Chapter III

Sexism

Man is designated to be the masters and women are never to be granted freedom. It has emerged from the debate of anthropologists and sociologists that the subservient role of the female gender is either the result of biological necessity or the construct of power relationship culturally determined by society. For centuries, Black women have been called the ‘mule of the world’ and ‘slave of a slave’ and had the status of the wretched on the earth. Uprooted from her native African culture and placed in a dominant, she was very often intimidated by racists. Initially, the main concern of the Black Women’s organizations was to abolish all kinds of economic and political disparities against them. Now they are mainly concerned with the issues to black women who are oppressed by sexism, racism, and poverty. Kashinath Ranveer asserts:

Black Women in America are triply burdened and disadvantaged. They are black, female and economically under privileged. This triple burden restricts them from a fuller and meaningful participation in American society mainly because they are confined to their race and the narrow enclosures of sex. As a result they suffer as blacks amongst the blacks, slaves of the slaves and forced to occupy a very marginal place in the Americans social life. Not only this, their humanity and the black female self are denied by white men and also by their own people, particularly black men. This made them feel insignificant, faceless, subservient, and devoid of identity. (68)
The responsibility of giving them back their rejected humanity and their womanhood falls on the shoulders of black women themselves. Consequently, they have developed certain peculiar ways of looking at the society at large. In *The Color Purple*, Nettie’s experiences in Africa are not very pleasant. The central oppression of woman by man appears to be a pre-condition of life in Olinka. She recounts in her letters how black men have four wives, treat them as slaves, prevent girls from being educated because “A girl is nothing to herself only to her husband can she become something” (TCP 162). Such blatant discrimination against woman compels Celie to comment, “God I been praying and writing to is a man. And act Just like all the other men. Trifling, forgetful and lowdown” (TCP 199). This distrust erupts from woman’s inexplicable oppression.

*The Color Purple* is a novel that emerges out of Alice Walker’s central concern with defining the existence, experience and culture of African American women and the brutally complex systems of oppressions. It deals with the role of male domination in frustrating the black women’s struggle for identity and independence. It shows how women are oppressed and manipulated by men and humiliated into powerlessness. Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* scrutinizes the successes and failures of various means and methods employed to keep woman in the position of the unempowered. Her treatment is absence rather than presence, her existence an object, not subject is revealed through and various social traditions. *The Color Purple* with its African American ethos views the problem of gender politics as cultural stereotypes that makes women physical, social and emotional victims of male sexual agency represented through husbands and sons. Celie’s first letter in the novel reveals her sexual exploitation, marginalization and suffocation. Since her voice as a woman is silenced, she writes:
Dear God

I am fourteen years old. I have always been a good girl. He (her step father) never had a kind word to say to me. Just say you gonna do what your mammy wouldn’t… He start to choke me, saying you better shut up and git used to it… And now I feel sick every time I be the one to cook. (TCP 3)

Celie, the protagonist, whose condition in the novel is deplorable. She is abused physically, sexually, emotionally and socially. Despite being a girl, she is pregnant. Celie’s position frames a woman’s status in an African American culture. Daughter raping is an ordinary incident in Black American society.

Walker’s heroine is an innocent victim of evil and fate. Celie consequently does not rise to confront her fate for a great many years. It needs all her faculties, in the mean while, simply to survive. Celie, meeting her fate alone, watches her mother die “screaming and cussing” (TCP 4). After she has been repeatedly raped by her father he takes her away from school in spite of her tears and protests. Celie tries to keep alive the curiosity for knowledge in her by studying her sister Nettie’s lessons. Celie is in a futile struggle to conserve in herself the spark of healthy vigor that is necessary to acquire knowledge. She is prevented from sustaining this. Bewildered and ignorant, she watches her body swells and grow larger, and her surprise knows no bounds when a child comes out of herself, kicking and squalling. Celie faces her ordeals she and her pregnancies alone. Nobody comes to the house to see her. While she puts up with physical violence in the form of whippings, beatings and rapes, fears lest her growing sister Nettie, should meet with the same fate at the hands of their father.
Celie, as she grows, develops an uncanny fear for men. She never dares to look at a man: “He beat me today cause he say I winked at a boy in church. I may have got something in my eye but I didn’t wink. I don’t even look at mens. That’s the truth. I look at woman, the cause I’m not scared of them” (TCP 7). For years, Celie lives in terror of her husband remains to her as ‘Mr._’. He represents to her an impersonal force, as terrifying and as destructive as her father. Celie congeals into numbness and steels herself to meet her oppressors.

For Celie passivity is the only strategy available in order to keep alive. She begins to face the realities of life when she is still ill-equipped to face them. Celie is never given a respite to develop her faculty for fighting back. All that she can do is to take Albert’s blows without buckling under, and to accept without flinching her step children’s violence and hatred for her. She becomes incapable of living or looking up to men. Men, to her, possess an undeniable capacity to hurt, physically, sexually and, therefore, mentally.

At the beginnings of the novel, Celie is circumscribed by the paternal command, “you better not never tell nobody but God. It’d kill your mammy” (TCP 3). It clearly demonstrates his power and powerlessness of the other. She is pulled to marry Mr. Albert, a typical male gesture to emphasize woman’s subordination. If her condition as a daughter is unbearable, her life as a wife is no better. She is married off to a middle aged widower because she has been trying to protect her younger sister Nettie from the evil intention of her so-called father. Her case is recommended to Mr._:
She ugly. He say. But she ain’t no stranger to hard work. And she clean. And God alone fixed her. You can do everything just like you wan to and she ain’t gonna make you feed it or clothe it. (TCP 10)

Walker portrays Celie as a victim of many imaginable abuses and a few unimaginable ones. She is a woman who believes she is ugly and she centers that belief on her blackness.

According to the proverb, ‘charity begins at home’, Celie should have experienced love at home. But home provides her with the cruelties of a harsh and loveless society, initiates her father’s lynching and her mother’s mental derangement and subsequent marriage to Fonso. This unwholesome situation sets the pattern for violence, assault, and oppression in the novel. In the first place, Fonso’s cruel and lustful behavior in sex and beatings leaves Celie’s mother weak, sick, and eventually dead. Soon after, Lucious’s birth, Fonso demands sex:

Last spring after little Lucious come to heard them fussing. He was pulling on her arm. She say it too soon Fonso, I ain’t well… A week go by, he pulling on her arm again. She say naw, I ain’t gonna. Can’t you see I’m already half dead, all of these children. (TCP 3)

Then she describes the miserable way Celie falls a victim to the sexual advances and atrocities of her stepfather, when he finds out that Celie’s mother cannot allow him to have a sex, he tries to find out a substitute. Subsequently, he turns on his daughter and makes brutal sexual attacks without scruples. He tells her, “you better shut up and get used to it” (TCP 3) The father described in Celie’s letter appears too virile, tough, and strong like satyr in potency and appears like a walking phallus but definitely without any human quality.
Celie’s mother is reprieved of his continuous sexual attacks, while Celie is subjected to an enforced rape. As a result, she becomes pregnant at a very young age. Motherhood may be a pleasure to some women, but to Celie, like Meridian, Mem, Josie, and Margaret, it is a burden. Celie’s stepfather abdicates her children without giving any chance to love them. After the death of Celie’s mother, he marries another black woman and marries her off, against her will and consent to Mr._’, who is no better than Fonso.

He says no kind word to Celie, but degrades and demoralizes her verbally and physically, and psychologically. Introducing Celie to Mr._, Fonso describes her as a hard and clean worker, a liar, and a stupid, ugly, and spoiled girl who is too dumble to go to school. Furthermore, the entire process of Fonso’s exhibition of Celie to Mr._ resembles the inspection of slaves on a slave market. This is seem to be a business transaction, a capitalistic deal in which Fonso wants to get rid of a spoiled slave, and Mr._ wants someone to mother his children, to cook for the family, and to satisfy his sexual desires.

Another aspect of this capitalistic transaction associate Celie with the image of a cow. Fonso offers Celie and the cow she raises to Mr._ but refuses to give up Nettie. Mr._ consents to take Celie and asks, “that cow still coming?” (TCP 13) Associating Celie with the image of a cow places her in the role for domestic work, field work, and sexual duties. This traditional role of love the wife offers her no love and affection. In fact this role makes her subservient to her stepfather, her husband, and God. Fonso also alienates Celie from objects or symbol of love. His lecherous advances force Nettie to leave, and he gets rid of
Celie’s children. These are the people whom Celie loves dearly and who would return love to her. Furthermore, Celie’s love for cutting hair has been transformed into hatred and nightmare. Celie tells Shug:

I did love to cut hair… since I was a little bitty thing. I’d run go git scissors of I saw hair coming, and I’d cut and cut, long as I could…

It got to the place where everytime I saw him coming with the scissors and the comb and the stool, I start to cry. (TCP 118)

From beatings, abuse, and rejection at home, Celie is passed to Mr._ to endure a similar fate for the next three decades. These men illustrate the loveless, lustful, and cruel world of Walker’s fictional men. George Stade vividly describes these men:

As for the men, with a few telling exceptions, they are brutal in the flesh because they are impoverished of spirit. They are pitiless when they are not self-pitying. They are misogynist and they are pedophobic. They are petty, spiteful, lustful and treacherous. They are also arrogant, complacent, lazy, insensitive, incompetent, vain, inartistic, contemptuous of women, but quick to take credit for their work. Above all they are lechers, mechanical monsters of sexual appetite. (266)

Celie’s insensitive and her selfish husband offers her no love, but he uses her to satisfy his wants and needs. Every society considers culture to be superior to nature; culture is the means by which man controls nature and women. A women’s psyche is further debased when as a wife, she is controlled by her husband. She is forced to redefine herself and an active reshaping of the personality to confirm to the wishes or need of the husbands.
As Celie prepares to emancipate herself from a slavish marriage, she receives more verbal abuse from her husband who often compares her with his mistress, Shug. As a wife, it is very terrible to tolerate:

Shug got talent. She can sing. She got spunk. She can stand up and be noticed. But what you got? You ugly. You skinny. You shape funny. You too scared to open your mouth to people. All you fit to do in Memphis is to be Shug’s maid. Take out her slop-jar and maybe cook her food. (TCP 212)

He finally sums up his estimation of her: “You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman Goddam, you nothing at all” (TCP 213). Conventional society convinces Celie that she is ugly and unloved. In the three decades of her friendless life, Celie chops cotton in the fields, takes care of Albert’s four unmannerly children, cleans the house, cooks, hates herself, hates the world, and silently allows men to dominates her.

Albert’s sexual relationship with Celie reinforces all the negative feature of patriarchal exploitation and oppression. Celie describes this colonial relationship to Shug: “Most times I pretend I ain’t there. He never know the difference. Never ast me how I feel, nothing. Just do his business, get off, go to sleep” (TCP 74). This is a one-way sexual relationship, described as “like he going to the toilet on you” (TCP 74). Again Celie survives by desensitizing herself. However, this one-way, selfish sex is not common only to Albert and Fonso, but also to other men in the novel. Mary Agnes’s supposed uncle rapes her and Sofia’s daddy hates children and where they come from, yet he has twelve children with different women.
Albert’s oppression is not merely physical but mental and emotional. He uses his male sexuality to batter Celie, forcing intercourse on her so that Celie becomes revolted at the idea of sex. But Celie cannot fight back. All she can do is survive passively. She says, “I think bout Nettie, dead. She fight, she run away. What good it do? I don’t fight. I stay where I’m told. But I’m alive” (TCP 22). To her, to survive is of supreme importance, and she does survive through all odds. She knows that wife means to be submissive, to be subordinate, to be obedient and to be a punch bag for the man. She suffers both at the hands of her husband and her stepchildren. She has yet to realize that one must not only survive, but survive without being splintered and degraded, survive “whole”.

Traditionally, the family is the place where one first experiences affection, but Walker advocates the failure of the family to provide affection. Her experiences and the experiences of women, particularly black women, have influenced her negative view of the family. Almost at the point of death in her first pregnancy, she thought about various members of her family and found nothing positive or comforting. Her mother was against abortion, her father had never helped her since she was twelve years old, and her sisters had their own problems. One of her sisters never replied to her cry for help, while called her a slut. This is why Walker believes and advocates that “wherever there’s a man, there’s trouble,” (TCP 212) and she demonstrates this point through the cruel treatment her female characters receive from the males. Albert beats Celie the same way he would beat his children, except he seldom beats the children. To survives beatings, Celie destroys her emotions,
He beats me like he beats the children. Cept he don’t never hardly beat them. He say, Celie, git the belt. The children be outside the room peeking through the cracks. It all I can do not cry. I make myself wood. I say to myself, Celie, you a tree”. (TCP 23)

Mr. Albert’s physical abuse of Celie is too intolerable and hence she wishes that she could transform herself as tree or a piece of wood, so that his beating can make no effect on her physic. This is an obvious example of a black woman’s identifying herself with the passive suffering of Nature. Wendy Wall explains that “Celie’s attempt to negate her pain by desensitizing herself creates within her emotionally hollow spaces,” (TCP 84) which result in fragmentation, alienation, and unresponsiveness. In *The Color Purple*, Walker gives a vivid and pathetic account of sexual oppression of her female protagonists, who are more than ‘doubly jeopardized’. Walker, with her deep perceptive mind, delineates the sufferings, and the struggle, the limitations of Black Women in a racist and a sexist society and also she shows that black women are not merely an object to gratify white male’s desire, black men too are no exception to this.

The majority of the men and women involved in the story are of the opinion that men should dominate women. Harpo feels threatened by his strong-willed, defiant wife, Sofia, and tries to become physically stronger than her so that he can beat her and return things to what he sees as their natural order. Throughout the novel, women are degraded by men and treated as second-class citizen. This inequality mirrors the inequality between the races.
Harpo provides one of the novel’s major conflicts in his own efforts to dominate his wife, Sofia, described as “a big strong girl […] solid. Like if she sit down on something, it be mash” (TCP 36). Sofia never acquiesces to her husband’s patriarchal authority, though he continually attempts to dominate her. In stark contrast to Celie’s silent obedience in Mr._’s home. Sofia demands to be treated as an equal by Harpo, to his surprise: “Harpo want to know what to do make Sofia mind. He sit out on the porch with Mr_. He say, I tell her one thing, she do another. Never do what I say. Always back talk” (TCP 37) and Celie adds, “To tell the truth, he sound a little proud of this to me” (TCP 37). It instances in Walker’s novel when character take a particular joy in behaving or interacting with other who behave counter to gendered expectation.

In Harpo case, the reimposition of patriarchal order comes, not surprisingly from his own father, who strikes immediately upon the problem with Harpo and Sofia’s relationship:

You ever hit her? Mr. ast.

Harpo look down at his hands. Naw suh, he say low,

Embarrass.

Well how you spect to make her mind? Wives is

Like children.

You have to let’em know who got the upper hand

nothing can

do that better than a good sound beating. (TCP 37-8)
Mr._.’s assertion that “wives is like children” functions as the blanket patriarchal control that discipline wives, children, and anything in between.

Black women not only had to deal with sexism, but racism as well. Harpo falls in loves with and marries a physically imposing woman Sofia. Through Sofia, Walker has created a strong character who serves as a foil to the suppressive culture for women. Though Harpo and Mr. attempt to treat her as an inferior, Sofia fights back. Celie initially encourages this bulling behavior, as being second to man is the only way she has ever known to live, but when confronted by Sofia she realizes her error. Celie is both envious of and intimidated by Sofia’s strong spirit and florid defiance of her husband’s absolute authority.

After a few years of constant fighting, Sofia leaves Harpo, taking their children with her. When she returns to town for a visit, she becomes involved in a fight with Harpo’s new girlfriend, Mary Agnes, who is nicknamed ‘Squeak’ because of her high-pitched voice. One day, the mayor’s wife Miss Millie, asks Sofia to work as her maid. When Sofia declines with the words “hell no”, the mayor reacts in a racist and sexist manner, slapping her. Not surprisingly, she knocks the mayor down, for she only knows how to answer violence with violence. Although she beats the mayor physically, she cannot beat his system. The mayor has the police, the justice system, and the penal system on his side; Sofia’s roughness cannot overcome such institutions. When the police arrive on the scene, they beat her mercilessly and taken her jail, humiliated as:
They crack her skulls. They crack her ribs. They tear her nose loose on one side. They blind her in one eye. She swole from head to foot. Her tongue the size of my arm, it stick out twen her teef like a piece of rubber. She can’t talk. And she just about the color of a eggplant. (TCP 82)

Sofia’s blind eye is reminiscent of Walker’s own blind eye. Alice Walker in a childhood injury lost her eyesight. One of her brothers was responsible for this accident and she views that this incident was not accidental as she says;

Although he was only ten. I had seen my brother lowering his gun after shooting me and knew the injury had been intentional. Perhaps he had not planned to shoot me in the eye, but that he was aiming at me was unmistakable. (TCP 10)

This blind eye is recurrent symbol occurring in many of her works. She is imprisoned for twelve years. The whole family rallies round in this crisis except Albert. He has gone to see Sofia, he jokes with sheriff through a sexist discourse. He told the sheriff all women are crazy, and the sheriff has agreed with him, laughing. It is only by using his patriarchal privileges that he can manipulate the white power structure, which ironically oppresses both black women and black men.

The black woman faces the reality of double discrimination of both race and sex, she is doubly burdened and doubly jeopardized person. Paula Giddings explains:

[…] in the experience of a black woman, (there) is the relationship between sexism and racism because both are motivated by similar economic, social, and psychological forces […]. The means of oppression differed across race and sex lines, but the wellspring of that oppression was the same. (6)
African American woman is used to describe as the awkward images and demeaning caricatures in literature and in other fields reveal the depravity of her dignity as a woman.

Sofia has worked as a menial in the prison laundry. She is washing the dirty convict uniforms, nasty sheets and blankets every day. They are allowed her family to see her twice a month for half an hour. She is totally changed, “her face yellow and sickly, her fingers look like fatty sausage” (TCP 83). She has suffered lot in the prison. She says, “Everything nasty here, she says, even the air. Food bad enough to kill you with it. Roaches here, mice, flies, lice, and even a snake or two. If you say anything they strip you, make you sleep on a cement floor without a light” (TCP 83). Squeak not only takes care of Sofia’s children, she musters up enough courage to go and meet the prison warden, a distant relative, to get help for Sofia. But her mission ends in disaster. She is raped. Sofia is shifted from prison to the mayor’s house and worked as a nanny for his children. Sofia is presented in the image of a stereotype the ideal ‘black mammy’ which was certainly forceful. During the time of slavery black women were kept by rich white plantation owners as nanny to look after their children. They were like slaves always at their command and so Sofia was forcefully put in that box of an ideal nanny. When Eleanor Jane is showing Reynold Stanley Earls in her, Sofia turns away. The reason is not that the baby looks like Eleanor Jane’s father who enslaved Sofia, but in the old legal system of slavery, slaves were not permitted to acquit themselves until the third generation had died. Therefore if Eleanor Jane were to die, then Sofia would be forced to work for Reynolds Stanley Earl, the next or perhaps third generation and this account for her behavior.
The unexpected discovery of Nettie’s letters introduces the Africa section of the novel. These letters detail the story of Nettie’s adoption by the missionary family of Samuel and Corinne, and her subsequent travels to New York, England, Senegal, Liberia and finally the unnamed country of the Olinka tribe. In Nettie’s description of African women’s experience in an indigenous patriarchal structure made more rigid in reaction to the introduction of Western religion and economic colonialism, we are given a pattern of shared oppression of women on the basis of gender. Though on the one hand there is a strong positive image of a culture that practices polygamy, yet manages to foster strong female friendships and support networks, there is, on the other hand, a critique of African patriarchal practices. Nettie notes the similarities between the patriarchal family structure in which she and Celie grew up and the male female relationship she observes in the Olinka:

There is a way that men speak to women that reminds me too much of Pa. They listen long enough to issue instructions. They don’t even look at women when women are speaking… The women also do not ‘look in a man’s face’ as they say. To ‘look in a man’s face’ is a brazen thing to do… They look instead at his knees. And what can I say to this? Again, it is our own behavior around Pa. (TCP 168)

The links between patriarchal practices among the Olinka and American racism, both of which disempowered women are clearly established. Tasha, the Olinkan girl is not allowed to attend school because “A girl’s nothing to herself, only to her husband can she become something” (TCP 162). Olivia, her friend, comments: “They’re like white people at home who don’t want colored people to
learn” (TCP 201). Later, she undergoes the painful ritual scaring of the face and the female initiation ceremony which is forced women by the tribe as a way of carving their identification.

In primitive societies, women, as the bearers of children, were the only discernible parents. With the transition to the pairing relationship, however, the mother-right was overthrown and replaced by the father-right. The wife was relegated to certain parts of the home; isolated, guarded and her activities carefully monitored to protect her husband’s honour. The word ‘domestic’ clicks the sense of protection, comfort, and the place where one can feel one’s identity. However, when we add the noun ‘violence’ after it, snatches all good things from it and leaves simply, frustration and mental unease.

This domestic violence can be seen in the soil of America in African American families. Men against women especially make this kind of violence. Thus, the woman, who is said to have been the first member of the family, is not safe even in her own domestic environment. Being as a woman, the words: daughter, mother, or sister carries no meaning. Thus, violence is not only meant by physical torture it can be an emotional, mental or psychological injury and it might be unbelievable that these injuries are more harmful than the physical violence.

In domestic atmosphere, women have assigned certain roles, and their upbringing held in such domestic atmosphere that they have to follow such roles. Marriage is the basic mechanism by which patriarchy is maintained. The laws require the husbands to support the family and hold the wife responsible for maintaining the household and caring for the children. The marriage contract is unwritten but case law has reinforced the husband’s authorities, which makes it apparent the state’s overriding interest is in protecting the patriarchal family structure.
Domestic violence makes the women victim of physical, sexual and psychological abuse by her partner. Physical abuse is assault that ranges from hitting or slapping at one end of the continuum to homicide at the other. Physical abuse may or may not be accompanied by physical injury and by the victim’s attempts to defend themselves. Sexual abuse is any sexual intimacy forced on one person by another. However, this term is most frequently refers to domestic homicides as spouse killing spouse or to less serious assault as domestic disturbances focusing on the relationship without specifying the gender of the assailants and victims. The man expects a wife to look like woman, behave like a woman, think like a man and work like a dog. Wife beating is generally accepted as a normal phenomenon. Most men take it upon themselves to beat their wives to improve them. Women too accept it as a part of life.

_The Third Life of Grange Copeland_, the very first novel of Alice exposes the domestic violence like _The Color Purple_. In this novel, the violence comes out against women because of racial violence against men. Through this novel, Walker evaluates the perspectives of domestic violence there are two couples in a family rather two generations of family. In the first generation Grange Copeland used to beat his wife Margaret and his son Brownfield. He remains unfaithful to his wife as he goes to a prostitute named Josie. He never gives a proper time to his family, which is required on the side of wife. According to Hogue’s analysis:

Margaret is one of those black women who are submissive and loyal because they have such limited control over their own lives. Dependent on their husbands, such women lose respect for themselves and their husbands. (12)
As a child, Brownfield watches a transformation take place in his mother and blames Grange for it. In the beginning he loves his mother yet sees her, “Like a dog in some ways. She didn’t have a thing to say that did not in some way show her submission to his father” (TLGC 5). When Grange decides to escape to North, his wife Margaret poisons herself.

In this domestic atmosphere, Brownfield who once has sympathy with his mother now follows his father’s footstep, going only as far as Josie’s Dew Drop Inn. After two years of being Josie’s and her daughter’s lover, and being kept by them Brownfield meets Mem, Josie’s niece, eventually marries her, and repeats his father’s experience as a sharecropper, gradually falling into debt to a white boss. In the early years of their marriage, Brownfield loves Mem, but once again, he falls into the pattern established by his father, beating Mem and being unfaithful to her. Mem’s response, however, is different from that of Brownfield’s mother. Mem has a measure of independence and a strong sense of self-respect. His pride, however will not allow him to accept Mem’s educational power:

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 and write. It was his great ignorance that sent her into white homes as a domestic, his need to bring her down to his level! It was his rage at himself and his life and his world that made him beat her for an imaginary attraction she aroused in other man, crackers, although she was no party to any of it his rage and his anger and his frustration ruled. And she accepted all his burdens with her own. (TLGC 73)
He forces the family back onto the land and resumes his life as a tenant farmer, continuing to resist, however, and refusing to abandon her self-respect as a black woman, she finds another job. Again following his father’s destructive example, Brownfield gets what he thinks is his final revenge by shooting her head off with a shotgun. Thus, the domestic structure of African-American families causes violence against their women. In this Copeland family, the two-generation witnessed without any big change, the same sort of violence against the women in the family.

Walker examines the problem faced by black women and penetrates deep into their souls; the plot of this novel covers a span of sixty years in a black family, involving three generations. Even though the novel is more about the two men Grange and Brownfield, Walker emphatically tells the story of the abused and victimized women who get include with them. Margaret cuts short her life when she cannot tolerate it any longer; another one, Mem is killed by her husband.

Margaret lives a life of humiliation. Grange tried to prostitute Margaret to pay off his debts. He feels for his act that propels Grange to take alcohol to overcome the guilt. Later we come to know that Margaret over covers her reluctance to go out and enjoys the company of other men. These actions are Margaret’s feeble attempts at revolt. Her discontentment with her life is expressed in her action, which speaks louder than words.

The only reason that Margaret does not leave Grange is that she still love him. Margaret’s love is subservient and docile, there was deference in her eyes that spoken of her love for Grange. Love apart, Margaret has no option but to stick to
Grange. In those times, a woman was categorized into two roles: a respectable married woman, or an immoral woman. Even though she sells her body, Margaret clings to the security of a dead marriage rather than pet herself out of the impossible situation. She understands Grange’s problem to a certain extent. He is like a wounded animal that trapped in the sharecropping system. Thus, he always hurts his family, as he himself is hurt.

When Grange leaves them, Margaret apparently says, “Well! He’s gone” (TLGC 26) as if it does not make any difference to her. Her victimization is complete when she is deserted by her husband and has to commit suicide. She had no other means of sentence except prostituting herself openly. Even though her suicide makes reader sad, it does not astonish anyone. Margaret’s life of oppression ends prematurely before she gets a chance to prove herself. She is the first victim in the long line of the victimized women in Alice Walker’s first novel.

However, like Grange Copeland Brownfield is also trapped in the sharecropping system. He is in debts, working from sunrise to sunset and even in that condition, he could not allow Mem to do a job. He tries to curb Mem’s books are used to shift rat holes in their shelf. Brownfield cannot take care of his family but when Mem tries to share his burden, she is punished for transgressing her limits as woman.

Eventually, Brownfield succeeds in fulfilling his promise to himself, to treat Mem like a nigger and whore. Mem is unable to protect herself against the beating of Brownfield after the birth of three children and many other pregnancies, which bear no fruit, Mem, is truly the weaker sex. After abusing her sexually, Brownfield looks to his friend about his sexual desire.
In spite of all the odds, Mem tries to live for the sake of her children working like a drudge and as a domestic in her own house and outside too. She no longer has the strength to fight back. Brownfield’s brutality keeps on increasing and Mem starts losing the will to live. Finally, seeking release it seems, she faces Brownfield’s gun and later Mem is forced to live a life of a non-entity.

So much for the stereotypical strong black woman who conquers all. Walker calls up the other side of that strong black image, as well as the reason why it is emphasized so much in American mythology. That image is necessary because so many black women, like Margaret and Mem, have been crushed and utterly destroyed precisely because they are black and they are women. Their blood flushes the Copeland quilt with the colors of violent death and with the threads of degeneration. Now the children are left to fend for themselves in a world that will naturally abuse them. Margaret and Mem are examples of the Walker’s first group of black women, the most abused of the abused. It is important to note that these women are destroyed when they began to gather strength or to rebel.

Just as their husbands are defeated by an internal as well as an external disorder, both Margaret and Mem are destroyed not only by their husbands and their society, but by their “stupid belief that kindness can convert the enemy”. They have tried to be women in the traditional Southern Christian sense. Margaret tries to rouse Grange to concern by abusing herself, and Mem believes that she can give her own strength and its rewards to Brownfield. Even as they rebel, these women lived and dead with their husbands rather than themselves, foremost on their minds. Brownfield musing in his jail cell, fixes Mem’s essence for reader:
If she had been able to maintain her dominance over him perhaps she would not stand now so finished, a miniature statue, in his mind, but her inherent weakness, covered over momentarily by the wretched muscular hag, had made her ashamed of her own seeming strength. (TLGC 212)

The story of the Mem Copeland is just one of the many in the Black American society which is replete with many men. Walker’s range is also directed against the black women who have blind faith and loyalty towards the black men; hence, her writing reflects the tragedy, the abuse, the loneliness and desperation of black women. Mem’s tragedy is that she is non-fighter. Her generosity and tenderness get the better of her resolves.

Every time she starts thinking of a way out. Her other weakness is her children, but she is too weak to help them. According to Barbara Christian:

Mem tries to take responsibility for her own actions and change the definitions of herself as a woman. But since her redefinition challenges Brownfield’s definition of himself as a man, she is destroyed. (45)

Violence in the relationship between men and women is a recurrent theme in Black fiction. Walker’s vision of womanism brings out the fact that not only the whites but even black males are responsible for the state of the black women. It is a common practice of black man to blame the black woman for anything that goes wrong. John Callahan views that:
In Walker’s fiction there is often nothing but pain, violence, and death for black women. I shouldn’t say nothing because the two women who die violently in “The Third Life of Grange Copeland are lovely, strong and in love as they marry and begin working shares on the white man’s plantation. (21)

This attitude can be seen both in Grange and Brownfield. Grange too beats his wife, accused her of sleeping with white man, and abandoned her and the children. Brownfield also presents the same picture. Thus one can notice that in domestic violence, there are so many possibilities of children witnessing wife assault in their home, may grow up to abusive husbands or assaulted wives. Children also become the target of violence by being exposed to violence they suffer from, tremendous emotional abuse and possible neglect. It is little wonder children react the way they do; the cycle of domestic violence continue.

Keeping a mistress or going to a prostitute is a sort of violence against the wife. In this novel, Grange Copeland though has a wife turned towards Josie a prostitute. As if he said that she had turned towards the white plantation owner then the argument must occur that it is the weakness of his own character that he could not be able to protect his wife from the hands of white man. It is just to overshadow his weakness he did not try to save her life but turned towards Josie.

Josie is also a woman trying to keep her own place in men’s world. She is the common link between Grange Copeland and Brownfield. The nightmares haunt her. In the society and community she lives in, the only roles, a woman has to perform are those of a wife, mother, or whore. Josie wants a proper family life like the rest of the girls. Instead, Josie is turned out of the house at sixteen because she is pregnant. Totally conditioned to the patriarchal values, as she is, the young Josie tries to gain her father’s love, which is refused to her forever by the latter.
Fat Josie is one black woman in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* is neither virginal nor wifely, and who does not depend on a man for her financial needs. In fact, her profession feeds on the despair of the men around her. But although she is economically independent, Josie’s life is another example of the way in which the society’s definition of woman and man conflict with one another.

At the age of sixteen, Josie becomes a whore because her father rejects her when she becomes pregnant. In an attempt to win back his love, she uses her body, her only asset, to earn money to buy him gifts. Walker’s presentation of young Josie’s fall as a woman is marked by her analysis of the difference between society’s view of her lovers, who are encouraged to express their manhood through their sexuality, and its punishment of the woman who succumbs to them. Although the young Josie is expected to attract men through her body, she is also expected to be a virgin. This irresoluble conflict is powerfully dramatized when the very pregnant Josie literally falls at the birthday party she gives for her father:

Her mother stood outside the ringed pack of men, how many of them knowledgeable of her daughter’s swollen body she did not know, crying. The tears and the moans of the continually repentant were hers, as if she had caused the first love-making between her daughter and her daughter’s teen-age beau, and the scarcely disguised rape of her child that followed from everyone else. Such were her cries that the men, as if caught standing naked, were embarrassed and they stooped, still in the ring of the pack, to lift up the frightened girl, whose whiskied mind had cleared and who now lay like an exhausted, overturned pregnant turtle
underneath her father’s foot. He pressed his foot into her shoulder and dared them to touch her. It seemed to them that Josie’s stomach moved and they were afraid of their guilt suddenly falling on the floor before them wailing out their names… “let’er be,” growled her father. “I hear she can do tricks on her back like that.” (TLGC 52-53)

Forevermore, in her dreams that foot continues to ride Josie. Her father, whom she calls a witch, continue to haunt her. The relish with which Josie does her job, then, is partly based on the anger towards her father, laced with an insatiable desire for the love she never had. Throughout the novel she is presented as a devouring cat, voracious and sly.

Though her relationship with Brownfield given Josie pleasure, she does not attain fulfillment as a woman. Josie gives Grange everything; she sells her business her only source of income to buy a farm. However, at the age of sixty, Josie has nothing, “Once again she had been used by a man and discarded where his satisfaction was secured” (TLGC 205). She gives up everything she has for the love of a man but she gets nothing in return, not even love.

The novels in general, Walker expresses her anguish at the African American woman’s oppression, which starts even from their childhood days. The wondrous fragility of life is compressed into the faces of the many African American children, who like mist appear and reappear throughout her novels. Their melodic faces connect the bits and pieces of the South’s complexity. What all these children have in common is the precariousness of their existence. They may be aborted before they even have a chance to live; they may be given away; they may be assaulted or killed. Like the Wile Chile, they may be motherless children or they may be the children who kill their own children.
Alongside their tentative child bodies, stand the seemingly substantial figure of African mothers buttressed by the monumental myth of African American motherhood, a myth that is based on the true stories of sacrifice African American mothers has had to commit for their children. Walker chronicles the history of the mothers, and their history in turn organizes her analysis of the Southern milieu. The history, then, of black Southerners is an essential piece of fabric in this quilt, not as dates of battles or even the accomplishment of singular important African American figure but on the natural process of generation and regeneration of oppressive African American women’s lives.

For instance, Meridian reveals the sense of shame that develops in the living of African American women, not necessarily because they have done something wrong, but because they feel that others have given up their lives for them. As whites are opposed to their regeneration, Africana Americans by their very existence called for monumental suffering and sacrifices from one another. At the peak of their sacrificial hierarchy, stands the relationship between the parent and child, the paradox of life-giving guilt. In giving to children who are both unwanted and unappreciated by the society, Walker’s mothers also have to give up much of their own lives to sustain their children. The children know that they survive only because their parents committed acts of extraordinary suffering. In this novel, the relationship among Meridian, her mother, and her maternal ancestors is the major, although not only, extension through which the motif of guilt is explored. Walker traces:
Meridian found, when she was not preoccupied with the movement, that her thoughts turned with regularity and necessity to her mother, on whose account she endured wave of an almost 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. (M 118)

Since life demands such extraordinary sacrifices, sex, which is its cause, is fraught with danger, particularly for the women. Throughout the novel the role that sex plays in the development of girl-children into women and boy-children into men is at the best static, and at the worst tragic. The body as sensual is almost problematic. Often, but too late, the girls realize that it is through the fecundity of their bodies that their lives can be limited or even ruined. The only worth they find in themselves is that much of their early life is to make their bodies appealing to men, and then to find that the fruits of that appeal come to them before they even realized who they are. Like the seventeen year old Meridian, many girls are dropouts from high school, divorced wives, and young mothers; like her husband, Eddie, many of the men are destined always to be boys, “fetching and carrying, courteously awaiting orders from someone above” (M 81).
Just as the body can become the tomb of the mind, the mind’s anguish can diminish the body; since these two entities are not separate but one. Violence to one is violence to the other. Mental states, particularly the flaccid bubble of guilt, induce dreams, hallucinations, and visions that in turn affect the body. The guilt that Meridian feels is not living up to her mother’s expectation about motherhood is expressed first in her recurring dream of death and then in her neglect of her own body, later in her “blue spells”, in her temporary loss of sight, and finally in her occasional bouts of paralysis. Her body state reveals her spirit, just as the act of not-violent resistance expresses the spiritual position of the demonstrators.

Since African American women have no choice, they always reach out for the unknown or suffer for a guilt; their extreme purity of life is compelled but necessity. So, when they choose, they naturally choose the norm, sometimes with a vengeance that underscores their long years of sufferings. Buttressed by the knowledge that the abuse of hardship is one-half step behind them, many of them galloped to security, gird their loins, starch their homes, and swallow wholesale the feminine mythology from which they have been excluded. Often they find like Meridian’s mother, who exchanged sheer hardship for sheer frustration. Before, they know their lives are not their own; later, they believe that if they improve themselves they would have life, only to find that they are no longer trapped by being outside the norm, but by being inside it. These women feel themselves caught between the heroism of their past and the mundane boredom of their existence. In both cases, either without or within the norm, the common denominator in their lives is their role as mother. Whether they are slave-women for whom “freedom meant that they could keep their own children” (M 111), or
women like Mrs. Hill, who could declare, “I have six children, though I never wanted to have any and I have raised every one myself” (M 109). The ones for whom these women sacrificed their lives are their children. African American women are the victims of violent crimes; of them, African American mothers are the worst victims. Meridian’s mother Mrs. Hill could “never forgive her community, her family, the whole world, for not warning her against children” (M 53). To her, motherhood is a sort of victimization that aggravated still more her agony of being an African American woman.

Meridian’s mother was not adequately informed about the restriction of motherhood; rather she and her daughter are made to believe about its glory. Thus, Meridian’s conflict is further exacerbated with the remembrance of her maternal ancestors – mothers who were slaves, and who were often denied their children; mothers who did anything and everything to keep their children. Meridian is tormented by the memory of those slave mothers who have to starve themselves to death to feed their children. She feels that these women have persisted in bringing them up all to a point beyond where she, in her mother’s place, her grandmother’s place, and her great-grandmother’s place, would have stopped.

Little is known to young women about what motherhood really means. They forget or fail to understand that they, not the society, will be totally responsible for their children. Further, the history of slave mothers reinforces the idea of sanctification that surrounds African American motherhood. Therefore, they believe that mothers should live of sacrifice has come to be seen as the social convention.
Mrs. Hill raises her own children, whom she does not want, and poisons their development by injecting into their minds that they are unwanted. Though Meridians saves her own child from these thorns of guilt, she cannot save herself. Only her mother or a mother figure can save her from her own judgement. But both women are trapped by the myth of motherhood and cannot help each other. The moral choice that Meridian makes saves her child, but not herself. Ironically, although she believes she has sinned against her maternal history, she belongs to it, for she is willing to die on account of her child. Her spiritual degeneration results in a kind of madness as well as the deterioration of her body.

Through Meridian’s experiences, Walker examines one of the society’s major contractions about African American women. The primary role to which they have been assigned and for which they are perpetually praised is also, paradoxically, the means by which they are cut off from life. Since in principle, society places motherhood on a pedestal, while in reality, it rejects individual mothers, as human beings with needs and desires; mothers must both love their role and undergo agony for choosing to be mothers. Though this is true for all mothers, this double-edged dilemma is pronounced for African American women because the society does not value their children. As they are praised for being mothers, they are also damned as baby machines, which spew out their products indiscriminately upon the society.

It is no wonder that Meridian, a sensitive girl-child who understands that she has shattered her mother’s emerging self, tries to break the pattern by giving her own child away not only because she wants to college, but also because she
knows she will do to her own son as her mother has done to her – poison his growth with thorns of guilt. Walker says “When she gave him away, she did so with a light heart. She did not look back, believing that she had saved a small person’s life” (M 110). But in keeping that the long tradition that precedes her, Meridian cannot forget her child. Meridian’s quest is certainly intensified by the search of her child in the face if all the young children she encounters. Her guilt about her inability to lives up to the standards of motherhood that has gone before her shatters her health and propels her on the search for salvation.

Meridian is caught between her own tradition, her own personal desire to become a mother, and the fact that motherhood seems to cut her off the possibilities of life and love. Paradoxically, it is this contraction that precipitates her quest. In her pilgrimage towards wholeness, she becomes a mother not in the biological sense but in her nurturing life rather than destroying it.

Through Meridian’s conflicts with the social construct of motherhood, Walker also explores the effect of the tension between African American men and women. At the core of society’s criticism, that all African American women are fit to bear babies, festers the slightly hidden accusation that they are driven by sexual impulses they cannot control. The criticism of their continuous fecundity is in reality a judgment on their promiscuity. Her being a sexual partner to a man, preferably one man, is all that the society expects of them. No serious attention is given to the development of their minds or imagination, since all girls, particularly African American ones, will grow up to be mothers. This line of reasoning is held tautly in place even as the society presents sex as sordid. This fact is true in the
case of Celie in *The Color Purple* and Mem in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*. They are reduced to the level of child-bearing machines. Their feelings are not given any importance and whether they like it or not, they are made to bear children, since it is their husbands’ wish. As Meridian, Celie also thinks that sex is one sided and it is only “giving in” (TCP 78).

*The Third Life of Grange Copeland* presents motherhood as a debilitating burden for several of its woman characters, including Margaret, Josie, and the nameless white woman murdered by Grange. Mem’s life provides the most striking instances of reproduction as an oppressive cycle that defeats a woman’s quest for self-determination. Pregnancy is described as Mem’s “weakness” (TLGC 143); her own moment control over her life is dissipated by the “return” of her reproductive “cycle” (TLGC 143). The two pregnancies that follow are not only unproductive; they destroy her health and render her unfit for work, and thus entirely dependent on her husband. Of all the pregnant women featured in the novel, Helen is the only one whose pregnancy appears to be a source of pride, pleasure, and hope in the future.

Unlike Walker’s earlier novels, in which motherhood is rejected (*Meridian*) or thwarted by oppression (*The Color Purple*), *The Temple of My Familiar* valorizes motherhood. The loss of familiar as affecting, even effecting, the plight of contemporary sons and daughters whose maturation process have been crippled by their relationship with parents, especially by a mother’s rejection. The tasks of reeducating them belong to African American women who recover not only the immediate past but also a pre-historical, largely matriarchal heritage. Miss.Lissie
and Zede’, who remember and teach the lost ideals of harmony and nurturing, are biological mothers; Celie and Shug nurture Fanny as surrogate mothers. Mothers thus are given voice and allowed to speak the discourse that have been suppressed through male-authored history.

Exoneration of the mother, frequently blamed by adult children for their faults and failures, becomes a key to self-knowledge and cultural awareness in *The Temple of My Familiar*, as Walker’s characters, guided by matriarchal wisdom, exorcise their personal anger through painful reassessments of their relationship with their mothers and grandmothers. Release of anger occurs in moments when the conscious mind relaxes its defensive censoring of memory: “Suwelo is suddenly too tired to keep watch over the door of his heart. It swings open on its own” (TMF 403). The men forgive the mothers who neglect them after recognizing the reasons for their neglect: Suwelo blames his fathers and then forgives his abusiveness, while Arveyda comes to respects his mother’s spirituality, which absorbed the attention he craved as a child. Recalling their mothers, the women rediscover and reclaim loss of ties with their female heritage: As a “bell chemist” (TMF 372), Carlotta replaces her grandmother’s magical artistic talent; when Fanny recalls her early upbringing in the warm community of Celie and Shug’s house, she allows herself to bond with the others in friendship and a marriage that respects individuality in community. The dissipation of anger releases the mothers from personal blame and responsibility for adult children’s problems, and affirms female love and nurturance- the lessons of matriarchal pre-history.
Like the men who forgive their neglected mothers, Meridian also forgives her mother, who sows the seed of guilt in heart. When she is in a dream like state, she says, “Mama I love you. Let me go” (M 161), with the necessary words, “I forgive you” (M 161). This absolution gives Meridian the permission to go on the quest that will occupy the rest of the novel, a quest that will take her beyond the society’s narrow meaning of the word ‘mother’ as physical state and expand its meaning to those who create, nurture, and save life in social and psychological as well as physical terms.

Meridian does not follow the traditional pattern of her mothers. Within the context of the Civil Rights Movement which is opposed to the fragmentation of violence and committed to the wholeness of creativity, she is able to probe the meaning of motherhood, not solely in a biological context, but in terms of justice and love.

In Meridian, childbearing is consistently linked to images of murder and suicide. In this, the figure of the Wile Chile is not gratuitous, not an aberrant whim on the part of the author, but an epigrammatic representation of all the women Walker brings to life. Wile Chile, a thirteen year old ghetto urchin, who from the age of about five or six, when she was first spotted, has fed and clothed herself out of garbage cans. More slippery than a “greased pig” and as wary as any stray, the Wile Chile is virtually uncatchable. When it becomes obvious that the Wile Chile is pregnant, Meridian takes it upon herself to bring her into the fold. Baiting her with glass beads and cigarettes, she eventually catches Wile Chile, leads her back to the campus, bathes and feeds her, then sets about finding a home for her. However, Meridian’s role as mother comes to an abrupt end when Wile Chile escapes and bolts into the street when she is struck by a speeding car.
When Meridian drags the stomach-heavy Wile Chile back to her room, she puts herself in the role of mother and enacts a mode of mothering that smacks of liberal bourgeois sentimentality. On the other hand, Wile Chile’s own impeding motherhood represents absolute abandonment to biological contingency. These are only two of many versions of womanhood that the problem of mothering will provoke in the book. Although Meridian and Wile Chile do not share a common social ground, they come together on one point, and that is the possibility of being made pregnant. Fast Mary, another minor anecdotal figure, is as much a paradigm for the book’s main characters, Meridian and Lynne. As the students of Saxon College tell it, Fast Mary secretly gave birth in a tower room, chopped her newborn babe to bits, and washed it down the toilet. When her attempt to conceal the birth fails, her parents lock her up in a room without windows where Fast Mary subsequently hangs herself. In posing the contradictory social constraints that demand simultaneously that a woman be both a virgin and sexually active, the parable of Fast Mary prefigures the emotional tension Meridian herself will experience as a mother, expressing it in fantasies of murder and suicide. The tales of Wile Chile and Fast Mary also pose the problem of the individual’s relationship to the group. Fast Mary’s inability to call on her sister students and her final definitive isolation at the hands of her parents.

Meridian violently denies the mother-child relationship when she becomes pregnant for the second time. She chooses to abort her lover’s baby. Her decision is also a dramatic refutation of Truman’s overtly made-chauvinist invitation to “have [his] beautiful black babies” (M 145) for the revolution. For Meridian, the subsequent decision to have her tubes tied of womanhood where heterosexuality
will not be the means towards oppression but a mode within which sexual partners
will one day set each other free. But for the time being, her espousal of a selfless,
nun-like celibacy suggests that the day is not a long way off.

In *Meridian*, Walker scrutinizes the tradition, which is based on the true
stories of sacrifice that African American mothers performed for their children.
But the myth is also restrictive’ for it imposes a stereotype of African American
women, a stereotype of strength that denies them choice, and hardly admits the
many who are destroyed. Walker, in her characterization of Margaret and Mem
Copeland in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, acknowledges the abused African
American women. She goes a step further in Meridian. Meridian’s quest for
wholeness and her involvement in the Civil Rights Movement is initiated by her
feelings of inadequacy in living up to the standards of African American
motherhood. Meridian gives up her son because she believes she will poison his
growth with the thorns of guilt, and she has her tubes tied after a painful abortion.
In this novel, Walker probes the idea of African American motherhood, as she
develops a character, who so elevates it that she, at first, believes she cannot
properly fulfill. Again, Walker approaches the forbidden as a possible route to
another truth.

In *Meridian*, Walker not only challenges the motif of African American
motherhood but also she enters the fray about the efficacy of motherhood in which
American feminists were then, as they are now engaged. As many radical feminists
blame motherhood for the waste in women’s lives and see it as a dead-end for
women, she insists on a deeper analysis: she does not present motherhood in itself
as restrictive. It is so because of the little value society places on children, especially African American children, on mothers, especially African American mothers, and on life itself. In Meridian, she acknowledges that a mother in this society is often “buried alive, walled away from her own life, brick by brick” (M 53). Yet the novel is based on Meridian’s insistence on the sacredness of life. In seeking the children she can no longer have, she takes responsibility for the lives of all the people. Her aborted motherhood yields to her a perspective on life. Meridian is based on these ideas of the sacredness and continuity of life and the necessity to take life in order to preserve it and make it possible for future generations.

Walker prefers Southern African American women to be her major protagonist only because she is one, and also, she has discovered in the tradition and history that they collectively experience an understanding of oppression that has elicited from them a willingness to reject convention, and to hold to what is difficult. In Walker’s novels, many women are almost entirely ignorant of love, never having been allowed to share it. Whenever they are abused, they do not know the value of the self that has been violated. This violation has become a part of their life. Celebrations in such circumstances are necessarily infused with an irony completely alien to the writer, who envisions an ideal equality between men and women.

The female body is revealed as a site of male and national colonization through the rituals, clitoridectomy and infibulations that the protagonist, Tashi undergoes. Walker bases the experience of her fictional character upon facts. Genital mutilation is inflicted upon approximately 100 million women world-wide.
This is a procedure generally, covered by the comparatively innocuous term “female circumcision”. This mutilation ranges from knicking the clitoris to infibulations the excising of all external genitalia and the sewing shut of the vulva, except for a tiny opening barely large enough to allow the passage of very small quantities of blood and wine. The girls and young women who undergo this procedure most often die of medical complications, such as infection and problematic labors. From the novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, the fact is obvious that in Olinkan culture, the practice of female circumcision is based on a desire to limit woman’s sexuality, and increase male’s pleasure.

The feminists Gloria Steinam and Robin Morgan in their essay, *The International Crime of Genital Mutilation*, say, “We can explore the real reason for them only within the context of patriarchy. It must control women’s bodies as the means of reproduction, and thus repress the independent power of women’s sexuality” (296). Pierre, who represents the enlightened man for Walker in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* presents another feminist critique:

Man is jealous of woman’s pleasure [...] because she does not require him to achieve it. When her outer sex is cut off, and she’s left only the smallest, inelastic opening through which to receive pleasure he can believe it is only his penis that can reach her inner parts and give her what she craves. But it is only his lust for her conquest that makes the effort worthwhile. And that it is literally a battle, with blood flowing on both sides. (178)
Without the clitoridectomy and infibulations, the woman is imaged as dirty, masculine, and whorish; the general believe is that the genitalia of the “uncircumcised” woman will continue to grow and become masculine, enabling her to satisfy herself. She is generally unable to marry, thus affecting her economic status as well. For those faced with conflict between traditional and colonial influence, the ritual of genital mutilation gains added significance as a means of resisting tribal colonization. Tashi is a native African woman who is sensitive to the threat posed her people by outside colonizers. When her village is destroyed by a rubber manufacture from England, Tashi engages in the revolutionary activity of embracing traditional tribal rituals; it is her way of resisting tribal erasure. The body is the only means of resistance left, as everything else has been stripped away by the foreign colonizers. Tashi narrates,

I had taken off my gingham Mother Hubbard [that the missionaries had given the women of the tribe to wear]. My breasts were bare. What was left of my dress now rode negligently about my loins… We had been stripped of everything but our black skins. Here and there a defiant cheek bore the mark of our withered tribe. These marks gave me courage. I wanted such a mark for myself. (PSJ 22-24)

However, although Tashi willingly requested to be “bathed” by the tsunga M’Lissa’ the woman who performs the ritual, she did not realize what, precisely, was involved. This is partly due to the fact that discussing the ritual is taboo; it is enshrouded in a silence that helps to keep the practice intact. She did not realize either the physical or psychic damage that would result from the ritual.
Once a woman who took pleasure in her body, Tashi is embarrassed by the shuffling walk and odor that are characteristic results of the procedure (her menstrual period takes ten days and some of the blood is unable to get out due to the smallness of the vaginal opening); in addition, neither she nor Adam, her husband, could ever again experience the sexual pleasure they had before the operation. The operation ensures that the woman will have no pleasure through vaginal intercourse, and Adam, a non-tribal American male, does not enjoy either the blood or the pain that results for Tashi from forcing the vaginal opening wider. A part of Tashi’s self hides away after the ritual ceremony’ she is no longer the woman she once was.

Two other examples of genital mutilation are given to the reader to underscore the prevalence and pain of this practice: that of Dura, Tashi’s older sister, and that of M’Lissa, the tsunga. Dura’s experience is key as it forms part of Tashi’s post-ritual madness. A hemophiliac, Dura died as a result of the ritual performed at M’Lissa’s hands. After this traumatic occurrence, Tasha experiences a sort of amnesia related to her ensuing madness; when she overcomes this amnesia, a vital part of her cure is effected. This part of the cure entails naming her and her sister’s oppression; Dura’s death is named a murder which, in addition to the traumatic effects of the ritual upon Tashi, must be revenged. And the person upon whom vengeance must be visited is the one who performed the ceremony and the one praised as a national treasure: M’Lissa.

M’Lissa is also a victim of genital mutilation. She drags her left leg behind her, as the tendons were severed during the operation. M’Lissa’s mother had attempted to simply knick M’Lissa’s clitoris; the male witch doctor, however, was
vigilant and, perceiving a violation of the ceremony, performed a thorough clitoridectomy and infibulations himself. As M’Lissa bucked under the razor-sharp stone, he also cut the tendons in her left leg.

Although M’Lissa is a victim, the reader is not persuaded to empathize with her plight. Although her body is marked and experienced as a site of male domination, she becomes the next tsunga and thus becomes complicitous with the patriarchy. She learns to stop feeling and becomes callous in the performance of her “duty”. As this ritual is her livelihood she decides to ensure her own autonomy at the expense of other women, women whom she sees as fools. She believes the women themselves to be the agents of their own domination; in her eyes, if women are stupid enough to obey this tradition, then they deserve everything they get as a result Tasha puts this sort of belief as follows, describing its consequences: “If you lie to yourself about your own pain, you will be killed by those who will claim you enjoyed it” (PSJ 106).

In looking at the female body as a site of colonization in this novel, a few points are clear to the reader. First, those who are colonized may also acts as colonizers. This is true of both the tribal leaders who encourage genital mutilation and the tsunga M’Lissa. As the leaders are subordinated to English colonial authority, so, too, do they subordinate women to their own authority, limited as it may be. Some critics condemn that genital mutilation is not a cultural affair but it is a crime against women. Nationalism does not excuse oppression. As a colonizer, Adam acts as religious, male, and America figures of domination. The moment at which Tasha spiritually left their relationship, she tells the reader, is when Adam, a
progressive minister, refused to give a sermon on female suffering as evidenced in Tasha’s mutilation; he had lectured on the suffering of Christ, and Tasha believed he should lecture on the suffering of women like her as well.

I grew agitated each time he touched on the suffering of Jesus… I am a great lover of Jesus, and always have been. Still, I began to see how the constant focus on the suffering of Jesus alone excludes the suffering of others from one’s view… Was woman herself not the tree of life? Not in some age no one even remembers, but right now, daily, in many lands on earth?... One sermon, I begged him. One discussion with your followers about what was done to me… He said the congregation would be embarrassed to discuss something so private and that, in any case, he would be ashamed to do so. (PSJ 274)

Adam has the power to help revolutionize understanding of structures of domination, yet he refuses this possibility and becomes complicitous in maintain a disempowering silence.

However, he, too, is hurt by the system of oppression. Although men are not victims of sexism in the way that women are, there are ways in which they are adversely affected by it; many men experience the pain of their mothers, sisters, and daughters as they encounter sexism, often experiencing the ramifications of colonization with them. Specifically, Adam acts as an anchor to Tasha’s psychically unbalanced life. He is the caretaker, for instance, when Tasha unconsciously slashes rings around her ankles. He remains with her throughout her voluntary commitments to a mental hospital and her episodic rages. He is also
unable to have intercourse with his wife and thus experiences some of the same rupture in sexuality as Tashi does. Thus, the way in which her body has been colonized as a site of subordination has affected his own existence as well.

Another male, Benny, is also hurt by the colonization of Tasha’s female body. Benny is the son of Tashi and Adam, and his trip through the birth canal was impeded by Tasha’s infibulations; the vaginal opening was not large enough to and part of Benny’s brain was crushed during labor. As a result, Benny was born retarded. Although he functions fairly well, he cannot remember things and constantly has to take notes on conversations and instructions. Benny is also affected by Tashai’s emotional disturbances, constantly rebuffed by the emotional wall surrounding his mother. Although he tries to snuggle up to her, both symbolically and literally, she pushes him away. Benny, although an American male, is clearly not aligned with the colonizer. Though the repressive is shocking enough, the actual conditions of the operation and the resulting complications make it even more appalling. Walker’s depiction of the practice is accurate and without exaggeration. In particular, it should be noted that Tashi’s difficulties in labor and the resulting retardation of Benny are complications resulting from her circumcision that are not uncommon among circumcised women.

The use of unsterilized surgical instruments for several girls at one time also contributes to the spread AIDS in Africa. The commonly used hypodermic needle that makes intravenous drug users a high risk category for AIDS in the First World has its counterpart in the no sterile common cutting implements and needles employed in male and female circumcision, defibulations, recircumcisions, and scarring procedures in Africa. Olivia in Possessing the Secret of Joy explains the connection between female circumcision and AIDS in the following ways:
Tasha is convinced that the little girls who are dying, and the women too, are infected by the unwashed, unsterilized sharp stones, tin tops, bits of glass, rusty razors and grungy knives used by the tsunga, who might mutilate twenty children without clearing her instruments. These are also the fact that almost every act of intercourse involves tearing and bleeding, especially in a woman’s early years. The opening made will never enlarge on its own, but must always be forced, because of this, infections and open sores are commonplace. (PSJ 247-48)

Walker makes the connection between AIDS and circumcision very clear, and she believes that AIDS spreads faster in Africa because of the genital mutilation. At the end of the novel, Tasha returns to Africa and murders M’Lissa avenging the deaths of scores of women. Her act is not only against M’Lissa but against the whole process of mutilations. However, she has become a “national monument” (PSJ 147) and, in her act against her, Tasha acts against the patriarchy that subdues womanhood. While M’Lissa is a monument to the patriarchy, Tasha becomes a heroine to the oppressed and subjugated women worldwide. These women testify to her status at her execution as well, enacting a pageant of solidarity. The last thing that Tasha sees, which explicates the meaning of her actions, is a banner reading “RESISTANCE IF THE SECRET OF JOY” (PSJ 279).

African American men always want their women less knowledgeable than they are. Although Truman shares political struggle with Meridian, as African American men always have with African American women, he wants a woman who knows less than he knows about reality, a woman who can see him as a prince:
At times she [Meridian] 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. But Truman, alas, did not want a general beside him. He did not want a woman who tried, however encumbered by guilt, and fears and remorse, to claim her own life. She knew Truman would have liked her better as she had been as Eddie’s wife for all that he admired the flash of her face across a picket line— an attractive woman, but asleep. (M 136-37)

Truman leaves Meridian for Lynne who has had the time to read everything, the leisure to be idealistic and the training to adore him, because Lynne sees her role not as claiming her own life but his life as her own:

Truman had felt hammed in and pressed down by Lynne’s intelligence. Her inability to curb herself, her imagination, her wishes and dreams. It came to her, this lack of restraint, which he so admired at first and had been refreshed by, because she had never been refused the exercise of it. She assumed that nothing she could discover was capable of destroying her. (M 180)

Truman’s feeling for Lynne changes for precisely the same reasons it began: his desire to have a wife who is both worldly and idealistic, a wife whose intense idealism is based on freedom and security. He rejects the part of his heritage, because it is not cradled in freedom, and cuts himself off the strength, and control
that accompanies such restrictions. In desiring a woman, who is perfect in the eyes of the world, he overlooks the galling fact that his world is not perfect in the eyes of the world. So years later, he conveys his love to Meridian which she rejects:

For Lynne’s sake alone I couldn’t do it”, She had said

languidly,

rocking slowly in her yellow chair[…]

“How can you take her side?

“Her side? I’m sure she’s already taken it

I’m trying to make the acquaintance to my side in all this. What

side is mind[…]

Loving is different.

“Because I’m black?”

“Because you’ve you, damn it! The woman I should have married and didn’t!”

“Should have married and didn’t!” she murmured.

And Truman sank bake staring as if at a lifeboat receding in the distance”.(M 179)
Truman’s masculinity feels no shame in leaving his wife. When he learns that he can no more dominate his wife, he goes back to Meridian, the one whom he has rejected in the beginning. He wants to stand high in this world for which, he is ready to spoil any woman whoever it is – Meridian or Lynne.

In *Third Life of Grange Copeland*, Brownfield first feels drawn to Mem because of her literacy and her fluency in Standard English, at least, to escape from “the culture of poverty” (TLGC 81). Brownfield tries to learn how to read and write from Mem, in the hope that literacy can show him a way out of his situation. But when, later in their marriage, Brownfield abandons all hopes of bettering his condition, he resents Mem’s linguistic superiority over “the rest of us poor niggers” (TLGC 81). He forces Mem to revert from Standard English to African American dialect because the dialect identifies her as a degraded victim, thus feeding his desperate desire for masculine power. He wants her “to talk like what she was, a hopeless nigger woman who got her ass beat every Saturday night” (TLGC 81).

Walker calls Brownfield Mem’s pygmalian in reverse. He sets out to break her, starting with her speech, demeaning her and humiliating her in front of his friends until she drops her, educated dialect for the old one that she shared with them. Her schoolbooks become the kindling to start the daily fire in whatever shack he has condemned his wife and their growing family to live. Only once does he go for a midwife, when the time comes for one of his children to be born; the other times he is too drunk or it is too cold. Mem becomes haggard and ugly by his beatings:
Everything about her he changed, not to suit him, for she had suited him when married. He changed her to something he did not want, could not want, and that made it easier for him to treat her in the way he felt she deserved. A fellow with an ugly wife can ignore her, he reasoned. It helped when he had to heat her too. (TLGC 57)

African American men, whoever they are, Brownfield, Truman or any one, they are conscious that their wives should be less knowledge than they are, if it is otherwise, somehow they manage to dominate them by using their masculine power. In both the cases, their learned counterparts become the helpless victims.

In *By the Light of My Father’s Smile*, Alice Walker depicts the oppressive patriarchal abuse of religion and biblical hermeneutics as a force inhibiting female, and male, body and spiritual development. Women suffer marginalization within patriarchal structures, deprived of opportunities to express their female individuality. Men, often unconsciously, are led to complex self-destruction as they involve themselves, as authoritarian figures, in hypocritical and unnatural performances. In the novel, the author references Western Christianity as the most conspicuous expression of religious oppressive patriarchy. At the same time, Alice Walker juxtaposes the manifestations of religious oppressive patriarchy with female cultural and spiritual sojourns towards womanist love.

Susanna, a black woman character, while sojourning in Greece on a visit to her Greek husband’s family, comes to realize to her disappointment the extremity of Western patriarchal religiosity. She encounters Irene, a dwarf, cast out of her Christian patriarchal family and broader community. The villagers taboo and
demonize Irene, whom they regard as deficient. What renders Irene’s marginalization particularly intriguing is her relationship with the church, a place that should foster community and the uplift of its members. To the contrary, Susannah encounters there an excluded woman. Irene was born as a result of her mother’s rape. The family patriarchs claimed that the woman’s pregnancy resulted from dissolute behavior. In order to punish her for soiling the family’s honor, they brutally beat her. Later, after childbirth, she died. The patriarchs regarded Irene’s dwarfism as God’s punishment for her mother’s debauchery and gave her to the church as a servant. Susanna also learns from Irene more about the non-re relenting cruel patriarchal manifestations in Greece. Irene states:

They used to stone women, here... not so very long ago... that is what the men tell each other... and whisper into the ears of foreign men, when they get the chance to talk together... You can be sure they stoned a great many, before they got their vaunted ‘democracy’ in these parts. From my window I can see one of the stoning pillars. They say that even a hundred years ago, the base if it was still pink from blood. (BLMFS 55)

Irene also cites racial prejudice within the church as a rationalization of European Christian superiority. Cultural morays divergent from Western patriarchal order and discipline were condemned as morally depraved. Irene laments her church’s denouncement of the joyous spontaneity and wandering of the Gypsies (Roma) something she, to the contrary, perceived as inviting. She discerns that the wandering lifestyle of the Roma did not result from the preference
for disorder but was the effect of others not allowing them to establish permanent
settlement. The four hundred year long European enslavement of the Roma and
their imprisonment in the Nazi concentration camps are the evidence of their
oppression in Europe. The characters reflect not only upon the manifestation of
oppressive Western religiosity within Europe, but also globally.

Walker’s depiction of African American men as being capable of
oppressing other members of the community especially women, generated a lot of
criticism from African American community, especially men. In the novel *The
Color Purple*, Walker pays much attention to the manner in which African
American men brutalize their women. Young women are made sexual objects.
Celie’s body is raped by “Pa”, and her spirit by Mr._. Nettie must be clever and
work hard to escape Celie’s bad fortune. Sofia notes, “a girl child ain’t safe in a
family of men” (TCP 38). Also, Walker finds a tight link between the sexual and
economic oppression that African American men brings upon African American
women. “Pa” robs merchant’s wife and her daughter and their inheritance. One of
“Pa’s” selling points when he marries Celie off is that she “can work like a man”
(TCP 18), and later in the novel Celie is seen to be the only one working hard on
the form.

At the early stages of Celie’s story is devoid of identity. She is totally
incapable of defining herself. She sees herself, both physically and emotionally, as
living in irreconcilable fragments. She begins her narrative by writing, “I am”
(TCP 11) which she then negates by crossing out, indicating her lack of self-
confidence and self-acceptance. Dieke says, “Celie has been fragmented into
pieces, which are given away to others” (164). All her life is a series of sacrifices – to Pa’s desires, to Nettie’s safety, to Mr._’s brutality. She has been torn into pieces – from childhood by Pa’s rapes, torn from her children, and torn from Nettie. She can identify nothing of her own self; she does not feel that she belongs to this world.

Walker’s men are virile, selfish, domineering, and share all the traits generally attributed to patriarchy. They are condemned for their offence against their women and at the same time they are considered as perpetrators, not creators of violence. They continue to harass their women in imitation of white men and as a sort giving rent to their own oppression under whites. Brutality against women is an involuntary reflex that could help them to maintain their poise and balance at the worst moment of racial persecution. Sometimes, they are also victims of sexual holiness. They are affected when their wives, mothers or daughters suffer due to sexism.

African American writers, who have always had to refer to the reality out there which has its all too real foot on their necks, further, for women, whatever their race, they have been silenced for so long, the very essence of this supposedly radical the literary theory would reduce their words to sound and fury without meaning. It strikes the reader ironic that as groups who have traditionally been silenced begin to ‘penetrate’ the literary market, the reader learns that neither the world nor meaning exists.

Her fiction, she has called together a meeting of Black Women. The place is south. They are plain women. They grow petunias. They struggle endlessly and are harmless because they know no wrong. Their tragedies are very personal, very
real, and extraordinarily bleak and black. They keep repaying their dues in their small isolated world fashioned by time and condition. Eventually they all shape into hardened clay. Different though they may sometimes seem, they all push against the same barbed-wired wall of racism, sexism, age, ignorance, and despair. Often they are reduced to a level lower than themselves, become frustrated, and operate on the level consistent with their reduced state. They are trapped by circumstance and this entrapment is the result of their sense of powerlessness against the structure of the dominant society as well as the fact that they little understanding of that structure. According to Bettye J.Parker Smith:

The women in Alice Walker’s fiction… are a disturbing bunch indeed. For most part, they do not understand the complexity of their problem and because their limited worlds cannot assist them they are destined to operate haphazardly. They vacillate between the bottle and the Bible and spend a lot of time on their knees. The distinctive feature of these women is the tremendous quality with which they carry their suffering. (490-91)

Therefore in a day-to-day existence, they carry out a plot constructed by white society (male and female) and choreographed by Black Women in relationship to their pain and suffering. The claim that Black women’s conditions result from an intrinsic weakness is angled more graphically and more consistently in Walker’s novels.