Chapter 3

The Ancestor as Foundation

All narratives move in two directions at once—towards recovering the past and towards being heard or told. They grow out of the roots of history, memory and culture, and they take flight on the wings of desire. It is such an affirmation of “village values” that one finds in the fiction of Alice Walker. As a cultural archivist and redemptive scribe, Walker sought not just to reclaim cultural resources and “discredited knowledge” but to criticize those forms of cultural domination that would devalue and marginalize its resources.

Perhaps Walker alone of her generation of Black women southern writers persistently identifies herself and her concerns with her native region—the deep south of Georgia and Mississippi. All her works depend on what Black life has been and can be in a specified landscape that becomes emblematic of American life. Her intellectual themes are wedded to the life experiences of just plain folk who are also Black and mainly poor. “It is” Walker asserts in the novel Meridian, “the song of the people, transformed by the experiences of each generation that hold them together, and if any part of it is lost, the people suffer and are without soul” (205 – 06). Her own works are, in a sense, the song of the people,
celebrating and preserving each generation. They are an echo of the past, but at the same time, they also become the vigorous voice of the present.

Walker’s use of folk material has evolved considerably over the course of her career as a fiction writer. She considered it her duty as an artist and a witness for the future to preserve the stories of unknown men and women whose everyday lives constitute the communal past. Walker felt that everything around her was “split up, deliberately split up. History split up, literature split up, and people are split up, too” (Gardens 48). In “Saving the Life That Is Your Own”, Walker argues that “what is always needed in the appreciation of art, or life, is the larger perspective. Corrections made, or at least attempted, where none glance at the varied world the common thread, the unifying theme through immerse diversity” (Gardens 5). One of the most valuable gifts Walker gained in discovering her literary ancestors was a sense of continuity of Black artisans. She was able to link the survival of the artist to the survival of cultural heritage.

Walker presents the experiences of Black women who are shown to suffer in the world but who also discover ways to endure and prosper, the latter usually in spiritual or psychological rather than material ways. The principal source of strength is the knowledge, gained through folk wisdom that suffering seems the destiny of women and that survival is a valid revenge for the pain.
Deeply rooted in history and mythology, Walker's works resonate with mixtures of pleasure and pain, wonder and horror. They are rich, not only in human characterizations but also in the signs, symbols, omens sent by nature, wind and fire. Robins as a plague in the spring, marigolds that won't sprout, are as much characterizations in her novels as the human beings that people them.

Walker's works are also quilts—bits and pieces of used material rescued from oblivion for everyday use. These bits and pieces are not random fabric. She is at her best a story teller. Like a quilter, she is economical in the telling of her stories. The quilt continually reiterates the cyclical motifs of spiritual and physical regeneration within the Copeland family. In short stories like "Everyday Use" the use of quilt is very symbolic to the message of confusion of past heritage for Dee, one of the characters. It also emphasizes the communal nature of quilting and the quilts as an emblem of difference. The story takes on the significance of ritual, with the quilts as the making of the self. The insight in the story is in the mother's recognition of the value of that which is ignored or rejected, as in the second daughter.

The stories in Of Love and Trouble repeat the tension between folk wisdom and conventional systems of order. "Strong Horse Tea", "The Revenge of Hanna Kemhuff" and "Everyday Use" provide the best examples of the working out of this theme. In each case a strong folk
female figure must deal with the unbelief of a woman who has, either consciously or unconsciously, adopted an anti-folk system of values. The validity of that system must be called into question and the folk alternative is given primacy.

Thus Rannie Mae Toomer in “Strong Horse Tea” puts her trust in the White medical world with its new miracle drugs to cure her little boy Snooks of his double pneumonia and whooping cough. She scoffs at the old home remedies, insistent that her child will have the benefits of modern medicine. Modern medicine does not find its way easily into a shack in the middle of a cow pasture. She stops the White mailman in pouring rain, her dripping head and desperate plea for help an unwelcome intrusion into his rounds. Her message gets no further than Aunt Sarah, the old root worker down the road, who is all the mailman thinks Blacks need in the way of medical care. By stopping and yelling to Aunt Sarah to go help Rannie Mae, the mailman does all that his conscience requires of him. He is in too much of a hurry to do anything more, eager to disassociate himself from the wet, goat smell of Rannie Mae and the disgusting touch of her hands on his shoulder.

As her son lies dying, Rannie Mae loses valuable time waiting for a doctor who will never come. Aunt Sarah wonders in despair, “When would this one know that she could only depend on those who would come” (Trouble 93). Only when Aunt Sarah finally makes Rannie Mae
understand that she is the only help coming, does Rannie Mae in
desperation thrust Snooks into her arms. According to Aunt Sarah, the
only bit of home “magic” that might save the baby is a dose of “strong
horse tea”, horse urine. While Rannie Mae runs about the pasture trying
to gather some in her shoe, Snooks draws his last breath. The story very
carefully defers the question of the root worker’s capacity to effect
physical cures, but it does clearly show the psychological value of folk
belief.

In “Strong Horse Tea” Rannie Mae and her child are denied access
to the White medical world. Her one link to that world, the mailman,
lacks the compassion that might have meant the difference between life
and death for Rannie Mae’s son. But in “The Welcome Table”, the world
of White religion is closed to an old, unnamed Black woman who
eventually finds her salvation outside the White church whose doors are
closed to her.

No one knows why on this day, this late in her life, the old woman
walked the half mile from her home to climb the steps of the White church
she had never entered to take her seat on the back pew. No one knows
exactly what the minister said to her in the vestibule before she brushed
past him. Little is known about that day at all because, once it was over,
no one ever talked about it. The White people on the steps and in the
church that day could not know her reason for violating a social code she
had lived with all her life. Walker tells us only that she was “singing in her head” (*Trouble* 84) and therefore was not looking when they came to take her away. Since the White church-goers could not hear the singing and could read nothing in her face “they gazed nakedly upon their own fear transferred; a fear of the Black and the old, a terror of the unknown as well as of the deeply known” (*Trouble* 81). What each witness feared, he or she saw in the face of a solitary old Black woman that day:

> Some . . . saw cooks, chauffeurs, maids, mistresses, children denied or smothered in the differential way she held her cheek to the side, toward the ground. Many of them saw jungle orgies in an evil place, while others were reminded of riotous anarchists looking and raping in the streets. Those who knew the hesitant creeping up on them of the law, saw the beginning of the end of the sanctuary of Christian worship, saw the desecration of Holy Church and saw an invasion of privacy, which they struggled to believe they still kept. (*Trouble* 82)

For the Whites in “The Welcome Table”, faith has nothing to do with their treatment of this woman. Fear has everything to do with it.

“The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff” gives primacy to the mental rather than physical power of folk practices. In this story, Walker makes explicit use of Zora Neale Hurston’s *Mules and Men*, an early study of
folklore practice among southern Blacks. Hannah, a sickly old Black woman, appeals to a conjure woman for justice. She claims to be a good Christian but she feels that God seemed to have other things on his mind when she needed him in the past. In order to secure the justice she feels she deserves, she seeks out Tante Rosie to supplement the work of the Lord.

In “The Revenge of Hanna Kemhuff” with the destruction of Mrs. Holley, comes the triumph of the White woman who once denied Mrs. Kemhuff the free food that would have saved her children from starvation. That the government’s Food Stamp Program failed to save the Kemhuffs in spite of the faith they had in it is another example of institutional failure. Mrs. Kemhuff also feels God has failed her because he has allowed Mrs. Holley to prosper. She tells Tante Rosie, the root worker to whom she, like Rannie Mae, finally turns in desperation, “God cannot be let to make her happy all these years and me miserable. What kind of justice would that be? It would be monstrous!” (Trouble 67).

Hannah’s renewed life comes not from anything done, but from the belief that something can be done to counteract the seemingly invincible power of Whites. The curse prayer that she recites along with the narrator, an apprentice of the conjure woman, serves more to give voice to her anguish and anger than it does to evidence any real belief on her part. In fact, if the story can be taken in part as the education of the narrator in
certain folk ways, then the lessons are about the power of language more than the power of demonic forces.

In “The Welcome Table”, the church fails the old woman, but she never loses the faith in God that allows her to march off to glory at the side of a saviour no one else can see. Mrs. Kemhuff has given God his chance, and as she nears death she goes outside Christianity to seek revenge through the powers of Voodoo that Rannie Mae also turned to as a last resort. She and the old woman in “The Welcome Table” find victory only in death.

On the surface “Everyday Use” seems like rather a simple story of the conflict of generations. But viewed in depth, a serious concern underlies the masking of the names. In African and Afro-American lore, naming invokes the soul of the individual. Dee’s name embodies the spirits of her ancestors, and in denying it, she denies her heritage and the essence of her being, which are in fact the same thing. The self she chooses to create through the name Wangero is a false self because it is based on a false sense of her past. Similarly, the young man accompanying Dee introduces himself as Hakim-a-barber and the narrator thinks to herself, “I wanted to ask him was he a barber, but I didn’t really think he was, so I didn’t ask” (54). Despite dismissing this little joke, she later refers to him as “the barber”. By foregrounding names in this manner, the narrator
undercuts the pretensions of her daughter. Thus, in a typical trickster fashion, she can be two things at once.

*The Third Life* covers three generations of the Copeland family and a period of American history from the 1920s to the 1960s. Folk language, folkways and folk stories work symbolically in the novel. It is the story of three generations of a Black sharecropping family whose brutal experiences lead to abandonment, promiscuity, self-hatred, abuse and even murder. The southern landscape, with its harsh working conditions, racism, economic oppression, and frustration of Black dreams, offers little hope for the characters. Yet, these emerge in two elements consistently important to Walker: Afro-American folk culture and the Civil Rights Movement. The American social structure turns the Blackman into a beast—suppressing his human qualities and accentuating his animal tendencies. The Black man, in turn, reflects his violent relation with his White landowner in his relations 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 women, who as he does in the master-servant relation, remain loyal and submissive.

On the one hand, *The Third Life* reproduces an established definition of manhood which takes care of self and family while on the other hand, the text places that definition of manhood in an Afro-American constellation where it has no chance to materialise. Trapped in
an unending cycle of debt. Grange gives the fatal shrug of resignation which shows that he acknowledges his inability to care for his family. He gave the same shrug when he gave up hope of sending his son to school, when he gave up hope even of buying Margaret the new dress she needed. Five years later, when Brownfield is 15, his father shrugs off all responsibility and deserts his wife and child. Resigned to his inability to control his life or that of his wife and son, Grange walks away. This "death" ends his first life.

The existential function of myth explains why a number of major themes are common to the different mythologies. Cosmogynic myths—those describing the creation of the universe—and myths of origin, for example, are to be found everywhere. Destruction of an old world and creation of a new is likewise a largely distributed theme. Myths of creation, of mankind, appear to be universal, though the story may vary. Likewise, the periodic renewal of the world through a symbolic repetition of the cosmogony is found among many primitive and archaic people. These myths, implying as they do, a new universe—express the archaic and universal idea of the progressive degradation of a cosmos, necessitating its periodical destruction and recreation in a continuous cycle.

Thus in The Third Life, fate leads Brownfield not only down the same road but also into the same juke joint earlier frequented by his
father, quickly into Josie’s bed, and soon into her daughter Leroene’s bed. He soon learns there is more to manhood, however, in the presence of Mem, Josie’s educated niece and ward. He falls in love with the young school teacher, finds a job that will give him the financial independence to support his wife. Unfortunately, in committing himself to sharecropping for two years, he enters the same trap his father felt compelled to escape. A week later, the newly wed Brownfield and Mem ride off on a wagon to start their new life together with Brownfield blindly promising, “We ain’t always going to be stuck down here, honey”, and Mem “looking and smiling at him with gay believing eyes, full of love” (Copeland 49). Thus, early in their relationship are planted seeds not of creativity but of destruction.

Three years later, Brownfield and Mem, now with two children, are still on the same farm and deep in debt. They become transients, moving from one share-cropper’s cabin to another until Brownfield is left feeling that he has no control over his own life and therefore must assume no responsibility.

The role of the Black man taking out his frustrations on the Black woman because he dare not risk taking them out on a White person of either gender is not a new idea. Popularised by Zora Neale Hurston as the mule of the world, the image of the Black woman is as the only human creature more helpless than a Black man living in a White world. Mem Copeland however
is a woman brutalized not because of her helplessness. The source of her power is education – an education Brownfield does not have.

Walker calls Brownfield, Mem's "Pygmalion 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 she shared with them. Grange's wife Margaret found her alternative to despair in suicide. Ironically perhaps, she killed herself because she loved Grange so much that she could not live without him and could not forgive herself the sin of infidelity. Mem goes on living with Brownfield in what Walker terms "a harmony of despair" (Copeland 59) until she strikes back, once for the sake of their three children.

The characterisation of both Grange and Brownfield drew on folk figures, principally the bad man and the moral hard man. Brownfield lives out the selfish, violent, malevolent existence with which his father begins. In addition to being sexually promiscuous, he mistreats his wife and ultimately kills her, and he puts his new-born albino son outside on a winter night so that he will freeze to death. When his wife goes against his wishes in trying to create a more decent life for the family, he patiently and coldly calculates his revenge; he succeeds in returning the family to the barely human conditions from which they sought to rise. In all this, his attitudes resemble those of the bad man of the Black legend: the Great McDaddy, Billy Dupnee, Stagolee.
But in the process of using this folk material to give her character vitality, Walker simultaneously demystifies the legend by showing its roots in self-hatred and its impact on female characters. By such a process, she calls into question the cultural functions of such folk images; like Gaines in "Three Men", she implies that the bad man figure can be a justification for inhumanity. Brownfield undergoes two experiences in his early life that give him a sense of his fate under the existing social order. In the first of these, he is shown another world, symbolized by the car his northern uncle drives:

The automobile was a new 1920 Buick, long and high and shiny green with great popping headlights like the eyes of a frog. Inside the car it was all blue, with seats that were fuzzy and soft. Slender silver handles opened the doors and rolled the astonishingly clear windows up and down. As it bumped over the road its canvas top was scratched by low elm branches. Brownfield felt embarrassed about the bad road and the damage it did to his uncle's car. Uncle Silas loved his car and had spent all morning washing it, polishing the wheel-spokes and dusting off the running boards (11).

Grange and the Whiteman Shipley are different orders of being, with Shipley having the God-like capacity to change the Blackman into
something non-human. The mask that Grange wears is not the strategically adapted one of the trickster but one assumed to hide the involuntary reactions of fear and hatred. The emotions suppressed here find expression in a variety of behaviours often associated with the bad man: promiscuity, insensitivity and violence directed against the other Blacks, including his wife. He displays the bad man’s disdain for social conventions, but he finds in his choice not liberation but imprisonment, both psychological and physical after he murders Mem. He lacks the bad man’s anarchistic courage and lives in the folk world to the extent that he values its fatalistic and cyclical world view. In living his life, he relives his father’s life up to a certain point. This experience implies the changelessness of time.

Ruth, the granddaughter whom Grange takes in after Brownfield murders Mem and goes to prison, represents for him the opportunity to perpetuate his values. He tries to pass on the folk wisdom he has accumulated, giving special emphasis to the trickster tales which he hopes will instil in her a profound distrust of Whites. The act of nurturing, through education in folk wisdom and the example of dignity and independence demonstrates the intimate relationship of past and future. It encourages hope while preserving an awareness of suffering.

The work reflects Walker’s early interest in Camus, but in it also can be found the folk value of improvisation. In the dialectic of history
and self-creation, Ruth repeats the theme and form of Black life and Black art.

Walker uses folk and mythic elements in her fictional narratives to challenge received notions of gender and class and race as well. In her familiar but often undervalued study *The Roots of American Culture*, Constance Rourke calls attention to the need for writers and critics alike to bring new approaches to the American landscape. As she puts it:

A prodigious amount of work is still to be done in the way of unearthing, defining and synthesizing our traditions, and finally in making them known through simple and natural means. Beneath this purpose must probably be fresh constructions of our notion as to what constitutes a culture, with a removal of ancient snobberies and with new inclinations. (295)

Even the earliest works of Alice Walker reveal the folk aesthetic, mythic impulse and cultural function of narrative that would characterise her best work. The folk aesthetic in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* illustrates how the consciousness of young Ruth is transformed through the story-telling sessions she shares with the denizens of the rural community she visits. To a large extent Walker relies on the values of mythic patterns to reveal the unique grandeur and cultural significance of
her tradition. Her works bear witness to the cultural function of narrative to alter our perspective and to transform our consciousness.

One of the primary signs of the mythic impulse in Alice Walker's fiction is the nature of the journeys her characters undertake. She draws on the wealth of associations implicit in flight, which varies from flight as freedom and escape to flight as transcendence and self-actualisation. The most significant of these patterns—the flight to the outside world and the inevitable return home—have mythic characteristics of ritual. It is an act of triumph, of self-affirmation and communal celebration. Recollections of the past and the esteem for the wisdom of the age are recurring motifs in Walker that signify time as a single continuum.

*Meridian* is Walker's most impressive effort to incorporate folk forms into fiction. While the time frame in which it operates is not extended, taking in only the period just before and during the Civil Rights Movement, the use of legends and folktales add historical depth in matters of race and gender. In addition, the technique of repetition moves it into the realm of cyclical time. As in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, the tension is between those who see time as changelessness, which reduced people to ciphers, and those who see it as the pattern of growth and individuation.

The opening chapter establishes the basic pattern with the story of Marilene O'Shay, whose body, preserved in life-like condition, is carried
around in a trailer by her husband and put on display for the paying public. At all levels, the society reinforces his belief that she is merely a piece of property to be handled in whatever way it pleases him. The exhibition itself functions in the same way as a cautionary tale: for both men and women, it demonstrates the permissible limits of female behaviour.

Variations on this theme appear in a number of stories told early in the novel like the story of The Wild Child. The most folk-oriented of the stories is the legend of Louvinie, a very dark slave woman who told terrifying tales. Part of the legend was that her parents in Africa functioned as detectives. Louvinie’s tales seem to serve only as entertainment for children. On one occasion, a child of the master is so frightened that his weakened heart fails and he dies. For this crime of too effective story telling, she is punished by having her tongue cut out. She buries it under a scraggly mangolina tree, which slowly develops into the largest tree in the plantation. Named the Sojourner, the tree is said to have magical qualities; a slave hidden in it would be invisible to the Whites. Much later, it becomes Fast Mary’s one friend on campus; it serves as a trysting place for the lovers (none of whom were ever caught); and it is the site of Wild Child’s funeral. After the funeral, the students, in a frenzy of anger over the administration’s behaviour, riot, but the only damage is the cutting down of the Sojourner.
Essentially, the narrative technique in *Meridian* is the construction of a fictive fence to preserve folk roots. It is Walker’s desire to save a vanishing *way of life* by inscribing it in fiction. Her novel thus raises the question whether it is possible for a woman writer to affirm hidden values, to make them more visible and accessible, without subduing the forces of cultural domination that threaten her feminist vision. The situation of the narrator in *Meridian* is established by the word “guilt”. She spends years trying to expiate the guilt she feels for having failed her mother. Her family history is of mothers who sacrificed life itself for their children. Believing that is death not to love one’s mother, Meridian continues to see her mother as Black motherhood personified, in spite of Mrs. Hill’s failure as a mother. Children are Mrs. Hill’s—and later Meridian’s—own form of slavery, a burden to be borne.

Meridian does not take the symbolic plunge into the sea; she does not die. Her trances return occasionally, but Miss Winter’s words start her back on the road to physical and mental health. She comes to see death in its relationship to life with the clear perspective of her childhood. Then too she had her trances, but they taught her the value of life over death, not the reverse.

Myth is also incorporated into the text in the description of the small farm which was part of an Indian burial ground called “The Sacred Serpent” because of its shape of raised mounds. The coils of the Sacred
Serpent created a deep hollow with mysterious effects on those who entered it. There both Meridian and her father experienced the dizzying sensation of feeling spirit leave body and float free:

Her father said the Indians had constructed the coil in the Serpent’s tail in order to give the living a sensation similar to that of dying. The body seemed to drop away, and only the spirit lived, set free in the world. (*Meridian* 58)

Like his grandmother before him and Meridian after him, he knows ecstasy at certain moments in the centre of the serpent mound. Feather Mae’s experience is typical:

When she stood in the center of the pit, with the sun blazing down directly over her, something extraordinary happened to her. She felt as if she had stepped into another world, into a different kind of air. The green walls began to spin, and her feeling rose to such a high pitch the next thing she knew she was getting up off the ground. She knew she had fainted but she felt neither weakened nor ill. She felt renewed, as from some strange spiritual intoxication. Her blood made warm explosions through her body, and her eyelids stung and tingled. (49-50)

The ecstasy seems directly connected to locating oneself in the centre of the mound; Meridian and her father debate whether the
Craziness they share with her great-grandmother is an experience of death or life. They do know that the past contains much more than facts and bones.

The negation of their understanding comes when the state discovers the historical value of the land and takes it over with minimal compensation to Mr. Hill. They set up a state park, and refuse to allow Blacks into it. Thus, the true history of the sacred serpent becomes the cycle of dispossession. The spiritual significance of this is made clear when Meridian returns after the park has been integrated and tries to find ecstasy: "But there were people shouting and laughing as they slid down the sides of the great Serpent's coil. Others stood glumly by, attempting to study the meaning of what had already and forever been lost" (52). The state, by considering history primarily as entertainment has succeeded in suppressing the meaning of history:

Meridian alone was holding on to something the others had let go. If not completely, then partially by their words today, their deeds tomorrow. But what none of them seemed to understand was that she felt herself to be, not holding on to something from the past: but held by something in the past: by the memory of old Black men in the south who, caught by surprise in the eye of a camera, never shifted their position but looked directly back; by the sight of young girls singing
in a country choir, their hair shining with brushings and
grease, their voices the voices of angels. When she was
transformed in church it was always by the purity of the
singer's souls, which she could actually hear, the purity that
lifted their songs like a flight of doves above her music-
drunken head. If they committed murder—and to her even
revolutionary murder was murder—What would the music be
like? (121)

The revolution, because it would deny the songs, is ultimately no
different from the oppressive system it seeks to destroy. Both would
 efface the concrete history of suffering and joy and replace it with a
mechanized order, intolerant of variety and thus of human life itself.
Meridian's choice, incomprehensible to the revolutionaries, is to return to
the people and to preserve the song. The return to the folk seems to
intensify rather than relieve the burden of her personal history. She seeks
the renewing of her own and the people's spirits because that will
preserve the songs while bringing about the revolution.

Meridian was not convinced, however, that what was to be learned
from the proximity to death was anything about dying: "It seemed to her
that it was a way the living sought to expand the consciousness of being
alive, there where the ground about them was filled with the dead"
(Meridian 59). Years later, in her dorm at Saxon College, when Meridian is
granted expiation for her sins against her biological mother by her symbolic mother, Miss Winter, Meridian chooses not to become pure spirit forever, but chooses rather a role among the living.

Sometime after she follows Martin Luther King Jr. the epitome of non-violent revolutionaries to his grave, in a church scene in “Camara” that recalls the earlier scene in which she lost her mother, Meridian is finally able to find her own place in the resolution. The change in the music is one clue that the church she happens to go into Sunday morning is not the same church she attended as a child. This church does not preach mere acceptance of death—the resignation resonant in her father’s singing voice. This rather is the church militant and its music - the music of war. “Let the martial songs be written”, she found herself quoting Margaret Walker’s famous poem, “Let the dirges disappear!” She started and looked quickly around her. The people looked exactly as they had ever since she had known Black church-going people, which was all her life, but they had changed the music! She was shocked (Meridian 195).

The sermon too is different. In the voice of King, the preacher launches into an attack on “Tricky Dick” Nixon. The agenda he has in mind for his congregation is very much of this world, not the next:

He looked down on the young men in the audience and forbade them to participate in the Vietnam War. He told the young women to stop looking for husbands and try to get
something useful in their heads. He told the older congregants that they should be ashamed of the way they let their young children fight their battles for them. He told them they were cowardly and pathetic when they sent their small children alone into White neighbourhoods to go to school. He abused the Black teachers present who did not, he said, work hard enough to teach the Black youth because they obviously had no faith in them. . . . God was not mentioned, except as a reference. (Meridian 195-96)

Meridian glances up to see that the usual stained glass Christ holding a lamb has been replaced with a tall, broad-shouldered Black man (B.B. King) with a guitar in one hand and a sword dripping with blood in the other. The songs are more militant, the minister talks about political change rather than heaven. This image of joining the sacred and the secular realms appropriately has music as its motif; the linking of the Spirituals and the Blues makes possible an integrated folk expression which is one way of keeping the folk songs alive. Thus, she discovers that even within the traditions, there is change and a refusal merely to endure the suffering.

The focal point of the service is a ritual of remembrance. For Meridian, the ritual serves as liberation more than remembrance:
In comprehending this, there was in Meridian's chest a breaking as if a tight string binding her lungs had given way, allowing her to breathe freely. For she understood, finally, that the respect she owed her life was to continue, against whatever obstacles, to live it and not to give up any particle of it without a fight to the death, preferably not her own. And that this existence extended beyond herself to those around her because, in fact, the years in America had created them One Life. (204)

The ritual, which emerges out of the concrete history of the folk, teaches her the difference between suffering and victimisation. The pain occurs, but the service is a reminder to her that suffering is not a natural and necessary state of existence, that accepting it as such is an act of cooperation with those who inflict it. The guilt that she had felt for her son, her mother, and her own efforts is cleansed in her refusal to be a victim any longer. By choosing life—personal, sexual, racial—she cures her diseased soul. By taking responsibility, she rejects the guilt that has been imposed upon her. She will be the singer of the old songs that make possible the new world. And this world is the world of the Black community, which shares her vision and understanding.

Exemplifying Walker's grip in the folk aesthetic, some of Meridian's "songs" constitute the next three chapters of *Meridian*—
"Travels", "Treasure" and "Pilgrimage". The book ends as it began, showing Meridian going about the rural south, trying to persuade Blacks to register to vote and offering them whatever help she can regardless of whether they choose to register.

Meridian brings the old life into one full circle by producing a symbolic new son, Truman. He must be brought fully into the folk world and made to see it as a real and human world if he is to find his truest self, free of the stipulations of the White world and his dependence on women for his identity. In the end, he inherits her role. Meridian has left him to find his own song through the burden of responsibility. Having found her own voice she leaves him to find his. In this painful quest, he is not even permitted her guidance, for the past is his and so, the song also must belong to the past. Thus, the text implies a cyclical pattern in history; the return is always necessary for true change. Paradoxically, one makes progress only by going back to the beginnings, which is to be found among the people. Meridian has gone through her initiation and can move on; Truman begins his, and Anne Marion, must follow him. The ritual allows one to cease attempting to become a self in terms of the values of the dominant culture or the revolutionaries that are its mirror image; and instead to be the healed, growing self, that the folk world makes possible.
Meridian’s story confronts the question of whether art can survive in time of revolution; Truman and Lynn’s story asks whether love can. Similarly, Walker introduces the poems in Revolutionary Petunias as poems about revolutionaries but also about lovers. In that sense, then, parallels are found between the collection of poetry and Meridian. In the poem “Lost My Voice? Of Course” a childhood bully tells Walker that revolution cannot afford poems about love and flowers. Yet poems of love set in time of revolution may well be about flowers—about revolutionary petunias and the people who are incorrect enough to nurture those petunias. While Meridian’s story ends on an optimistic note, however, Truman and Lynne’s relationship, like those in some of the poems in Revolutionary Petunias, suffers from an inability to expand in love.

(Petunias, epigraph)

An air of forgiveness and brotherly/sisterly love permeates the novel’s end, as an air of guilt permeates the rest of it. Near the end, Meridian writes two poems. One of them begins thus:

i want to put an end to guilt
i want to put and (sic) end to shame
Whatever you have done my sister
    (my brother)
Know i wish to forgive you
Love you.  

(Meridian 213)
The poems, the songs, the stories—these are the links between individuals and between generations, as Meridian learned earlier. Another glimmer of hope for the future links her with a story-teller from Saxon’s past. An elderly slave woman on the plantation that became Saxon College once told a gruesome story in such vivid detail that the heart of one of the family’s young sons failed him and he died. The slave was punished by having her tongue cut out. She saved the tongue, though, and planted it under a scrawny magnolia that later flourished to become the famous Sojourner, a focal point of the Saxon Campus—until the Saxon students cut it down as an act of protest. Anne Marion’s last letter to Meridian contains a vast trunk of the Sojourner with a tiny shoot of new life growing out of one side.

The sojourner, a living memorial to an uneducated artist, did not die. Neither does the Petunia, a living memorial to the rebel in each individual. In the last poem in Revolutionary Petunias, “The Nature of This Flower Is to Bloom”, the revolutionary Petunia is hailed as enduring in all its glorious colour for itself and for those who look upon it with deserving eyes.

Therefore, Meridian is informed by several archetypal patterns encountered throughout world literature. Like Don Quixote, Meridian is a wanderer, separated from her culture, idealistically in search of one more substantial than that embraced by the hypocritical, materialistic society
she has rejected. Meridian undergoes a series of painful experiences in passing from ignorance and innocence into spiritual maturity; she comes of age—is morally reborn—when she decides that forgiveness and love transcend a guilt-ridden life. It is a progress toward spiritual health and self-definition. In *Love and Trouble* has this quotation from Herman Hesse that serves as its epigraph:

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It is harder to kill something
that is spiritually alive
than it is to bring the dead
back to life. (104)
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Meridian goes through a symbolic resurrection once she realizes that her duty to her own life is to live it even if that means literally fighting for her life.

In addition to these universal archetypes, *Meridian* contains a mythology that is distinctively American. She epitomizes the conglomerate paradoxes that make up American character. She is truly a self-made woman, free from the materialism and morality-by-formula of the Horatio Alger Hero. She possesses the simple modesty, the quickness, the stamina and the skill we admire in our athletes. She is both ingenious and ingenuous. Yet, she is also a sensitive, conscience-burdened loner troubled by man's inhumanity to men. She is also, at times a mystic and a dreamer who has an uncommonly sensitive heart.
At the crux of all the images in Meridian is the concept of animism, that which Walker defines is a belief that makes it possible to view all creation as living, as inhabited by spirit, thus stressing the oneness of the natural and human world. This view of the world is attributed not only to Afro-American but to the original inhabitants of America, the Native Americans. Throughout the novel they are the motif that stands for the union of the land and its people.

The image in the novel that most fully expresses the concept of animism is music. Music is here not only an individual, extraordinary accomplishment, but a part of the flow of life at parties, in church, while at work, with friends and lovers, in civil rights demonstrations, in social action. Even the structure of the book is based on music. Like a circular rhythmic pattern, short chapters follow long ones, creating syncopated beats. Meridian’s quest reaches its peak when she understands that it is the song of the people, transformed by the experience of each generation that holds them together. If any part of it is lost, the people suffer and are without soul. The folk have incorporated into their ritual the history of the Civil Rights Movement. So the words of the old songs have changed. The minister speaks in a voice like Martin Luther King about the politics of the nation rather than the omnipotence of God; the traditional painting of Jesus is replaced by a painting of an angered Black man called B.B. with
sword: the music articulates that which cannot be articulated, manifesting the continuing constancy of the entire tradition.

Walker's third novel, *The Color Purple* (1982) won both the Pulitzer Prize and the American Book Award for Fiction. The book is, in essence, a *womanist* fairy-tale. Walker uses this term to distinguish her position from the mainstream feminism, which she considers to be dominated by the limited perspective of White middle-class women. Though womanism implies similar things, she considers it more appropriate because it comes from the folk expression *womanist*. Like Snow White, Celie is poisoned psychologically in the novel by an evil step-parent; like Cinderella, she is the ugly, abused daughter who ultimately becomes the princess; like Sleeping Beauty, she is awakened from her death-in-life by the kiss of a beloved; and like them all, she and her companions, live happily ever after. Moreover, the fairy-tale quality is more than metaphoric, since major plot elements are worked out with fairytale devices. The story is generated out of what Vladimir Propp calls interdiction and violation of interdiction in his *Morphology of the Folktale* (26-27). Celie is told by her evil stepfather, after he rapes her, that she must tell none but God what he has done. She chooses to write her story. Transformation from a life of shame to one of self-esteem occurs when Celie receives the physical embrace of the regal Shug Avery. Finally, the plot is resolved and the characters are united through the exposure of villainy and the death of the
primary villain, an event which reverses the dispossession of Celie and her sister Nettie.

Since the fairytale itself is a folk form, there is no obvious contradiction between it and the Afro-American and African materials that enrich the narrative. In fact, such materials enhance the sense of a faerie world where curses, coincidences and transformations are possible. The power of healing and change latent in folk arts and practices important to Black women—quilting, mothering, blues singing and conjure—fit the pattern of the female character in the fairytale who is victimized but then saved through love and magic. One trait that distinguishes *The Color Purple* from Walker's earlier work is her setting up of an opposition between male and female folk wisdom. In Walker's view the former wisdom that passes from father to son, claims, the natural inferiority of women and the need to keep them under control, through violence if necessary. What was implicit in *Grange Copeland* becomes explicit here as part of the oral tradition.

As Walker explains, to have Celie speak in the language of her oppressors would be to deny her the validity of her existence; to suppress her voice would be to murder her and to attack all those ancestors who spoke as she does. Her words, particularly the opening ones describing her rape by her stepfather, might shock the reader but they are the only words that she could have used. They are a part of the self that Celie is
eventually able to accept. Walker writes of Celie, "She has not accepted an alien description of who she is; neither has she accepted completely an alien tongue to tell us about it. Her being is affirmed by the language in which she is revealed, and like everything about her it is characteristic, hard-won and authentic" (LW 64). "We all have to start somewhere if we want to do better and our own self is what we have" (Purple 278).

Walker found that the Black and Indian cultures shared more than a history of suffering during her years of liberation. She was amazed to learn, for example, that the uncle Remus stories she knew as a child were the same tales found in Cherokee folk literature. Just as the stories united her with the tales of the crafty Brer Rabbit, Indian children shared their ancestral heritage.

In speaking of Black’s needs to preserve who they have been in order to understand who they are, Walker pauses to observe that she is probably wrong to attribute this love of memory to any single race or clan. She believes rather that "it is a human trait—and for all I know, even a non-human animal one—and that what the Black, the Native American, and the poor White share in America is common humanity’s love of remembering who we are" (LW 63).

One way to ensure that the memory of ancestors of any race or clan lives on is by preserving their language, their sound. For all those who
have suffered under oppression, however, to preserve the language, is of necessity, to reveal the conflict between the oppressor and the oppressed.

Primary among the experiences that shape Celie's personality is her mistreatment by men. Out of these experiences her disdain for men grow, and later, for the traditional God modelled in their image. Her feelings toward men do not initially prevent her from accepting Albert without question. At Shug's insistence, she describes what her God looks like: a "big and old and tall and grey bearded" White man in long white robes. When Shug laughs, Celie asks "Why you laugh? ... What you expect him to look like, Mr. —?" (Purple, 201). Celie is not able to redefine herself in any but a subservient position until she replaces her fear of men with anger, and in the process redefines God.

Celite is not in a literal sense a slave, but she certainly is sexually abused, whipped, is the mother of children she did not want, lover of children she could not have. In her suffering, as hundreds of slave women before her, she finds the twin self within. The letters that constitute the first half of the novel are a one-way correspondence between the abused and lonely Celie and her own inner self—that part of herself that eventually makes her fight back. In writing to God she is writing to the part of her personality growing progressively stronger until she is able to acknowledge the God within herself and demand the respect due to her.
First, she has to reject her traditional notions of divinity. This she does with the help of Shug Avery.

Thus Walker erases the conventional image of God. Seen in the light of Walker's comment that "I am trying to rid my consciousness and my unconsciousness of the notion of God as a white haired British man with big feet and a beard..." (Qtd. in “Right on Time” CLA Journal, June 1984, 52), Celie’s attitude becomes meaningful. Celie, Shug and Nettie are no longer able to identify God with an old, White man. Shug identifies God with trees, birds and beautiful flowers of nature. Nettie, though a missionary in Africa, finds it impossible to retain the old picture of Christ. In one of the letters to Celie, Nettie explains:

God is different to me now, after all these years in Africa. More spirit than ever before and more informal. Most people think he has to look like something or someone—a roof leaf or Christ—but we don’t. And not being tied to what God looks like, free us. (Purple 264)

It is this new concept of deity that we find in Celie’s address in the final letter: “Dear God, Dear stars, Dear sky, Dear everything – Dear God” (292). Om P. Junega in the essay, “The Purple Colour of Walker Women: Their Journey from Slavery to Liberation” remarks:

... Celie renounces the White God a symbol of American sexism, for African animism. Her identification with trees,
buds, air and other human beings represents the natural
state of living free from all kinds of oppression. (*Literary
Criterion* 25.1 (1990): 75)

Nettie meanwhile, half a world away as a missionary in Africa, has
also discovered a more fluid and internal God. Among an African people
who worship the root leaf plant that makes their way of life possible, she
has learned that the God that she has tried to introduce them to, the one
from the “White folk’s Bible” that Celie found incomparable with the
reality of her life in the rural South, is not necessarily any more
compatible with the reality of life in Africa. Near the end of almost 30
years in Africa, Nettie writes to Celie:

> God is different to us now, after all these years in Africa.
>
> More spirit than ever before and more internal. Most people
> think he has to look like something or someone—a root leaf
> or Christ—but we don’t. And not being tied to what God
> looks like, frees us.
>
> When we return to America we must have long talks
> about this, Celie. 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 a people who also believe. (*Purple* 264)
It is difficult to sustain the epistolary format throughout the work, but Nettie serves as a convenient audience to replace the God that Celie has rejected. The remainder of the novel consists of Nettie's accumulated letters and letters to Nettie that now replace Celie's letters to God. Nettie's letters, in their formal English, seem stiffly deductive after the poetic beauty of Celie's nearly illiterate attempts to verbalize her plight, but they provide a parallel between the oppressive, male-dominated southern society that Celie has now become strong enough to rebel against and an equally oppressive and male-dominated society in Africa.

Important throughout the narrative, the kinship trope for race relationships is articulated more explicitly late in the novel when a mature Celie and a reformed Albert enjoy communal sewing and conversation. Celie herself raises the issue of racial conflict by drawing on the Olinka "Adam" story that has been handed down to her through Nettie's letters. Beginning with the explanation that "... White people is Black people's children" (231), the Olinka narrative provides an analysis of race relations expressed explicitly in terms of kinship. According to the Olinka creation narrative, Adam was not the first man but the first White man born to an Olinka woman to be cast out for his nakedness—or for being "colorless" (231). The result of this rejection was the fallen world of racial conflict, since the outcast children were, in Celie's words "so mad to git throwed out and told they was naked they made up they minds to crush us
wherever they find us, same as they would a shake” (232). Offered specifically as an alternative to the Judeo-Christian account of Adam, this parable also offers readers an alternative account of the original sin—defined not in terms of appropriating knowledge or resisting authority but precisely in terms of breaking kinship bonds: “What they did, these Olinka peoples, was throw out they own children, just ‘cause they was a little different” (232). Significantly, by retelling the Olinka narrative, Celie is able to express naturally some rather sophisticated ideas concerning the social construction of racial inferiority, since the myth defines that inferiority as a construct of power relations that will change over time.

At times Celie herself functions as a conjure woman. When she decides to travel to Memphis with Shug, she delivers a curse on Mr. ___: “Until you do right by me. I say, everything you ever dream about will fail. I give it to him straight, just like it come to me. And it seem to come to me from the trees” (176). Walker here uses Zora Neale Hurston’s notion that the voice speaking is in fact that of a God using a human instrument. “A dust devil flew upon the porch between us, fill my mouth with dirt. The dirt say, Anything you do to me, already done to you” (176). The voice, whatever its source, speaks the truth of Celie’s pent-up anger and sense of injustice. Speaking forth carries with it its own authority; the voice exposes the suffering that has been her life and gives
her an interiority and humanity that others have denied her. Her conjuring, in other words, has creative moral force. Its effect is shown in Mr. ___'s decline, both physical and mental, during her absence; only when he takes steps to right the wrongs he has done her does his strength return. Significantly, his major wrong has been the withholding of correspondence between Celie and Nettie. When he accepts their right to expression, the curse is lifted.

The most important of the folk figures is the female Blues singer Shug Avery. Like her music, she embodies both love and trouble. Shug exists as something other than the reality in which Celie lives, and yet she is connected with that reality through Mr. __. Thus she is not pure fantasy, a being representing escape from the harsh world of the present.

*Shug Avery was a woman. The most beautiful woman I ever saw. She more pretty than my name. She bout ten thousand more prettier than men. I see her there in furs. Her face rouge. Her hair like somethin tail. She grinning with her foot upon somebody motorcar. Her eyes serious tho. Sad some.* (8)

She opens for Celie the realm of the unconscious, giving her another dimension of being. The emergence of this dimension which makes possible her conjuration receives expression in the connection between Shug and Celie's gradual awareness of her own body. The
discovery, not of an abstract, spiritual beauty, but a physical one, inherent
in womanhood brings the psychological change in Celie. She now
becomes someone worthy of the love of Shug, and someone who did not
deserve the treatment she received from her stepfather and Mr. __.

For both Celie and Mr. __, Shug’s beauty is linked to her singing.
She can give voice to the pains they each endure silently. For Celie, she
implies the possibility of creativity in a context other than the endless
cycle of reproduction.

What that song? I ast, sound low down dirty to me. Like
what the preacher tell you its sin to hear. Not to mention
sing.

She hum a little more. Something come to me, she say.
Something I made up. Something you help scratch out my
head. (48)

Though she sings the devil’s music, Celie must balance this sin against her
affection for the singer/sinner. Shug’s history is the classic Blues dilemma
she describes in her songs. She creates the same tensions for Celie whose
very love for Shug makes her vulnerable to despair when her beloved
finds another man; the opening of her life involves pains which she did
not experience before she felt worthy of love. Thus, Shug as a folk figure
opens possibilities rather than constructs completed orders of reality.
The Color Purple telegraphs the traumatic transformation of Celie's family history by emphasizing Nettie's generic departure from standard epistolary form to the fairytale. Nettie writes to her “Once upon a time, there was a well-to-do farmer who owned his property near town. Our town-Celie”. The language of Nettie's fairytale encourages the substitution of family discourse for the language of capital relations. Rather than naming names—her own father's, her mother's, her stepfather's—Nettie emphasizes abstract kinship terms like "the man and his two brothers", "his wife", "the widow", "The stranger" to describe their position in the tale. Because the importance of the story to Celie lies in its transmission within the context of family relations, the tale brackets class issues as if the capitalist economy is generated by the operations of family ideology.

Shug's creativity leads to a resolution of the text's conflicts that is more appropriate to the fairytale than to Afro-American folklore. At her suggestion Celie begins making pants, especially purple ones, for herself and for others. At first, this traditional art works in a folk manner. But when it is revealed that Albert has always enjoyed sewing, any lingering hostility between them vanishes, and they sit on the porch stitching folky pants and shirts.

In The Color Purple, Walker finds magic in combining folk and female material, transforming the power of the root-doctor's conjure.
Walker allows her Black characters to take folk and female magic into their lives and to grow just by listening to each other. She moves folk heritage further forward, into a context in which loving women become the most successful conjure of all. And she does so by simultaneously moving backwards, taking for her narrator, a woman whose incorrect spelling and broken syntax place her firmly within the nineteenth century tradition of Black women. The tradition of Black women's fiction finds its flowering and simultaneously begins again in the original development of Celie's self-consciousness. Shug Avery is no conjure woman but she teaches Celie a new meaning for the term.

*Temple of My Familiar* (1989) is a novel that attempts to provide a spiritual history of the universe. It also demands a belief in transmigration of the soul. Walker herself has called it a romance of the lost 50,000 years. Walker brings back from *The Color Purple* some characters whom she simply could not bear to abandon, most notably Miss Celie and Miss Shug. In *The Color Purple*, Walker had depicted her female characters capable of breaking the bonds of oppression and defining themselves as whole persons. She also discovered divinity in all human and non-human elements of the universe. The ancient matriarchal religions discovered by Walker's contemporary characters in the novel allow them to redefine relationships between sexes. The lessons they learn about the need for balance between the flesh and the spirit help them to redefine themselves.
As Walker's own description of the novel indicates, *Temple of My Familiar* is essentially a story of the lives and loves of three couples: the popular musician Arveyda, with his exotic blend of African/Scots/Blackfoot/Filipino/Chinese blood, and his south American wife, Carlotta; Suwelo, Carlotta's lover and a history professor and his wife, Fanny, Miss Celie's granddaughter and an academic who leaves teaching literature to become a masseuse; and the elderly Black couple, Miss Lissie and Mr. Hal, friends of Suwelo's uncle Rafe, whose death draws Suwelo into their lives. By means of her conversations and correspondence with Suwelo, Miss Lissie serves as Walker's most direct link to romance and of other complexities of life as they have existed over the last half million years.

Miss Lissie's memory of past lives provides a convenient if artificial means of encapsulating in a single character, centuries of the history of Black womanhood. Here is a soul that in one incarnation survived the horrors of the slave ship only to die on a Virginia plantation after losing a leg to a bear trap while trying to escape. In another she was a moress burned at the stake as a witch during the Spanish Inquisition. In still another she was fortunate enough to marry a man of her own choosing, but because she was born without a hymen and there were no bloodstained sheets to show the villagers after the marriage was consummated,
she was denounced publicly, forced into prostitution, and died of infection and exposure at the age of eighteen.

Looking back over her collective past, Miss Lissie realizes that she can recall a few times when she was at peace. One such time was when she was a pygmy in Africa’s past. As a pygmy, she viewed the apes in the jungle as her “cousins”. In fact, in her account, the peace-loving and gentle apes are superior to their rather loud and contentious human counterparts. While men and women were segregated in the human community, family unity was an important element of Simian life. Miss Lissie recalls breaking with her tribe and taking up permanent residence among the apes because she and her mate chose to live together, and as a couple, raise their children, a sort of co-habitation unheard of among humans during that era, but one that gradually came into vogue for a time, as Miss Lissie explains to Suwelo.

Walker’s history of the world as traced through the novel’s African and South American characters records this pattern of freedom, an alternating between times when men and women could and did live together more or less in harmony and times when harmony was best maintained by living apart. Man’s need to dominate women recurs periodically, however, and each time the two sexes enter a period of uneasy cohabitation.
In her story of the middle passage, Miss Lissie recalls a time before Islam when the mother was an object of worship. In fact, among the slaves in the ship's hold were those who had been sold into slavery because of their belief in the ancient religion of mother worship. Whole families who worshipped the Goddess of Africa "were routinely killed, sold into slavery, or converted to Islam at the point of the sword" (Temple 195). Lissie tells Suwelo of the subsequent death, during the hundreds of years of the slave trade in Africa, of mother worship:

There were, in the earliest days, raids on the women's temples, which existed in sacred groves of trees, with the women and children dragged out by the hair and forced to marry into male-dominated tribes. The ones who were not forced to do this were either executed or sold into a tribe whose language was different. The men had decided that they would be creator, and they went about dethroning women systematically. (Temple 63-64)

According to Miss Lissie, following the persecution of mother-worshippers in Africa, the Moors in Spain mistakenly believed that Spanish Christian would let the Goddess of Africa pass into modern world as the Black Madonna.

After all, this was how the gods and the goddesses moved from era to era before . . . some of (our African fathers)
pushed on into France and Germany, Poland, England, Ireland, Russia . . . If I am not mistaken it is only in Poland that our Black Lady, the Great Mother of All Mother Africa, if you will—is still openly worshipped. Perhaps that is why it is said to be Poles that they are none too bright. (Temple 195-196)

“Dream Memories” are those lives of Miss Lissie lived in the distant past. Near the time of her death she confides to Suwelo that in one of these dream memories she was not a woman, but a lion, a woman’s familiar. Thus she witnessed first hand how man’s jealousy and his need for dominion changed once again the pattern of freedom. The animals that had shared the warmth of a nightly fire with the women and their children were driven from that circle of warmth and all were the poorer for the loss. Miss Lissie mourns the loss of the friendship, that she, as a lion had with women, pitying the poor women left alone with no fellow creatures but men. Still, she admits that she was relieved to escape the “eternity of strife” that men and women, merged, had inaugurated: “In consorting with man, as he had become, woman was bound to lose her dignity, her integrity. It was a tragedy. But it was a fate lions were not prepared to share” (Temple 366).

Mythic stories are also incorporated later into the novel when, Zede tells Arveyda of a time in the history of her South-American Country
where women were priestesses of a *Mușe Mary Grande*, a goddess who produced the earth. The birth process was a mystery to men, even though it sometimes produced little beings more like them than like the women. Ironically, it was the men who made women into priestesses because what the mind doesn’t understand, it worships or fears. Only a creature proven capable of giving birth, to their way of thinking, could have given birth to the earth. “And so, if the producer of the earth was a large woman, a goddess, then women must be her priests, and must possess great and supernatural powers” (*Temple* 49).

Over time, the men forgot that they were the ones who had elevated women to the status of goddesses and priests. Spying on the women, they learned the secret of birth and started mutilating their own bodies in an attempt to redesign them in the image of the woman’s body. Thousands died in an effort to carve into their bodies the passage through which new life emerged. Where the men once hunted in order to bring women the means of ornamenting themselves, women such as Zede the Elder now use their creative talents to adorn the male priests. The only *truly bright moments of village life* came when the priests paraded in their feathered, beaded and shell-bedecked costumes.

Ancient traditions and ways of life are tenacious and cannot be destroyed overnight by changing economic situations. Thus Zede the Elder creates the priests’ capes and head dresses out of feathers. Doing
holy work, she draws apart into a separate mud hut for days at a time, lapsing out her creative state periodically to return to the main house to become a wife and mother for a time. Zede the younger works for days in a sweet shop but at night practises the art passed down to her by her mother. Carlotta first catches a glimpse of one of her mother’s magnificent feathered head dresses when the gays parade on Halloween in a scene reminiscent of the parade of effeminate South-American priests. Carlotta meets Arveyda during her last years in college when she delivers a cape of peacock feathers her mother has created for him (gays and rock stars, not priests, are her primary clientele). She has a matching Arveyda cape made for Carlotta, and in their finery they too parade on Halloween though the streets of San Francisco:

After Arveyda drops Carlotta for her mother, Carlotta puts on another type of costume. Later she admits that for a time she was a “female impersonator” putting on the outward garb that would make her attractive to men. She tells Arveyda, “I wore the kind of shoes you’d asked me to wear, though they hurt and you’d left me for my mother, who always wore flats . . . It didn’t make any sense, wearing the shoes. They were killers. But even if they destroyed my feet and crippled my legs, I knew I wasn’t giving them up. I liked the way men looked at me in high heels. The look in their
eyes made me forget how lonely I was. How discarded.”

Fenny tells her that she wore the heels as an act of penance, that “women wear things that hurt them to atone for the sin of loving someone they’d rather not”. (Temple 294)

These “Salvage” crafts which include quilting, weaving rag raps, making head dresses out of feathers provide considerable personal satisfaction from supplying the needs of their families by their own hands, guided by their inherited knowledge of necessary techniques and patterns.

The novel Temple of My Familiar thus becomes a myth that is stretched to accommodate history. It is a journey from cradle to bed. History and myth have been great sources of creativity and myth has become a powerful instrument of preservation of both history and culture. In historical religions such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam, the cyclical concept of time may not be present. But in religions and philosophical systems like Hinduism and Buddhism, the cyclical concept of time plays a major role and the idea of rebirth and renewal are important. There are myths related to souls, external souls and guardian angels too.

The scene that gives the novel its title is Walker’s warning against betrayal of one’s own, wild, untamed spirit. In the scene, Miss Lissie tells Suwelo of a dream in which she shows him her temple. Rushing about
underfoot is her familiar—part bird, part fish, part reptile. So distracting is its slithering and skidding about that she entraps it under a clear glass bowl, which it breaks through to escape. When the glass bowl fails to contain the creature, she tries a heavier white one and then finally, as a last resort, a metal wash tub. With the power of a volcano, the familiar breaks through the tub and out into the open air “It looked at me with pity as it passed. Then, using wings it had never used before, it flew away” (Temple 120). Miss Lissie realizes that out of pride and distraction she has betrayed the beautiful little familiar that had always been so loyal to her. She has betrayed her own spirit by trying to deny it the freedom of the cosmos.

As asked by Oprah Winfrey in 1989 where the novel came from, Walker responded that it came:

From me wanting to know my name, you know. I wanted to know the very first woman, our common mother from all those years ago, and I just . . . thought and dreamed my way back to her. There is no heaven. This is it. We’re already in heaven, you know, and so in order . . . for the earth to survive, we have to acknowledge each other as part of the family, the same family, and also reaffirm those things in ourselves and in other people that we’ve been brought up to fear or to hate. (191)
Walker acknowledges and prays to a Great Spirit that sounds suspiciously like God without the male trappings formerly incompatible with her womanist sensibilities. In the last essay in Living By the Word, “The Universe Responds”, written in 1987, she defines prayer as “the active affirmation in the physical world of our inseparableness from the divine” (LW 192), and she ends with this adaptation of the Gospels.

Knock and the door shall be opened. Ask and you shall receive

Whatsoever you do unto the least of these, you also unto me—and to yourself. For we are one.

“God” answers prayers. Which is another way of saying, “The Universe responds”.

We are indeed the world. Only if we have reason to fear what is in our own hearts need we fear for the planet. Teach yourself peace:

Pass it on. (LW 193)

Thus in her latest novel Possessing the Secret of Joy Walker weaves multiple polemic issues into a mythopoeic framework. A primitive ritual is rendered in a post-modern dialect. Keeping a tribal rite in the foreground, Walker’s narrative makes constant shifting to the past and present, linking together multiple forms of oppression resulting from Sexism, Racism and Patriarchal, Religious, Colonial and Cultural
Imperialism. Thus the narrative transcends the limits of the tribal world of the Olinkans and merges with the universe at large with the plurality of concerns woven into it. The novel is a fine expression of the womanist consciousness which manifests itself in Walker’s concern for the entire planet, its flora and fauna, its lakes and mountains. There is an unusual blending of the old and the new, the primitive and the modern, the savage and the civilized, tradition and science.

The personal experience of Tashi, who makes peripheral appearance in The Color Purple and The Temple of My Familiar acquires universal and ecological dimensions in Possessing the Secret of Joy. Woman’s reproductive capacity and biological processes make her a close ally of nature and she identifies herself with exploited and obliterated nature. This kind of identification urges woman to take on herself the moral responsibility of redeeming this universe from total annihilation. So, women come together, transcending the limits of race, culture and colour to fight for a common cause. Just as they bond together to protest against wronged womanhood, they form an alliance with nature to resist the cruelty inflicted on them by men.

Alice Walker uses the word “womanism” instead of “feminism”. For her, a womanist is:

A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or non sexually . . . committed to survival and wholeness of entire
people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically for health. Traditionally universalist . . . (Gardens XI)

Her search for the old planet with its green trees and running streams and wholesome natural woman is further recaptured in the novel. She believes that a womanist accepts the struggle for survival as a part of her life. Tashi takes upon this struggle when she rides into the M'bele camp as a warrior. The spirit of resistance is very strong and Walker makes this very clear in her description of Tashi riding to the camp: “I sat astride the donkey in the pose of a chief, a warrior” (PSJ, 22). She emerges as an Amazon fighting against White colonizers, patriarchal oppression and environmental mutilation. Tashi undergoes the strange ritual of female genital mutilation as a protest against the White imperialism and an expression of empathy towards the colonised and exploited land. She feels that the best way to fight against the Whites is to bear the unnatural warrior marks of tradition. In this unnatural fight, a group of people join her with their tales of pain and suffering. Tashi soon realizes that the forces against her are too menacing to be overthrown.

Tashi sacrifices herself in the manner of a scapegoat. The pain she suffers opens her eyes to reality and she realises how women have been victimized by patriarchy over the ages. This victimization is forced upon in the form of oppressive rites. The primitive rites which originated from superstition or fear turned out to be oppressive in due course of time. If
ancient patriarchy asserted itself in the form of rites and ritual, western capitalist patriarchy in the present era takes control of woman's womb and reproductive capacity by means of forced Caesarians, IVF, surrogacy and the very recent invention of cloning. The meaning is not directly arrived at; the signs defer meaning to such an extent that the signified is to be located somewhere in the paraxial region where an image is likely to be obtained. The heroine, who like the writer is fond of story-telling, transfers herself and her readers into a world of fantasy every now and then. These pieces of fantasy become more realistic than reality itself on a multi-contextual and inter-textual analysis.

*Possessing the Secret of Joy* is Walker's outcry against the male gender-biased theories and practices by which she makes an attempt to promote and practise her womanist consciousness. The excruciating ritual of clitoridectomy, which forms the main text of the novel, took its origin as a primitive rite to accommodate man's fear about the female body and its functions. Later it was used by patriarchy as a weapon to keep woman subordinate in the social ladder. These primitive rites were all primarily intended to protect the land, increase the fertility of the soil and expel sins and evil from the society. For the primitive tribes, culture meant "a body of ready-made solutions to the problems encountered by the group. It is a cushion between man and his environment" (Tina Corrine Brown, *Understanding Other Cultures* 3). In the early stages of
history, culture reflected a holistic view of society. As Rose Mary Ruether observes: “The individual and the community, nature and society, male and female, each Goddess and sky God were seen in a total perspective of world renewal” (Woman Spirit Rising 46-47).

As a result of invasions and conquests, the word “culture” has gradually lost its meaning. The fertility cults in ancient society were remodelled after patriarchy when great philosophers of the past attributed creativity to the male principle. For them, as Simone de Beauvoir puts it: “The origin of the grain and its verity lies in Zeus; women’s fecundity is regarded as only a passive quality. She is the Earth and man the seed” (The Second Sex 176). The phallus with its life-creating power displaced and degraded the female function of reproduction. Though man recognised the necessity of the sod which received the seeds in its furrow, protected and promoted its growth, it was not as important as production. This relationship of dominance and subordinance defined as “herschaft” by Max Weber (qtd. in Kate Millett’s Sexual Politics 25) is responsible for the interior colonization of woman’s body by man. Man achieves this by imposing stringent restrictions upon woman’s freedom and sexuality.

Restraints upon woman’s body and will become extremely stringent when the girl reaches puberty. The reason for such confinement can be traced back to the primitive man’s dread of menstrual blood and
misconceptions about woman's bodily functions. It was believed that woman possessed a dangerous, mystical power at this time. The Bushmen of Africa feared that a look of woman at such a time would turn man into a tree or as still as a rock. Among the cattle-rearing tribes it was believed that a drop of menstruous blood would kill the cattle (The Golden Bough 791). Carl Jung interprets this initiation - ritual as a retreat "into the deepest level of original mother-child identity or ego-self identity; thus forcing him to experience a "symbolic death" (Man and His Symbols 123). In his opinion, the ritual "invariably insists upon this rite of death and rebirth, which provides the novice with a rite of passage" (123). To give the impression of this death and rebirth, the woman is forced to stay in a dark and narrow cave where the sun's rays do not reach.

It is a replica of this cave that we get in Walker's description of the M'bele camp where Tashi undergoes genital mutilation: "Tashi was in a rough bower made of branches lying on a mat made from the grass that grew around the camp. And as she lay there, her head and shoulders propped against a boulder . . . (PSI 43). These orally transmitted myths and rites have lost their meaning and form as time passed by. The puberty rites which originally sprang from ignorance and superstition became the means by which men controlled female sexuality.

Several authors have argued that initiation and several other rites represent the symbolic assertion of male cultural superiority and
domination over the natural female power of reproduction. This rebirth, in the hands of man, accordingly asserts that the natural child created by the woman is made social and cultural by the symbolic and spiritual powers enjoyed by man. These rites also assert male control over key aspects of female reproductivity and behaviour. They emphasize the control exercised by men over a woman's reproductive activity and the transfer of her rights and control over her from her lineage to her husband's lineage. It is the rites and not the physiological fact of menstruation or childbirth that make a real "woman".

Tashi's fight, is, in a sense, a resistance against cultural imperialism and religious imperialism. The Olinkans watch the Black missionaries with suspicion. Tashi is infuriated by the missionaries' attempts to change the ways of the natives. So she shouts to Olivia: "Who are you and your people never to accept us as we are? It is always us who have to change" (PSI 23).

In The Color Purple also, from Nettie's letter, we come to learn how the missionaries try to change the native customs and practices. The earlier missionaries had forced the Olinkans to stop worshipping the roof leaf tree as their God. Tashi develops an unconscious fear that the new missionaries—though they are Blacks—will try to change them. It is often seen that religious ceremonies and practices have influenced culture; as
John Couper Powys has observed: “Under certain conditions, culture actually becomes a substitute for religion” (The Meaning of Culture 57).

Though Olivia is her dearest friend, Tashi finds pleasure in disobeying her just because she is an outsider. Olivia’s effort to reason with her is interpreted only as an attempt to assert her religion. She expresses her contempt by abusing Olivia and her family as the “Whiteman’s Wedge”. Her words are charged with energy as she bursts out: “We look at you and your people with pity, I said: You barely have your own black skin, and it’s fading . . . you don’t even know what you have lost! And the nerve of you, to bring us a God someone else chose for you!” (PSJ 23).

It is clear that the image of God they have formed in their mind is that of Judeo Christian male God of patriarchy—a God who has deserted woman. The God portrayed by Walker is blind to the suffering of women and children. When Tashi reflects on the passages read out by Pierre from Marcel Griaule’s book, she feels that “even so long ago God deserted woman, . . . staying by her just long enough to illustrate to man the cutting to be done” (177). Later the same idea is echoed in M’Lissa’s words. “. . . there is no God known to man who cares about children or about women” (223). In the voices of the village elders also, we get the impression of a patriarchal God. Tashi thinks of Jesus as a foreigner.
Thus Walker erases the conventional image of God. When Tashi kills M’Lissa, it symbolises the death of the patriarchal image of God and the aggressive forces against women. When Tashi is questioned in the court room, the spite against such a White God finds expression in a fragment of fantasy: “Once upon a time there was a man with a very long and tough beard . . .” (PSJ 35). The entire court room bursts into laughter at this, but seen in the light of Walker’s comment that “I am trying to rid my consciousness of the notion of God as a white haired British man with big feet and a beard . . .” (qtd. in “Right on Time” CLA Journal, June 1984, 52), Tashi’s words become meaningful. In The Color Purple, Celie, Shug and Nettie change their concept of God. They are no longer able to identify God with trees, buds and the beautiful flowers of nature. Nettie, though a missionary in Africa, finds it impossible to retain the old picture of Christ. In one of the letters to Celie, Nettie explains:

God is different to us now, after all these years in Africa. More spirit than ever before and more informal. Most people think he has to look like something or someone—a roof leaf or Christ—but we don’t. and not being tied to what God looks like, frees us (Purple 264).

It is this new concept of deity that we find in Celie’s address in the final letter: “Dear God, Dear Stars, Dear Sky, Dear Everything - Dear
God" (292). Om P. Junega in his essay, “The Purple Colour of Walker Women: Their Journey from Slavery to Liberation” remarks:

Celie renounces the White God a symbol of American sexism, for African animism. Her identification with trees, buds, air and other human beings represents the natural state of living free from all kinds of oppression. (*Literary Criterion* 25.1(1990): 75)

Walker admits that she is not able to understand the conventional prayer, but she believes that prayer is “the active affirmation in the physical world of our inseparableness from the divine, and everything, especially the physical world, is divine” (*LW* 192). In the concluding part of *Living by the Word*, Walker makes a very meaningful observation: “God” answers prayers. Which is another way of saying, “the universe responds”. We are indeed the world. Only if we have reason to fear what is in our own hearts need we fear for the planet. Teach yourself peace. Pass it on” (*LW* 193).

Science and technology perform sophisticated rites on the land and woman. In *The Color Purple*, Walker describes how the rubber planters disrupt the harmony of nature by cutting down the trees and digging the yam fields to build a tarmac road. It is in the manner of a ritual that the land is being changed. The natives are made to believe that the new road is meant for their good and convenience. They wake up from this trauma
only when they realize that the village itself is gutted. The road builders have orders to shoot those who stand against them. In the place of drum beatings associated with ritual ceremonies, modern ritual of “development” is accompanied by the deafening noise of the machines. As far as women are concerned, the medicalisation of reproduction takes the place of oppressive rites. The tsunga’s place is occupied by professional experts who “circumcise” modern women using more advanced surgical instruments. The doctor’s clinic turns out to be another M’bele camp where woman’s body is reduced to mere matter. Thus one is always in fear of “the man with the knife”. The devaluation of woman is conceptually related to the devaluation of the natural environment and its members. This becomes clear when one thinks of the woman-nature relationship emphasized by Eco-feminists.

In the course of telling Tashi’s story, Walker transports us into a primitive world of ritual dreams, fantasy and folklore, which according to Jung are “symbols that arise from the unconscious to express the deepest feelings and attitudes” (Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious 5). She employs these archetypes to tell the tale of suffering, especially because Tashi’s tradition considers it a taboo to speak about woman’s suffering. Walker’s emphasis on sign language is observed in the statement: “... in America, people make signs and buttons for everything they want to say...”
(PSJ 109) reinforces the significance of signs in the novel. Moreover Carl Jung appears as a character-narrator in the text.

Walker’s treatment of the signs is rather unique. The signs defer meaning to such an extent that an individual sign, especially a fragment of fantasy or folklore, seems to travel on a marginal axis (where no image is possible) thus resulting in “zero-signification”. In order to avoid distortion of meaning, the signs must be taken out of their immediate contexts and placed in another. The signs are all interconnected, being projections of the writer’s collective unconscious. The archetypal narrators adjust and readjust the position of these signs to form a spectrum of meanings. In other words, an intra-textual or multi-contextual analysis of the signs results in a seeming collision between the sign and the signified in the paraxial region. At times the region may extend to another work by Walker, thus demanding an inter-textual analysis as well. It is in this spectral region of the “fantastic” that the reader comes across the woman-nature relationship which again lends itself to multiple readings. Thus the narrative technique itself postulates Walker’s ideal of survival as a whole.

The central theme of the novel, the ritual of female genital mutilation, is the symbolic expression of man’s control over the female body and sexuality. Gayatri Spivak has explained clitoridectomy as “a metonymy of woman’s social and legal status” (The PostColonial Critic 10).
Tashi undergoes the painful ceremony as an acting out of empathy towards the colonized and mutilated land of the Olinkans. By making effacement of clitoris an expression of protest against White colonization, Walker makes it a visible expression of all sorts of oppression imposed upon by capitalist patriarchal system. As Gloria Steinem observes:

Female genital mutilation is a demonstration of patriarchy at its worst, a metaphor for the "psychic mutilation" that women suffer everywhere at the hands of their male "oppressors". Just as African patriarchs have fashioned a brutal practice that would ensure the virginity of their brides, the spirit-killing regimes of male dominance in the west rob women of their "reproductive rights" by seeking to outlaw abortion by insisting on unnecessary mastectomies and caesarean births, by demanding a kind of subservience that kills the rebellious high spiritedness of little girls and so on. (qtd. in "The Cutting Edge", National Review, August 3, 1992, 49)

Tashi undergoes the initiation ceremony as a conscious attempt to protest against White colonization. Thus the personal becomes the social and the ecological. On paraxial level it can be seen that Tashi yields her body to such a mad practice as an attempt at retribution for violating a tribal rule. The Olinkans believed that "love-making in the open fields
jeopardized the crops” and “if there was any fornication whatsoever in the fields the crops would not grow” (PSI 27). Adam and Tashi have often violated this in their adolescence. When the land and the crops are destroyed by the rubber planters, Tashi develops an unconscious fear that her own guilt is responsible for this destruction. In the true manner of a primitive ritual, Tashi allows the “tsunga” to treat her as a scapegoat. She sacrifices her “self” for the sake of the land.

Walker believes in the unifying spirit of nature that runs through the whole cosmos. This unity of wholeness is at stake as a result of the White man’s aggressive conquest of nature. Walker expresses her concern for the planet in the preface to her collection of essays Living By the Word:

I set out on a journey to find my old planet: to gaze at its moon, to swim in its waters, to eat its fruits, to rediscover and admire its fog. To my inexpressible joy, I found it still there, though battered as an unwanted dog. . . . I saw however that it cannot tolerate much longer the old ways of humans that batter it so unmercifully. (xx)

At the very outset, on the wings of fantasy, Walker transports her readers into the world of a beautiful, young panther, Lara. The triangular relationship among Lara, Baba and Lala foregrounds the relationship of Adam and Tashi and Lisette. The forsaken and devastated Lara is a precast of Tashi herself. The pain and loneliness experienced by Lara suggests
the sense of neglect felt by Tashi in Adam's absence. Tashi never shares her anguish with anyone or makes an open accusation of Adam. Though the unconscious mind does not find fault with Adam, the conscious mind suffers. Thus the story of Lara, in the true nature of a fantasy "traces that which cannot be said, that which evades articulation. . . ." (Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion 37). It is the same inexpressible pain that stimulates her to collect boulders which she pelts at Pierre on his first visit to Adam. The latter part of Lara's story reveals the healing power of nature. Lara retains her youthful vitality and vigour when she turns to the kissing sun and the love making moon. Water, the elixir of life, brings desirable change in her. Water, too, makes Tashi feel better as she stands absorbed in the water of the Lake Zurich where M'zee takes her for boating. This reinforces the need for water which flows out of the land as a result of the destruction of the rain forests and the introduction of large-scale irrigation projects.

The sun, the air and the water replenish the earth and maintain the health of the planet. Walker emphasizes the need to maintain this power of the universe. By means of a folktale, Walker gives expression to the multiple obsessions lurking in the unconscious: sexism, environmental pollution, and the redemptive power of nature which helps one to possess the secret of joy.
Even as a child, Tashi had the “tendency to escape from reality into the realm of fantasy and story-telling” (PSJ 132). In Jung’s theory “a sequence of fantasies produced by deliberate concentration is active imagination” (The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious 49). Tashi would lose the pennies given by her mother to buy match-boxes. When questioned by her mother, she invents the story of a “giant bird” which “noticing the shimmer of the coin in the glass of water . . . had swooped down from the sky” (PSJ 6) and snatched away the penny. The giant bird swooping down brings the image of the giant aeroplanes in which the White men come, attracted by the gold (mineral resources). The penny that is snatched away clearly indicates the money that she pays in taxes which is used for making “weapons and the policy that maims, kills, frightens and horribly abuses babies, children, women, men and the old” (Essence, July 1988, 130). Seen in the light of her notes from the journal, the giant bird strikes the image of highly destructive phosphorous rockets.

In order to help Tashi open her heart, M’zee sets her to drawing. The first thing that takes shape is her mother’s meeting with a leopard which relates the “official story” (PSJ 20) of her birth. Tashi’s mother was frightened by the leopard and did not carry her to term. Tashi is enchanted by the beauty of the leopard and seeks a justification for the leopard’s behaviour. Her mind goes off into the world of the leopard and sees the story from its point of view. She draws her mother as the four-
legged leopard and the leopard as the two-legged. Such a significant
transposition takes the reader to deeper levels of meaning. The two-
legged animal clearly suggests the oppressing White man who intrudes
upon the world of the four-legged.

M'zee provides a stimulus to Tashi by showing her a film about
initiation ceremony. There is a large fighting cock crowing mightily. At
the sight of this, Tashi faints. She is terrorized not by the cock in the
picture, but by the memory of the picture of a fighting cock. This cock has
been haunting her since Dura’s death. The cock is clearly associated with
the initiation ceremony. In Warrior Monks, it is mentioned how a chicken
is beheaded just before the ceremony. But in Possessing the Secret of Joy,
Walker modifies it a little and presents the cock as waiting for the excised
clitoris to gobble it up. It is this twist that lends larger dimensions to the
image of the fighting cock. The cliché, “man is God’s cock” suggests it as a
phallic symbol and symbolizes man’s lust and greed. It becomes a more
meaningful sign when Tashi draws large and fearsome fighting cocks and
a foot holding the excised clitoris between its toes.

. . . there was something, some small thing the foot was
holding between its toes. It was for this small thing (the
excised clitoris) that the giant cock waited, crowing
impatiently, extending its neck, ruffling its feathers and
strutting about. (PSJ 73-74)
The painting of "The Beast" provides a clear insight into the deeper layers of Tashi’s mind. Adam describes it as “a homogenous feathered creature for it was too menacing and evil to be given the simple appellation of chicken or cock” (PSJ 78). It embodies the evil that she has encountered. Walker uses it as an archetypal image by lending suggestive connotations. For her, "The cock was undesirably overweening, egotistical, puffed up and it was his diet of submission that had made him so" (PSJ 80).

Lynda Buke gives a cluster of associations for the word “beast”. For her, “the beast is a powerful cultural icon” (Feminism, Animals and Science 17). Speaking on the rhetorical power of “Beasts” in the language, Buke explains:

They symbolize our denial of aspects of ourselves that we don’t like, . . . The icon that springs to mind when I think of “beast” is of an aggressive, ferocious creature, maddened by some untamed threat. . . . They also symbolize western cultural hegemony over the rest of the world, its nature and its peoples. they symbolize the separation that this implies between us and other species (mere beasts); they symbolize the way that we come to dominate nature (Feminism, Animals, Science 18).
Thus the image of the beast implies the aggression and violence involved in colonization and reinforces the signification of clitoridectomy in an environmental context.

The Tower is a major dream symbol used in the novel. This archetypal image intrigues the reader as it does Tashi and others related to her. The Tower is first mentioned in the novel in Adam’s description of Tashi’s dream on a personal, conscious level, the Tower symbolizes the dark criss-cross of the Mbele camp or the dark enclosure usually associated with “rites-de-passage”. One concretised form of the Tower in her dream is the location of the initiation camp:

Tashi was in a rough bower made of branches, lying on a mat made from the grass that grew around the camp. And as she lay there, her head and shoulders propped against a boulder that resembled a small animal . . . . (PSJ 43)

A better understanding of the tower symbol is made possible with its association with the termite hill. The termite hill as presented in the folklore of the Dogon people projects the woman - earth relationship. Pierre reads out from Marcel Griaule’s *Conversation with Ogotemmali*:

The earth lies flat, but the north is at the top. . . . This body, lying flat, face upwards, in a line from North to South, is feminine. Its sexual organ is an anthill, and its clitoris a termite hill. . . . At God’s approach the termite hill rose up,
barring the passage and displaying its masculinity... But God is all-powerful. He cut down the termite hill, and had intercourse with the excised earth. (PSF 173-174)

The Termite hill therefore functions as a powerful metonym, a meaningful body sign with its structural similarity with the female genitals. That is why in Warrior Marks, the figure of a termite hill is given the title: “The Clitoris: i.e, a termite hill”.

The meaning is further deferred when Pierre explains the symbolic meaning of the termite hill. The Africans who have learned a lot from the termites, fashion their life accordingly, especially in enforcing male superiority. Even their religious symbology becomes a reflection of the termite behaviour. The Queen is powerless and Pierre compares Iashi to “the Queen who loses her wings” (PSF 232). All of a sudden, meaning flashes upon Pierre: that the tower ultimately means the patriarchal code of female sexuality. The termite hill is a mask for the truth that a woman is “expected to reproduce as helplessly and inertly as a white ant” (273). But the cruelty of telling this forces men to resort to some sign or euphemism. Pierre clarifies this: “... in a culture in which it is mandatory that every single female be systematically desexed, there would have to be some coded, mythological reason given for it, used secretly among the village elders” (PSF 233).
This code helps the village elders to enforce circumcision, the
telling of which is a taboo. Thus the termite hill or the tower indicates the
patriarchal insistence on the reproductive function of sexuality.

The chain of the signified extends further with Tashi's retelling of
Dura's death scene (236) and the haunting voices of the village elders.

Number three: If left to herself the Queen would fly . . .

Number one: He clips her wings.

Number two: She is inert.

Number one: And did he not put the Queen's body there
to make our offspring?

Number four: And when she rose up [. . .]

Number one: She did not see God's axe.

Number four: God is wise. That is why he created the
"tsunga."

Number one: Let us eat this food, and drink to the
Queen, who is beautiful, and whose body
has been given to us to be our sustenance
for ever. (PS) 237-238

Tashi knew that the village elders in the manner of a Greek chorus
were discussing and determining Dura's life. Tashi was too young to
understand, but "there in her unconscious had remained the termite hill,
and herself trapped deep inside it, heavy, wingless and inert, the Queen
of the dark tower" (PSJ 239). This reveals another signified inherent in a fragment of fantasy.

The cutting of the termite hill signifies ecological peril with Pierre's explanation that the human beings in Africa built houses resembling the termite to escape the heat and humidity. This it can be easily associated with "Oikos", the Greek word meaning "house" from which the word "ecology" is derived. Walker suggests the loss of habitation that is regarded as a female space.

Another recurring sign is that of the "fertility dolls". The doll with its hands on the genitals and happy contented face is the visible manifestation of Walker's ideal woman — self-possessed and complete. The freedom that women enjoyed in the ancient past is symbolised through these dolls. Walker thus celebrates the beauty of the female body in its wholeness. M'Lissa's mother used to pray to these dolls because a complete woman had the status of a goddess. Tashi, too, is given such a doll by Olivia and she adorns it attributing the sanctity of a religious icon or creator Goddess. But these "fertility dolls" were distorted with the changing needs of patriarchy. The Potters explain:

When women were subjugated, these images were sent literally underground, . . . many of the figures were destroyed. Especially those that show both a woman's vagina and her contented face. . . . Now of course every little
girl is given a doll to drag around. A little figure of a woman as a toy, with the most vacuous face imaginable, and no vagina at all. (PS/202)

Multiple concerns in the novel are woven into a thematic unity in one single sign—the flag. White colonization, environmental mutilation, the earth with its rich resources, the struggle for survival and the hope of the people are all brought together by the colours of the flag:

Red for the blood of the people spilled in resistance to the White supremacist regime. Yellow for the gold and minerals in which our land is still rich, even though the Whites have carted mountains of it away. Blue riches and the wonders of the deep. Blue also for the sky, symbol of our people’s faith in the forces of the unseen and their optimism of the future.

(PS/110)

The last sign, the banner with the words “Resistance is the Secret of Joy” (PS/281) is Walker’s message to the world. We must resist the oppressive forces of this universe. Self-development is the right of every human being. The banner is shown by a multicultural, multiracial and multisexual group so that Tashi can die peacefully. It visualizes Walker’s hope that people as a whole will survive for the liberation of the planet. Tashi now emerges to the level of a female goddess who is killed for the salvation of the whole universe.
Sometimes, Walker uses animal language to express basic human instincts and passions. When Tashi holds Benny close to her body, the picture that comes to her mind is that of an animal licking its cub. Here the shift to the animal world is quite veiled.

... and for the last three days in the hospital I held Benny close, gently and surreptitiously stroking his head into more normal contours (work I instinctively felt should be done with my tongue); ... (PSI 61)

Her love for animals enables her to read the message in their eyes. In *Living By the Word*, she acknowledges the fact that in her study of how to exist for the good of all, she “was taught . . . by the trees, the flowers, and most especially, the animals” (*Preface* XX). She is able to read or rather feel the pain in the horse Blue’s eyes (*LW* 5) and the dying chimpanzee’s cry (*PSI* 264). Blue feels sad and miserable when his mate is taken away. Walker feels guilty because the pain of parting is caused by a thoughtless human master. The way she relates her feelings expresses her concern:

I dreaded looking into his eyes. . . . If I had been born into slavery, and my partner had been sold or killed, my eyes would have looked like that. . . . I almost laughed (I felt too sad to cry) to think there are people who do not know that animals suffer. (*LW* 5)
Because she considers “everything” as a “human being” she is able to decode the message. In Possessing the Secret of Joy she translates the message conveyed by the bees. The deadening silence that falls after the quarrel between Adam and Lisette is broken by the bees:

The silence that fell between us was rendered somehow ridiculous by the energetic droning of her neighbour’s bees. It was a sound that said so clearly: Life goes on. The pain of it so sure. The sweetness of it so mysterious. It is irrelevant to us that you fight. You might both turn to stone there, and it would only mean our liberation into your garden as well as into our own. (PSJ 98)

A beehive, inspite of the lazy drones, is a symbol of togetherness, or “conspiracy”. The message brings home the need to co-exist in peace and harmony. If people go on fighting against one another, they will become dust and ashes and the animals will occupy the beautiful space. The message gathers significance and meaning through the concrete instances of ecological peril that Walker documents in Possessing the Secret of Joy:

Myths offer a lens which can be used to see human identity in its social and cultural context—they can lock us up in stock reactions, bigotry and fear, but they’re not immutable, and by unpicking them, the stories can lead to others. Myths convey values and expectations which are always evolving,
in the process of being formed, but—and this is fortunate—never set so hard they cannot be charged again.

(Warner 1994: 14)

Myth is re-reading, rewriting and recreating. It is always open to change and the readers must participate in the process. This process of understanding and clarification can give rise to newly told stories, can sew and weave and knit different patterns into the social fabric and this is a continuous enterprise for everyone to take part in. We have the capacity as tellers and retellers, interpreters and reinterpreters, to maintain the interaction of myth and history.

Alice Walker’s feminist and anti-racist perspective has given her access to new literary material by allowing her to see the value of the folklore of Black women and the history which has shaped that lore. In *The Third Life of Grange Copeland, In Love and Trouble*, and *Meridian*, she has emphasized suffering and the struggle to resist it through folk values. In much of *You Can’t Keep a Good Woman Down*, she moves away from story telling into polemic, even within narratives. Questions of race and sexual identity become more absolute, and much of the complexity of historical sensibility that feeds folk material is lost. In *The Color Purple*, she has in effect moved to allegorical form in order to transcend history and envision the triumph of those principles she espouses. But in doing so, she has neutralized the historical conditions of the very folk life she values.