to him much better than white people, at expressing power and emotion in music. He frequently told people that if he "could only find a white boy who could sing like a black man, [he] would make a lot of money."<sup>32</sup> The truth of his words came to pass when he made Elvis' first record.

In Walker's account, Traynor is soon making \$40,000 a day from Gracie's song. He has covered her so exactly that when she listens to his version of the song, she thinks, "It could have been me" (*You Can't Keep*, p. 7) She, undoubtedly, refers to his vocal rendition, because in another sense, it could not have been her. In the racial climate of the 1950s, an African American blues singer, would not have been accepted by the mainstream white public, many of whom dismissed rock n' roll as "jungle music"<sup>33</sup>.

However, Traynor finds himself in trouble because as he says in 1957, he does not "have the faintest notion what that song means" and he asks Gracie, "Where in your life did [that song] come from?" (*You Can't Keep*, p. 11) As Peter Chatman says, "You can't find it in a book...you've got to inherit the blues".<sup>34</sup> As part of the dominant social force, Traynor may be able to appropriate and exploit Gracie's song for himself, but because he lacks the proper understanding, it ultimately brings about his decline as well. The story becomes more than simply a tale of two artists who sing the same song to vastly different audiences. It is a metaphor for the cultural wrongs done to African Americans and its effect on both African Americans and whites. For the rest of his life, Traynor embarks on a quest to find the meaning of not only 'his' song, but of his life as well. In covering what essentially is not part of his heritage, he is unable to grasp the meaning behind the very song that propels him into fame and material prosperity.

Walker's preoccupation with the blues is also seen in the use of blues techniques in her narratives. The form of her stories, letters and diary entries, (seen in 'Nineteen Fifty Five', 'The Diary of An African Nun', and *The Color Purple*, to name a few), are like blues stanzas in their rich compactness and self-containedness. Like the format of blues pieces, her works take shape from repetition and variations of the

main themes, which are referred to as “core units” in blues music. Walker’s focus on the complexities of love and human relationships repeats the subject of many blues. As in the blues, paradox and contradiction are explored in the context of relationships, projected via responses to the “traditional situations” of these relationships and articulated using contrast and oppositional structures. For example, in ‘Roselily’ each line of the traditional wedding vows is punctuated by the protagonist’s mental images of suffering and bondage, which are opposed to the connotations of the words she utters. When the preacher arrives at the phrase “to join this man and this woman” in the wedding vows, she thinks of “ropes, chains, handcuffs, his religion”; when he says, “in holy matrimony” she remembers her “fourth child [whom] she gave away to the child’s father who had some money”. (*In Love*, p. 4)

Maria V. Johnson notes that the blues technique of oppositional language and ironic juxtaposition is used to contrast Traynor’s appearance of material well-being with his spiritual bankruptcy<sup>35</sup>. It is also used to contrast Traynor’s appearance of extreme and lasting world-wide fame, success and popularity (‘The Emperor of Rock and Roll’) with Gracie Mae’s appearance of moderate local fame, short lived and long forgotten (Gracie Mae Nobody from Notasulga). Lastly it is used to set the contrast between Traynor’s spiritual reality, which is empty, confused, and devoid of meaning, with Gracie Mae’s spiritual reality, which is alive, filled with creativity, and blossoming with the wisdom of age.

A standard blues piece consists of a series of stanzas each of which follows a basic harmonic structure (I IV I V I) and text form (AAB) which is repeated and varied as each piece progresses to give it a large-scale shape. Within this structure, there are core elements like pitches, contours, images, phrases, lines of text, chords. These are “repeated” using core means such as embellishment, vibrato, syncopation,

and timbral nuance to create unlimited possibilities for rendering the same stanza, song, or structure. Walker uses core songs, such as ‘You Can’t Keep a Good Woman Down’ both to encapsulate primary themes and to mark significant points in the structure and thematic development of these pieces.

Following in the blues tradition, Walker “repeats” with variation, the core opposition between appearance and reality. She articulates this in many guises as the story develops. Black and white, rich and poor, famous and unknown, young and old, alive or dead, asleep or awake, meaningful or empty, somebody or nobody, something or nothing, are some of the manifestations of this core opposition. Variations of this core opposition are embodied in Walker’s descriptions of Gracie Mae and Traynor: in their appearances and the images they project, their songs and musical performances, and their social interactions. As in the blues, it is by exposing core themes again and again in varied forms that Walker brings her readers to a deeper understanding of their significance.

The blues image of the hound dog from Thornton’s song becomes a core image in Walker’s story. In a moment of clarity and despair, inspired by his exchanges with Gracie Mae, Traynor says to her:

They want what you got but they don’t want you. They want what I got only it ain’t mine. That’s what makes ‘em so hungry for me when I sing. They getting the flavor of something but they ain’t got the thing itself. They like a pack of hound dogs trying to gobble up a scent. (*You Can’t Keep*, p. 17)

As Maria V. Johnson remarks, it is “at this moment Traynor comes closest to singing his own blues song.”<sup>36</sup>

The women of Walker’s short fiction have been singing their blues out of their experiences. The tales of suffering that are narrated through their lives are neither exaggerated nor minimized. Whether it is Hannah Kemhuff who spends the best part

of her life in plotting revenge, the African nun forever cloistered within the walls of the convent, Mrs. Washington who becomes deranged and commits suicide for loving the wrong man, or Roselily, who willingly enters into a marriage characterized by bondage, what underscores each of their experiences is pain. It is a pain that is so intense that it haunts every second of their waking hour. Each woman's story is a haunting blues song, sung with a simplicity and matter-of-factness that makes it all the more tragic. These women do not claim to speak for others. What they tell, or sing, is what they know to be true. Yet, what strikes the reader is not simply the trauma and suffering that they undergo, but the note of discordance at the end, which refuses to be defined or defeated by pain.

It is indeed apt that the last story of *In Love*, 'To Hell with Dying' strikes a different note in its understanding of the kind of hope that love offers. An old man, beyond all expectations, is perpetually brought back from the brink of death by the love of two children. Walker's message is that if love brings trouble, it also brings hope and healing.

Like the blues singer who creates beauty out of suffering, these women create beauty by showing courage and resilience even under pain. Like the blues song, they may be 'thrown down' sometimes, but they 'rise up in some other town', as is evident when we see the emergence of the self-confident, self-assertive women of *You Can't Keep*. They refuse to stay within the boundaries that society, institutions, and men try to impose upon them, and in so doing, they attain a selfhood that defines who they are in their own terms.

### Endnotes

1. Alice Walker, 'Be Nobody's Darling', *Revolutionary Petunias and Other Poems*, (New York: Harcourt, 1973), p. 193.
2. Alice Walker, *In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women*, (New York: Harcourt, 1973). Henceforth referred to parenthetically as *In Love*.
3. \_\_\_\_\_, *You Just Can't Keep a Good Woman Down*, (New York: Harcourt, 1981), Henceforth referred to parenthetically as *You Can't Keep*.
4. Alice Petry, 'Walker: The Achievement of the Short Fiction' in Henry Louis Gates Jr., and K.A. Appiah (eds), *Alice Walker: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, (New York: Amistad, 1993), p. 193.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 194.
6. Donna Haisty Winchell, *Alice Walker*, (New York: Twayne, 1992), p. 35.
7. Barbara Christian, 'Contrary Women of Alice Walker: A Study of Female Protagonists in *In Love and Trouble* (1980)' in *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers*, (New York: Pergamon, 1985), p. 38.
8. David Cowart, 'Heritage and Deracination in Walker's "Everyday Use"', *Alice Walker Studies in Short Fiction*, Spring 1996, p. 172.
9. Alice Walker, 'In Search of Our Mother's Gardens' in *Search*, p. 231-43.
10. David Cowart, 'Heritage and Deracination in Walker's "Everyday Use"', p. 174.
11. Alice Walker, 'Beauty: When the Other Dancer is the Self' in *Search*, pp. 384-93.
12. David Cowart, 'Heritage and Deracination in Walker's "Everyday Use"', p. 174.
13. *Ibid.*
14. Susan Farrell, 'Fight vs. Flight: A Re- Evaluation of Dee in Alice Walker's "Everyday Use"', *Studies in Short Fiction*, Spring 1998, pp. 179-86.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 182.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 182.
17. See Introduction for a more comprehensive note on the Black Arts Movement.
18. Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, (New York: Library of America, 1995) p. 713.
19. Barbara Christian, 'Alice Walker: The Black Woman Artist as Wayward' in Mari Evans (ed.), *Black Women Writers (1950- 1980): A Critical Evaluation*. (Garden City, New York: Anchor/ Doubleday, 1984) p. 468.
20. Alice Petry, 'Walker: The Achievement of the Short Fiction'.p. 195.
21. Trudier Harris, 'From Victimization to Free Enterprise: Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*', *Studies in American Fiction* 14. Spring, 1986. p. 5.
22. Donna Haisty Winchell, *Alice Walker*, p. 72.
23. Alice Walker, *Living By the Word: Selected Writings 1973- 1987*, (London: Women's Press, 1988), p. 31.

24. See Introduction for a detailed study of the evolution of Blues music.
25. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism*, (New York and Oxford: OUP, 1988). See Introduction for a more detailed study on the trope of Signifying.
26. Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans: A History*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Norton, 1983). Chris Strachowitz, Liner Notes. *Big Mama Thornton in Europe*. (Arhoolie F 1028, 1965). Qtd in Maria V Johnson, 'You Just Can't Keep A Good Woman Down: Alice Walker Sings the Blues', *African American Review*. Summer, 1996, p.222.
27. Sherley Anne Williams, *The Peacock Poems*, (Middletown: Wesleyan U, 1975) p. 37, qtd in Maria V. Johnson, p. 221.
28. 'Hound Dog', Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller, originally recorded by Willie Mae 'Big Mae' Thornton, (Los Angeles: Peacock Records, March 1953).
29. David J. Mickelson, 'You Ain't Never Caught a Rabbit: Covering and Signifyin' in Alice Walker's "Nineteen Fifty Five"', *Southern Quarterly*, Spring 2004.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
31. Richard Wooton, *Elvis Presley: An Illustrated Biography*. (Kent: Hodder and Stoughton, 1982), p. 14.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 23.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 48.
34. Peter Chatman, "Born With the Blues", qtd in Mickelson, epigraph, 'You Ain't Never Caught a Rabbit: Covering and Signifyin' in Alice Walker's "Nineteen Fifty Five"'.  
35. Maria V. Johnson, 'You Just Can't Keep A Good Woman Down: Alice Walker Sings the Blues', *African-American Review*, Summer 1996, p. 225.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 213.

## CONCLUSION

For me, black women are the most fascinating creatures in the world.  
(*Search*, p. 251).

The womanist reality presented by Alice Walker is multifaceted. The preceding chapters have attempted to analyze the nature of this reality in her fiction. The contemporary African American woman is a product of the coalescing of several factors, that are historical, cultural, political, and personal. Walker situates her African American women characters and herself in a long line of courageous women, from Sojourner Truth, Jean Toomer, Flannery O'Connor, Harriet Tubman, to the millions of anonymous African American women, like her own mother. These are women "who made a way out of no way."<sup>1</sup> Oppression and hardships have been part of the existence of the African American woman who has been slave, mother, daughter, sister, and lover. She has been marginalized by patriarchal institutions to the point of near obliteration. In order to transcend this existence, she has demonstrated immense courage and fortitude, qualities necessary to ensure her survival.

It is the courage of these women, manifested in different ways that Walker celebrates in her fiction. They have expressed their direct and indirect defiance of oppressive norms, and resisted the forces that threaten their wellbeing and very existence. Most of all, by using their creativity, they have been able to transform their difficult circumstances into something beautiful. In the face of opposition, that creativity itself has been severely hindered; they were "driven to a numb and bleeding madness by the springs of creativity in them for which there was no release" (*Search*, p. 233). Yet they "forced their minds to desert their bodies and their striving spirits sought to rise" (*Search*, p. 232) and create beauty in spite of their circumstances.

Quilting, gardening, story-telling, singing, and writing, are just a few of the ways with which the African American woman expresses her creativity. "For her, so hindered and intruded upon in so many ways, being an artist has still been a daily part of her life. This ability to hold on, even in very simple ways, is work black women have done for a very long time." (*Search*, p. 242) The African American women's art, beyond an assertion of their lives and independence, also serves as a means to retell their own stories. Thus, Nettie and Celie in *The Color Purple* utilize the written word to rewrite their history and that of African American people. Similarly, Walker uses her art to retell the story of African American women, whose portrayal by men has often been erroneous and misleading.

The women Walker celebrates are not defined by their status as victims. A womanist, apart from other things, "loves struggle", not because she enjoys conflict, but because she must fight her own battles in order to assert her individuality. Walker's women move beyond a state of victimization to emerge as survivors. Their answer to the suffering that they are made to undergo is "resistance, without much commentary." (*Search*, p. 268) This is the very basis of Walker's womanist creed. Her characters, like Walker herself, do not remain passive sufferers. Mem (*Grange*), Meridian (*Meridian*), Celie, Shug and Nettie (*CP*), Tashi (*Possessing*), Miss Lissie, Zede and Carlotta (*Temple*), and Magdalene and Susannah (*By the Light*) all question the validity of what others have defined as being "good" for them. As Walker puts it, a womanist "wants to know more and in greater depth than is considered good for her". This "wanting to know more" leads to an interrogation of her reality. She poses questions that force a re-examination and re-evaluation of herself and the world around her. Such a questioning attitude often leads to hostility and resistance on the part of those who hold a position of dominance over them. It also gives rise to

controversy, a controversy that a majority of her women characters generate, as Walker does too in real life. Walker, together with her considerable fan following, has had her share of controversy and criticism; not surprisingly, her most severe critics have been African American men, who believe that she has portrayed them in a negative light. Yet, Walker's commitment is to truth as she sees it. If this truth involves the violent realities of the African American woman, she is not one to shy away from writing about it. She says:

It is nearly crushing to realize there was an assumption on anyone's part that black women would not fight injustice except when the foe was white.<sup>2</sup>

While all aspects of Walker's writing, essays, poems and novels are interlinked, it is also possible to evaluate her only as a novelist. One may not agree with every agenda of her political activism, but this does not devalue her as an artist. This is the error that many of her African American male critics have committed. In protesting against her portrayal of Mister in *The Color Purple* as being detrimental to the image of African American men, for instance, they have tended to dismiss or attack the novel itself. Maria Lauret notes that when Walker is dismissed as "an ideologue whose work is a mere vehicle for leftist, racially divisive, feminist or wacky New Age ideas, the significance of that work is diminished or misrecognized."<sup>3</sup> Walker responds to criticism of *The Color Purple* by writing:

Rather than be glad that the ability to love has not been destroyed altogether in us, some critics complain about the "rightness" of its direction, hiding behind such shockingly transparent defenses as "but what will white people think of us?" Since "white people" are to a large extent responsible for so much of our worst behavior, which is really their behavior copied slavishly, it is an insult to black people's experience in America to make a pretense of caring what they think.<sup>4</sup>

At the same time, her portrayal of African American men must be studied in its entirety. It would prove an unjust criticism if attention was focused only on the

negative behavior of her African American male characters. A reformed Mister (or Albert) in *The Color Purple* asks Celie to marry him again, this time in spirit as well as in flesh. Grange Copeland comes back from his “second life” in New York a new and responsible man, who proves himself to be a loving grandparent to Ruth. Truman Held takes on the burden that Meridian puts off when she walks away, refusing to be a martyr. Suwelo in *Temple* grows from sadistically using Carlotta’s body, to recognizing that she is an important individual in her own right, and that all women are too. Walker’s emphasis is not only on the brutality that these men have displayed against women, but on their ability to change, grow and become better people. In short, they gain new perspectives which make their lives all the more meaningful.

A characteristic trait of Walker’s work is that she does not avoid issues that are unconventional. She says:

One thing I try to have in my life and my fiction is an awareness of an openness to mystery, which, to me, is deeper than any politics, race, or geographical location. (*Search*, p. 252)

This “openness” to subjects others may consider inappropriate is seen when she treats such topics as lesbianism in *The Color Purple* and *By the Light of My Father’s Smile*, or when she writes about alternative spirituality in *The Temple of My Familiar*. She does not hesitate to write about conflicts between parents and their children, between man and wife, or between white and black institutions. Her commitment to telling the truth, to “exploring the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties, and the triumphs of black women” (*Search*, p. 250) takes her on an odyssey to uncover the truth.

Walker is acutely aware of her responsibility as an artist, and particularly as an African American woman artist. Part of this responsibility involves a conscious effort to keep the past and its traditions alive for future generations. She writes:

When we look back over our history it is clear that we have neglected to save just those people who could help us most. Because no matter what anyone says, it is the black woman's words that have the most meaning for us, her daughters, because she, like us, has experienced life not only as a black person, but as a woman [...] How simple a thing it seems to me that to know ourselves as we are, we must know our mother's names. Yet, we do not know them. Or if we do, it is only the names we know and not the lives.

And I thought of the mountain of work black women must do. We must work as if we are the last generation capable of work – for it is true that the view we have of the significance of the past will undoubtedly die with us, and future generations will have to stumble in the dark, over ground we should have covered. (*Search*, p. 275)

Here, the significance of her assertion that a womanist “loves the folk” comes into focus. To Walker, ignorance of one's roots is tantamount to self-deception. In her fiction, then, she gives importance to the past as having a vital role to play in the present. The past, painful as it may be, must be dealt with in order to ensure a healthy present, which will, in turn, assure the hope of a positive future. Forgiveness is the key that will felicitate the healing of wounds caused by the past upon the African American race, and African American women in particular; a belief upheld by most of her women characters.

Walker compares African American women to the petunias that her mother loved so dearly. Faced by many challenges and the need to make a living, her parents had to constantly relocate. On one such occasion, her mother saw a lavender petunia bush, which she took and planted. Walker recalls, “It never wilted, just bloomed and bloomed. Every time the family moved (say twelve times) she took her petunia – and thirty-seven years later she brought me a piece of that same petunia bush. It had never died.” (*Search*, p. 268) Walker's women, too, refuse to be defeated by the challenges that they face, seeing beauty where none is expected, and blooming in spite of the harshness of their realities. Her work is “a celebration of people who will not cram

themselves into any ideological or racial mold. They are all shouting Stop! I want to get that petunia.” (*Search*, p. 268)

Walker’s fiction shows how African American women, oppressed by violence, racism and sexual discrimination embark on an journey that will take them away from a state of victimization to a controlling consciousness that inspires. Having redefined themselves, Alice Walker’s women emerge with dignity proclaiming:

*No, I am finished with living  
For what my mother believes  
For what my brother and father defend  
For what my lover elevates  
For what my sister, blushing, denies or rushes  
To embrace.  
I find my own  
Small person  
A standing self  
Against the world...<sup>5</sup>*

Walker’s women live for what they believe in, and they do this by looking within themselves to discover who they are. They purge themselves of others’ expectations and, through the baptism of self-discovery, they declare their own names. They love themselves, “regardless.” These womanists create freedom for themselves and their sisters in cultural, social and artistic spheres. She stresses the importance of African American women encouraging and helping one another:

There is no story more moving to me personally than one in which one woman saves the life of another, and saves herself, and slays whatever dragon has appeared. And I know that...this is work black women wish they were able to do all the time. (*Living by the Word*, p. 19)

These women reassert and reinvent themselves, re-telling their stories of a survival that is hard-earned and lasting. Walker proves herself to be a creative chronicler of the past as well as a perceptive commentator of the present. Most of all, she has succeeded in presenting a comprehensive portrayal of the African American womanist perspective in all its complexity and beauty, showing that African American women

do indeed “sing America too.”<sup>6</sup> In so doing, it is hoped that she has paved the way for future generations of artists who will continue to uphold the values that she has so artfully inscribed into her womanist fiction.

### Endnotes

1. Alice Walker dedicates her novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, to her mother, “who made a way out of no way.”
2. Alice Walker, ‘In the Closet of the Soul’, *Living By the Word: Selected Writings 1973-1987*, (New York: Harcourt, 1988), p. 80.
3. Maria Lauret, *Alice Walker*, (London: Macmillan, 2000), p. 196.
4. Alice Walker, ‘In the Closet of the Soul’, *Living By the Word: Selected Writings 1973-1987*, pp. 91-92.
5. Alice Walker, ‘On Stripping Bark From Myself’, *Revolutionary Petunias and Other Poems*, (San Diego: Harcourt, 1973).
6. This is a reference to Alice Walker’s essay, ‘Nobody Was Supposed to Survive’ in *Living By the Word*, p. 160, where she ends with a poem:

Our beliefs  
are our country.  
Our hair is  
our flag.  
Our love of ourselves  
is our freedom.  
We, too, fucking yes,  
sing America.

The last two lines are obviously a reference to Walt Whitman’s poem, ‘I Sing America’. Also in her essay, ‘On Seeing Red’, she writes, “In all our diversity, we have been one people – just as the peoples of the world are one people – even when the most vicious laws have forced us to believe we are not.

I, too, sing America.” (*Living By the Word*, p. 128)

APPENDIX – I

NAME OF THE CANDIDATE: Cherrie Lalnunziri Chhangte  
DEGREE: Doctor of Philosophy  
DEPARTMENT: English  
TITLE OF DISSERTATION: 'A Standing Self Against the World': The Black Womanist Perspective in Alice Walker's Fiction  
DATE OF ADMISSION: 20. 03. 2001  
APPROVAL OF RESEARCH PROPOSAL:  
1. BPGS: 16. 10. 2001.  
2. SCHOOL BOARD: 30. 10. 2001

*Evelyn A. ...*  
11/10/07

Head

Department of English



## Appendix- II

**Works by Alice Walker****Fiction**

*The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970)

*In Love and Trouble* (1973)

*Meridian* (1976)

*You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down* (1981)

*The Color Purple* (1982)

*The Temple of My Familiar* (1989)

*Finding the Green Stone* (1991) Juvenile audience

*Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992)

*By The Light of My Father's Smile* (1998)

*The Complete Stories*. (2000)

*The Way Forward is With a Broken Heart* (2001)

*Now is the Time to Open Your Heart* (2004)

**Non-Fiction**

*Langston Hughes, American Poet* (1974, 2002)

*Warrior marks: Female Genital Mutilation and the Sexual Blindings of Women*. With  
Pratibha Parmar. (1993)

*The Same River Twice: Honoring the Difficult* (1996)

*We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For* (2006)

**Poetry**

*Once* (1968)

*Revolutionary Petunias* (1973)

*Goodnight Willie Lee, I'll see you in the morning* (1979)

*Horses Make a Landscape Look More Beautiful* (1985)

*Her Blue Body Everything We Know: Earthling Poems, 1965-1990* (1991)

*Sent by Earth: A Message from the Grandmother Spirit After the Attacks on the World*

*Trade Center and the Pentagon* (2001)

*Absolute Trust in the Goodness of the Earth : New Poems.* (2004)

**Essays**

*In Search of Our Mother's Gardens : Womanist Prose* (1983)

*Living by the Word: Selected Writings 1973-1987* (1988)

*Anything We Love Can Be Saved : A Writer's Activism* (1997)

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