In comparison to the other Afro-American contemporaries, Walker has been a controversial figure and yet, remains in limelight after her prize-winning novel *The Color Purple*. She holds a central position in American literature. Both, black and white, male and female used to publish interesting criticism against her severe male-bashing and due to complexity in her works. But J.Charles Washington gives a full stop against Walker’s portrait of black men by writing an essay on positive black image in her short stories entitled *Obsidian* which published in 1988.

This thesis is based on close analytical reading of text books as well as working with the relevant articles, reviews and essays related. Chiefly and vastly the researcher has consulted Gates and Appiah, ed. *Alice Walker: Critical Perspectives Past and Present* (1993) and its all scholarly essays which give deep and wide ideas about Walker’s theme. Like Linda Abbandonato’s *Rewriting the Heroine’s Story* in *The Color Purple* (1993) gives the fantastic knowledge about epistolary form in *The Color Purple*; Lauren Berlant, Race, Gender, and Nation in *The Color Purple* (1993) is a deep ocean to go deeper to know Walker in a broad way. Others are Barbara Christian’s, *Novels for Everyday Use* (1993); Mary Helen Washington’s An Essay on *Alice Walker*. For knowing Walker’s creative background, it is also consulted some critical books of Trudier Harris to explore Walker's use of folklore, and Mary Helen Washington who suggests a thematic scheme in *Black American Literature Forum* in 1997 for studying African American writers along three historic dimensions: creative suspension, assimilation.

The researcher also consulted related ideas of prominent critics, feminists and scholars like Patricia Hill Collins, Deborah E. McDowell and Barbara Christian. Collin’s book *Black Feminist Thought: A Political Manifesto* on the historical position of black women and development of black women’s writing in the late seventies and eighties has been helpful to know black life in general and black women in particular. Besides scholars like Charles R. Larson; Janette Turner Hospital and Tina Mcelroy Ansa reviewed *Possessing the Secret of Joy* for the issues on Female Genital Cutting. The researcher also consulted George Olakunle’s *Alice Walker’s Africa: Globalization and the Province of Fiction*.

The present research study is a modest attempt to explore the possible whys and hows of the injustice happened towards black women and how they refute to liberate themselves from these injustices, Walker herself, who experienced the same anguish, is tracing the roots of black women’s suffering from their past as ‘negro’, inhuman treatment by white master,
the pressure of poverty and alienation from their husband. It also examines female sexuality, gender roles and communicative exchange presented in oral and written form in her novels.

The first chapter focuses on Alice Walker’s life—sketch including her Georgian sharecropping with parents which highlights her racial background which has casted its shadow on her characters, her fun-time as tomboy which makes her blind with right eye which causes her debilitating shame and which later on she experienced with male aggression. It also explains and analyzes, how Walker under Martin Luther’s inspiring speech, sheds her negativity out and with her changed perspective she makes her ‘wound’ a door open to the “world of possibilities”. This introductive part also analyses Walker’s personal, emotional and spontaneous outpouring of her feelings in her poems which becomes “our sweetest songs”.

Walker’s personal construct of black women characters in three cycles are the staple material to explore their predicament, their inner conflict and quest for identity. Her famous book *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens: The Creativity of Black Women in the South* has described her ideology of womanism which can be interpreted as “attempt to integrate black nationalism into feminism, to articulate a distinctively black feminism that shares some of the objectives of black nationalist ideology” (Dubey, 107)

The second chapter entitled feminist theory highlights the women’s position in Eastern and Western society, Vedic era, Suffergetists and Abolitionists, explores liberal feminism or Radical feminism, shortly. The impact of the works of German Greer, Betty Friedan and Kate Millet is also
put under researcher’s lens to compare and contrast with black feminism means how (white) feminism differs from black feminism and expands its tentacles. The vital issue is also to focus on the history of slavery, gender role of Afro-American man and women, controversy and dichotomy between black men-women position. An effort has also been made to analyse and evaluate all the black feminine issues that sprouted from Sojourner Truth 'thundering speech ain’t I a Woman?

The third chapter entitled Feminism in Meridian deals with modernism which saw the subject matter of soul-searching and law-breaking. Alice Walker’s historical inclination reflects an on-going process of problematizing life’s conflicts and compromises, resolutions and irresolution, triumphs and tragedies and so. Post-modern feminist envisions a new type of emancipation embracing political equality, liberation from misrepresented convention and changed relationship.

It is positively correct that, Motherhood is one of the much-talked postmodern feminist themes which the writers like to highlight. Especially Alice walker’s Meridian broadly focuses on the image of African-American mothers who were projected as “Superwoman”. Walker’s attempt towards dismantling traditional stereotypes of Black Motherhood particularly the Black superwoman stereotype, and thereby, ultimately redefining Black womanhood which leads Meridian to represent universal motherhood is also put under the lens of this research work. Barbara, a noted critic argues that Meridian’s quest takes her “beyond the society’s narrow meaning of the word “mother ”as physical state and expands its meaning to those who create, nurture and save life, in social and psychological, as well as physical terms,”(242)
The forth Chapter entitled Feminism in *The Color Purple* saw literature as a record of collective consciousness. The Sunrise of Walker’s Literary Day starts with the Color *Purple*. So, the present project examines Walker as champion of black feminism who focuses not only on racism and sexism which is dominant in all her novels, but also she explores the lesbian relations overtly. It also focuses on Walker’s concept of ‘sisterhood’ for the freedom of black women, their total empowerment and the wholeness of the community.

The fifth chapter entitled feminism in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* attempts to focus on powerful condemnation of the practice of female circumcision because of its hazardous effect on health of poor and illiterate third world women. Walker is not only a writer but also a political activist. Her chief motto is women’s emancipation from the evils pervaded in society. So, an attempt has also been made to highlight Walker’s positive contribution towards the world and its global issue.

The sixth chapter entitled Conclusion renders the crux of Walker’s narratives. The forgoing chapters in the thesis trace protagonists’ passage through a plethora of self-doubts, fears, angers, guilt and deliberate silence towards articulation and affirmation. The author through her work stands against the age-old patriarchal system which cripples innate creativity of women. Her quest for creating New Women with bubbles of energy to embark them on the journey of ‘women-empowerment’ is also focused in this. To sum up, it is rightly said ‘to err is human ,to forgive divine’, with this appeal, the researcher’s own findings related to the author for the benefits of future researcher as well as her explicit limitation in her literary domain has also been mentioned.
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Chapter -II
Feminist Theory

Before opening the canvas of black feminism, it is imperative to highlight the history of growth of feminism right from its germination stage till date. Some major historical feminist movements like First Wave Feminism and Second-Wave Feminism indirectly talk about the benefits of white females. Whereas, Afro-American feminism which is also known as black feminist movement is quite contrary in its mission from other feminists. It channelizes the global feministic movements from marginalized to centre. There is a broader description of gender-role of Afro-American male and female during slavery in America which causes Black liberation movements, like Civil Right Movements in the South, Black Aesthetics and Black Power Movement. A specific overview of Afro-American literature is also included to elucidate Alice walker’s position as an author and a scholar including her theory of Womanism which has stepped head for universal appeal.

The period between1789 to 1914 (the first world war) saw the birth and its aftermath of feminism, a term that refers to some important changes in the social structure such as wage, labour, individual civil rights, and a woman’s
right to education. It also witnessed the emergence of woman as collective force in the political arena. It might be better to say that nineteenth century was the moment in history when the lives of the women changed, or more precisely when the perspective of women’s lives changed. The advent of modernity made it possible to posit the female as subject, woman as a full-fledged individual and participant in political life and ultimately as a citizen. Despite the constraints of a strict social and familial code of rules governing women’s daily lives, the range of possibilities had begun to expand, and bold new prospects lay ahead. But how and when a realization dawned is a matter of great discussion.

In the words of great feminist Simon de Beauvoir “One is not born, one becomes a woman. It is the civilization that produces this creature which is described as feminine.” (The Second Sex, 500) In all traditions, Eastern or Western women are deprived of equality with men. Although, it’s a fact that women constitute half of the world’s population yet all the doors of freedom were closed for them. In the words of a critic “Human experience for centuries has been synonymous with the masculine experience with the result of that the collective image of humanity has been one sided and incomplete. Women has not been defined as a subject in her own right but merely has an entity that concerns man either in his real life or his fantasy life”(Shushila 7)

The past history describes that the situation was not the same since beginning. Vedic era was considered the Golden Era for women’s honorable position in society and Vedic Woman was the highest symbol of Hindu womanhood. In the words of Dutt;
Women were honored in ancient India, more perhaps than among any other ancient nation on the face of the globe. They were considered “the intellectual companions of their husband... affectionate helpers in the journey of life, and... inseparable partners in their religious duties. (67)

On the other side in Greek origin, Amazon, originally referred to a race of women, thought to exist in Scythia and elsewhere who removed one breast in order to be able to maneuver their weapons during battle. Amazon, in contemporary feminist literature, used interchangeably, is referred for ‘woman warrior’. The term also defines women’s strength, independence and centrality. So, these two ancient notions or examples are enough to feel that Woman’s position and role is not like the same as it was in ancient time.

It is a gradual deterioration which was caused by the patriarchal and male dominated society and the prevalent norms of circumstances which were adverse to the women’s holy position. Highlighting about sorry state of women of Muslim religion, E. Phillips in his book The Religions of the World rightly holds:

Arab woman moved freely until Muhammad’s time, but the insistence on the veil in Sura has had, and still has terrible consequence... but the sinister feature of the situation here is that whereas in most countries some religious principle can be invoked in support of necessary reform this religion solidly opposes it. (136)
In the traditional Western thought, mind and body form a hierarchy that symbolizes power structure. The privileged term, the mind, represents male class who are known as storehouse of intellect and wisdom whereas the body is linked with female class which is antithetical to thinking, writing and remain under constant guidance of mind. Feminist theory has imbibed from mainstream philosophical thought regarding the role of body in social, cultural, political, physical and sexual life. Elizabeth Grosz in her *Volatile Bodies: Towards A Corporeal Feminism* (1994) explains that the body becomes what is not mind, what is distinct from the other than the privileged term. Thus the body gets coded in terms that are traditionally devalued and comes to stand for a ‘brute givenness’ connected with animality and with ‘nature’ that needs transcendence.

Other great philosophers also have the same opinion about the women. Platonic philosophy had identified body as antithetical to reason and as a prison house of the soul. To Aristotle she is an inferior man. He considers maternal bodies as a mere acceptable for reproduction, a provider of formless, passive, shapeless matter which through the father attains shape, form, contour and specific features and attributes. He views that female is the female by virtue of certain lack of qualities. She is God’s second mistake, said Nietzsche. Machiavelli chooses to identify women with fortune: fortune is a woman and if you wish to master her, you must strike and beat her. Shakespeare, too, refers as ‘Frailty thy name is woman’ and the same idea is mentioned in *The Taming of the Shrew* e.g. Thy husband is thy lord, thy keeper, thy head, thy sovereign. A woman makes an excessive endurance and series of adjustments in her life faithfully and obediently. It is
her admiral qualities as individual while she negates her identity and bows herself to the patriarchal society. In the words of Simone de Beauvoir:

> I looked and it was a revelation: this world was a masculine world, my childhood had been nourished by myths forged by men and I had not reacted to them in all the same way I should have done if I had been a boy. (103)

All the definitions about women’s conduct, behavior and existence, were given by men. These aphorisms of a few of the great philosophers indicate the status of women in male-chauvinistic society. The old conventional notions of male-dominated society were so rude, unbearable, suppressive, oppressive and depressive that women’s discourse takes a shape of movement. Their consciousness seeks to analyze and understand the material conditions through which gender has been constructed within specific languages and bodies of literature. And its result is that the strong waves of feminism took place for women’s liberation.

According to Oxford English Dictionary feminism is state of being feminine or womanly. A feminist is one who is awakened and has become conscious about women’s life and problem. She/he is a person who also knows that the exploitation of women is caused by patriarchal hegemony and it has to be ended if one has to build a society based on equality. Alice Jardine defines “Feminism, she writes, is generally understood as movement (Gynesis,15). Another renowned feminist Toril Moi in Sexual/Textual Politics :Feminist Literary Theory , defines ‘feminism’ as apolitical position,’ femaleness’ as a matter of biology and ‘feminity’ as a set of culturally determined characteristics. “Two words ‘feminist’ and ‘feminism’
says Moi, are political labels supporting the aims of women’s movement of the 1960s” (204)

Thus we guess now that how many leading feminists and activists have attempted to alter the fate of countless helpless women. According to the feminist doctrine, the subjugation of women is a central fact of history, key to most of our social and psychological disorder. Janet Richards says, “Women suffer from systematic, social injustice because of their sex.”  (188)

The history of feminist movement is one of fission and fusion. Its different phases have gone under different labels- suffragette, women’s emancipation, women’s liberation, women movement, feminism, social feminism and radical feminism. The origin of feminism cannot be traced to a single source but are allocated in a number of traditions. At first the term ‘feminism or feminist ’began in France and Netherland in 1872, then in Great Britain in 1890 and in U.S. in 1910 .The movement began in the late 18th century and since referred to a series of campaign for reforming issues such as reproductive rights ,domestic violence, maternity leave ,equal pay the right to vote, sexual harassment. It is also believed that, 1790-1860 mark the beginning of the feminist movement. This period was dominated by enlightenment ideas: the rights of man, reason, natural law and equal rights. Both the French and American revolutions raised issues relevant to women’s rights. In both the U.S. and Britain early activists like Elizabeth Candy Stanton, Margaret Fuller, Lucretia Mott, the Laugham place Group, were concerned with securing legal rights for women in marriage, education and employment.
The phrase “first wave feminism” generally refers to women suffragists. Their effort to get the vote was granted or was achieved in 1920 under the able inspiration of Mary Wollstonecraft. She and her ideas shaped the thinking of the suffragettes, for which she campaigned rigorously. Her first feminist treatise *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) emerged from the social and political turbulence caused by the French Revolution. Wollstonecraft was the first feminist to raise issue for the welfare of middle–class women as ‘mother’, who influences the society. She also favored for girls’ education because of their freedom from drudgery and debasing life in family and she advocated their economic independence.

Regarded as the grandmother of British feminism, Wollstonecraft’s avowed aim in her *Introduction* is to show that the ‘elegance is inferior to virtue’, and the first object of laudable ambition is to obtain a character as a human being, regardless of the distinction of sex. Others like Hannah More’s writing on female education and Mrs. Sarah Ellis’s immensely successful *Women of England* (1839) were helpful to inspirit women with a sense of mission and notion of ‘Separate sphere’. The suffragist movement hinged on the belief that women’s oppression took root in the denial of access to certain rights and representations, a philosophy often referred to as liberal feminist.

In America, feminist activism started slightly earlier with the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848. Its aim was to demand an end to all discrimination based on sex. Feminism had been developing slowly over the preceding decades, as it had in Britain. A prominent figure of this movement was Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815-1902), who was born into an extremely conservative family. She was always reminded to be a female child. Even so,
Stanton along with Lucretia Mott led the fight for women’s suffrage. She used the 1776 Declaration of Independence as a model for the Declaration of Sentiments issued by the convention. The introduction to the declaration explained the justification for such a text:

> When in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one portion of the family of man to assume among the people of the earth a position different from that which they have hither to occupied, but one to which the laws of nature and of nature’s God entitled them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes that impel them to such a course. (2035).

These “Causes” involved around fifteen indictments of men, like it starts with

> He has never permitted her to exercise her inalienable rights to the elective franchise and ends with he has endeavored, in every way that he could, to destroy her confidence in her own powers, to lessen her self-respect, and to make her willing to lead a dependent and abject life. (2036)

Other important women key theorists were like Sarah Grimke and Margaret Fuller. Besides, many others who tried to exercise their power were bold female ladies. Victoria Woodhull and Matilda Joslyn attempted to cast votes prior to their legal entitlement to do so for which they had to face charges. In addition, other dedicated activists like Ida B Wells, Alice Paul and Sojourner Truth also asserted their voices against inequality. There were a wide range of women, some of them like Frances Willard belong to
conservative Christian groups others like Matilda Joslyn Gage belonged to the National Women suffrage Association. (NWSA) These women were more moderate and conservative than radical or revolutionary. They willingly joined to work within political systems to promote the cause of suffrage who had a belief that women’s rights are as natural and god given.

In the words of Betty Friedan in her book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) the women born after 1920, feminism was a dead history for them. Second wave feminism began during early in 1960s in the United States of America and lasted through the late 1990s. It was a worldwide movement which was also strong in Europe and parts of Asia, such as Turkey and Israel. The first wave of feminism was primarily concerned with the problem of formal equality between men and women. It was aimed to overturn legal obstacles to gender equality focused on voting rights and property rights. On the other hand second wave had the wide and broader demands of issues which aimed to multi-faced independence and multi-types of equality for their better dignified life. The issues were like sexuality, family, the workplace reproductive rights, de facto inequalities and official legal inequalities. Second wave feminism also focused on a battle against violence with proposals for marriage.

The period from 1920 to 1960 is known as the period of intermission in the history of the Women’s rights movement, when a sense of some complacency prevailed. The reality in society and day to day business soon belied the so-called sense of victory on the issue of suffrage and a new feminist Movement started with great fervor in the late 1960s. This decade was also period of protest movements- civil rights, peace, the New left, anti-slavery. Perhaps this, it was truly a revival era for the traditional, sick,
unbalanced women, who just get bored of housewives. They were puzzled as to what these women meant by ‘liberation or oppression’ The key publication in second wave feminism were Simon de Beauvoir’s, The Second Sex (1949), Shulamith Firestone’s The Dialectics of Sex (1970), Germane Greer’s, The Female Eunuch (1970) Kate Millett’s Sexual politics (1969) and D. Mitchell’s Women; The Longest Revolution (1974).

Simon de Beauvoir was the French writer who reacted and tried to examine the notion of women being perceived as “other” in the patriarchal society. She accepted male as superior life partner but she criticized the myths and facts that women are capable of only getting pregnant, lactating and menstruating so they are inferior she wanted to know a valid cause or explanation to place women as second sex.

Influenced by Beauvoir’s book, Betty Friedan in her book The Feminine Mystique (1963), poured down her emotion and regarding wasted talent and potential that keeping women at home; means limiting their intellectual growth and flourishing possibilities. Her creative writing left deep impact on people’s mind leading to open the path for second-wave feminism. President John F. Kennedy released a report on the status of women on gender inequality. This report revealed great discrimination against women in American life. Women, especially housewives got conscious and gathered a group at local, state and federal level. Even the independent women marched ahead giving fire to this movement collectively, confidently and boldly. As a result, they got legal victories as equal pay Act of 1963. Now Betty Freidan joined other women and men to form the National organization for women, known as (NOW). They also got executive order extending full Affirmative Action rights to women. Its aims
lay very much within a liberal Equal Rights tradition. It attempted to bring women into full participation in the mainstream of American society, in order to avail all the privileges and responsibilities, in equal partnership with men. Its board members included two former EEOC Commissioners and three trade union representatives, and in its first conference in 1967, it formally adopted a Bill of Rights for women.

On the contrary, the origin of the Women’s Liberation in America lay in the Civil Rights, Anti-Vietnam War and Student Movements of the 1960s. As participants of this left wing movements women found, in Juliet Mitchell’s words the attitude of the oppressor within the mind of the oppressed. (Woman’s Estate, 1971), even this attitude most famously exposed in Stokeley Carmichael’s (1964) comment that the only position for women in SNCC (Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee is prone.’ Movement women began to defect to a range of localized, non hierarchical women’s liberation groups. Opposite to NOW, these groups had no national organization instead they drew on the infrastructure of the radical community, the underground press, and the free universities. Anne Koedt in her speech given at the Free University in New York in the year 1973 describes this development;

Within the last year many radical women’s group have sprung up throughout the country. The new feminism is not about the elimination of differences between the sexes, nor even simply the achievement of equal opportunities, it contains and concerns the individuals rights to find out the kind of person he or she is and to strive to become person” (NP)
The feminist society in 1960s demanded a revolutionary transformation. It was radical in root as a whole. This radical turn, theoretically, involved the adoption of various ideas like Marxism, psychoanalytical and anarchism. This is termed as second wave in America which was associated with civil rights for black. The political struggle gave a view that black women were colonized under prevalent imperialism. So black and female must get liberated in political and economical field rather they should be glorified at the level of psychology and culture too.

By the early 1980s there was a changed scenario, which was the result of wide-spread favorable outcome of feminine’s independence campaign especially for the housewives. Meanwhile feminist leaders rooted in the second wave like Gloria Anzaldua, Bell Hook, Kerry Ann Kane, Audre Lord and many other feminists of color sought to negotiate a space within feminist thought for consideration of subject related to race sex and class. In the 80s&.90s the feminist trends gave way to divergent strains of feminist thought or feminisms. The movement was viewed by some as biased, as it was the movement of the white, heterosexual, middle class, educated western woman of European descent, and therefore took up issues relating to them only and remained ignorant of the issues and problems of the women in the rest of the world.

Literature is an account of the feelings of people .These feelings are an outcome of social, political, economic and personal commitments. In this way history of Afro-American relations enforce black people to fight against victimization. It was true that inspite of the rise of feminism, black women had yet to struggle So, in order to understand the Afro-American or Black
feminism, it is must to peep into its seed which is already woven by Sojourner Truth’s revolutionary step in Abolitionist Movement.

Abolitionist was basically an anti-slavery movement which gained its momentum in nineteenth century America. It was humanistic in approach. Yet its logic was cross-pollinated with the rhetoric of the women’s movement. Women and their male supporters gave force on the justification with slaves (in Americas) because there was no word segregation in a country which claims its foundation as God and liberty. Among them the most visible abolitionists were Frederick Douglass, William Lloyd Garrison, Sojourner Truth, Sarah Margaret Fuller, John Stuart Mill, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton etc who spoke out in support of the women’s movement, adding to both its visibility and its viability.

Here it is appropriate to focus broadly on Sojourner Truth who was first woman who had been “forty years a slave and forty years free” she spoke of the fifteenth Amendment of at its first annual meeting in 1881, which had granted African American men the right to vote in 1870. Her words “Now colored men have the right to vote. There ought to be equal rights now more than ever, since colored people have got their freedom” (2052)

As an abolitionist, Truth continued to fight for Afro-American black female slaves by invoking their power in her famous speech as she knew well the parallels between the institutions of gender-and slave based in equality. In her speeches:

It is a good consolation to know that when we have got this battle once fought we shall not be coming to you (men)
anymore you have been having our rights so long, that you think, like a slaveholder, that you own us. (2051)

Truth also pointed out to the necessity of inclusion of all women, testifying,

I have borne thirteen children, and seen most of them sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother’s grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain’t I a woman?”(2052)

Delivered by Truth in 1831 her famous speech, titled Ain’t I a Woman?, testifies the double jeopardy of Black Women who had to place the survival of her race before that of her sex. Though to some extent Truth’s argument gave opportunity to the privileging of white women’s rights. John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor, for example mentioned that women in England faced even greater subjugation than that of American slaves which meant to dismiss abolitionist views and ideas in favour of colored women. They argued that “In some slave codes the slave could, under certain to sell him. But no amount of ill usage without adultery superadded, will in England free a wife from her tormentor” (Mill67-75)

So, Truth’s attempt to advocate black women’s right to vote became a far cry and from here emerges the split of ideas and division between abolitionist and feminist philosophies and two thereafter became more self-consciously distinct. In 1831, this refusal to acknowledge the Black women presence caused Maria W. Stewart to cry, “How long shall the fair daughters of Africa be compelled to bury their minds and talents beneath the load of iron pots and kettles, (Lerner. 563).
This division compelled many African American Women to choose one movement over the other. Fractures of ideas led conflict and a number of organizations were developed in order to accommodate women’s differing priorities. One encouraged black women to pursue the vote; another tried to link-working and middle class women. Others favored women’s image as domestic workers to assert the centrality of women’s role. These differences caused the divided feminists being vulnerable to be attacked by anti-suffragists who thought women meant for domestic chores and not for votes. Despite this, though position of the black and white women was problematic due to institutionalized racial inequalities, yet they got united in their direct attack on male dominance. In her well-known work “Woman in the Nineteenth Century”, Sarah Margaret Fuller criticizes men who, thought for asserting their rights to ownership of women.

As the friend of the Negro assumes that one man cannot by right hold another in bondage, so should the friend of woman assume that Man cannot by right, lay even well-meant restrictions on woman. If the Negro be a soul, appareled in flesh, to one master only are they accountable. There is but law for souls and if there is to be an interpreter of it he must come not as a man or son of man but as son of God (16)

So, both joined hand in hand demanding the constitution for considering their plight and after seventy years of struggle women finally gained the right to vote in 1920 through the nineteenth Amendment. The longevity and difficulties of this battle had been predicated by Stanton in 1898, she forecasted that there would be no small amount of misconception,
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misrepresentation and ridicule, and she also said or commented it as the greatest revolution the world has ever known.

In White America the Blacks were incarnated as “wounded Black psyche under White duress”. (7) The word “Negroes” implies for both black men and women. Their life-history seems heart-rending. They I mean both (black-man and women) as a scapegoat, were brought to Jamestown Virginia and were sold and purchased by white colonists under legally sanctioned law in 1641. Inter racial marriages were banned for them and they were defined as ‘real estate’. Socio- Cultural context of Black reflects their feelings and experience of Africans after their arrival to the United States, being that their arrival marked the beginning of their journey to becoming African Americans. For the last hundred years they were treated as enslaved and oppressed coupled with the dismantling of families and forced divisions of labor among men and women. In a creative literary review by Jones (1982), American slavery was defined as “an economic and political system by which a group of whites extracted as much labor as possible from blacks through the use of threat or force”(235). So neither the black men nor black women had economic or social power over the other. American laws prevented all slaves from being property owners, getting education. Although, there was a sense of equality in the social status of slave, but the white masters treat violently by beating and giving mental and physical torture death and by separating their families if their expectations were violated.

American gender roles did not develop naturally rather it was fixed and determined by masters. The Blacks did not have even identity as Americans due to their denial for rights of citizenship, so they were
identified only as African descendants and enslaved Africans. The slave women have the varied role to do. They help in the fields alongside slave men planting, weeding, picking, hoeing, herding and doing whatever the master requested. They also work at master’s house, cooking cleaning and catering the needs of his wife and children. Besides, they go back to slave quarters to care their own children and family with all household chore. In the community, too, they work as community mother. They work as daily basis worker. In his own words Jones (1982) highlights that make slave were also viewed as laborers who besides working him the fields had to work in specialized areas like carpenters, blacksmiths, coopers, or shoemakers slave men also used to hunt and gather animals for their own family in the role of husbands and fathers. They made attempts to protect their women from the angry wrath of the slave master, sometimes at cost of their own lives. (235-69).

In this way during their first 200 years in the United States, role of slave women were workers caretakers, mothers, sex objects, and wives, there were enslaved women who were privately considered to be leaders, women who led slave revolts and helped other escape to freedom. Men were worker, provider, protector, husband and father, who endured humiliation on a regular basis. Gradually black male and female started to embody their role publicly as leaders, revolutionaries, sociopolitical bridge builders some other religious and civil unit encouraged black female to define and enhance their social status being like community agents, church women, clubwomen and even prostitutes. Thus, the Industrial Revolution and the underpinning of a capitalistic society compiled with emancipation of slavery began to plant
seeds of individualism in a culture of people who survived dreadful social conditions by maintaining collectivistic mindsets during slavery.

History has always proved that economic exploitation along with the political and religious has always provoked the abolitionist and novelists to perceive and reconstruct the reality of life. Black were no exception to it. Some leaders and writers came forward. They wanted to control the worsening situation of blacks. A well known Afro-American historian and sociologist Du-Bois described the twoness of Afro-Americans as “double-consciousness”. He said an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (12)

Du-Bois describes black people’s actual position in America. He further writes:

The end of the black American striving is to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of opportunity closed in his face....To be co-worker in the kingdom of culture ....Used his best powers and his latent genius.” (16-17)

Du-Bois as a savior of blacks took active part in the moment for freedom of blacks. He formed National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and called a new Negro who will be self-respecting, fearless and determined in the assertion of his rights. It was a first step towards the unity of individual self and black community as a biracial and bicultural, and black people as American descent. This new Negro Movement is also known as Harlem Renaissance of 1920s. However Du-
Bois efforts proved inadequate and the conditions were at all not favorable in America for Africans. Gunnar Myrdal has documented black’s worsening conditions in his classic study *An American Dilemma: the Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (205-994) as a critique quotes:

The pervasive racism in American society; the discrimination against blacks in economics, politics, justice and social equality. It also assesses the strength of black leadership, organizations and community institutions as well as their chances in overcoming racism. (Bruck 30)

World War II was a turning point and it accounted for many developments in African American relationship. Many technological and industrial changes took place which had made everlasting effects on the society. George W. Grah records them in his book *The Black Migration*:

…the traditional southern class structure of black land owners, tenants and farmhands all but collapsed under the impact of technological changes. The majority of blacks in the South had worked as share croppers and farmhands in the production of cotton and tobacco. The economic and social structure collapsed as machines took place of men. Tractors took over the plowing and planting, chemical weed control the weeding and the cotton picking machines did 80% if the harvesting by… (64)

In this way according to George W. Grah whole mode of production on which black livelihoods and folkways had depended so long, was then rapidly disappearing. The new wave of automation and mechanization of industrial production left fewer and fewer jobs for unskilled workers and laborers. As a result in the rural as well as in the urban areas blacks had to
face the problem of joblessness as they were, no doubt, in the category of unskilled workers and laborers. George W. Grah writes: By 1961 companies were hiring 50% of more professional people than laborers and the role of the laborers had been reduced to one job in eighteen. (117)

In spite of the problem of unemployment among blacks created by automation and mechanization, migration of blacks from South to North or East to West could not be stopped. As the reason for this was that there seemed better economic and educational possibilities. During 1960 to 1970 nearly one million people migrated to North. On the individual and collective level this rural urban shifting was a unique experience which reflected almost in all the biographies and novels written during the period. Migrants had to face all the typical specific urban problems like life in the ghettos, segregation in the housing and education, family disruption and building new community institution. Though NAACP and churches helped migrants in the matter, still blacks were systematically excluded from the political and educational possibilities to keep them away from making use of their rights. Status of blacks was very low due to the unemployment. In schools and curricula white values were prominently described. As a result blacks lost their identity. Advancement of black children in schools lowered frequently.

Many attempts were made from time to time to abolish the slavery system. A lot of black people sacrificed their lives in it. In this regard student’s Non-Violent Co-ordinating Committee (SNCC) was formed to stress Civil Rights Movement in the South. Naturally whites were not in favour of Black’s emancipation. They disliked and strongly opposed the movement. As a result blacks had to lose their properties as well as their
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lives. Ultimately the blacks succeeded in their struggle and the movement helped to abolish slavery and racism on paper in United States.

The Civil Right Act of 1964 brought back many black people to their homes in the North. Literary activities could not remain untouched with the movement. Alice Walker directly participated in the movement while William Kelley and Earnest Gaines expressed through their themes in the novels and in their own literary works. Innumerable significant Afro-American fiction, drama, poetry and essays were published during the period. It could be called “A second Renaissance”, this time not exactly based on Harlem, but it seemed to have come from Afro-American literature.

Though slavery was abolished but there was still a huge cry against racism, poverty, war, corruption and sexism. Rebellion or revolution victory or defeats were the burning questions. Black people were determined to liberate themselves from all these evils of society. Their determination turned into a movement called Black Power Movement- a call by the black in order to define their goals and to reject racist institution .After world war II Negro initiated their march on Washington along with demonstration, marches and boycotts in 1963 and in 1964. Leaders like Malcom and Martin Luther King Jr. respectively in 1965 and in 1968 were assassinated for their active role in Black Power Movement. Literature took notice of each and every moment and event. John A. William’s Man Who Cried I Am explains the horrors of slavery, wide spread hunger, illiteracy and starvation among blacks.
Thus by casting a quick look on the above-described issues related to black revolution it is obvious that the black -American made an attempt to search their identity of equality. They wanted to determine a suitable norm to lead a dignified life, which has some moral purpose as a humanbeing. It was the historical event that in America that the black intellectuals admit both the cultural differences as well as they reject to live as per white community’s cultural standards. Young Negro writers and artists clustered in Harlem during 1920s. They focused on three racial problems from 1900 to 1960. First of all they wanted to improve educational opportunities. Second during 1920s, essays shifted from defense to presentation to disprove their inferiority; and third due to developed pride and confidence among Negro writers of the race, exaltation has been replaced by critical evaluation. James Weldon Johnson announced in The Book of American Negro Poetry that the dialect literature had put “two full stops to humor and pathos”’ Langston Hughes Rudolph fisher, Claude McKay, Jean Toomer, Countee Cullen, Arna Bontemps and Sterling Brown, among others were forging new norms or reworking old ones. The high unemployment rate of 1930s and other so many deterring factors could not deter the empowered black literary stalwarts from showing their literary talents and receiving lucrative awards. Margaret walker, Richard Wright, Robert E. Hayden.

Historically, the black woman has been the central figure in the abolitionist and emancipation movements of the 19th and 20th century. Mary Evans in Personal Politics states that “twice in the history of the United States the struggle for racial equality has been mid-wife to a feminist movement- in the Abolition movement of the 1830’s and again in the civil rights movement of the (1981.24)
Black power movement and Black Arts both were conceptually and broadly related to the Afro-American desire for self-determination and nationhood, on the other hand both movements also tried and preferred to the emergence of male–chauvinism and women were destined to be mother or a home-maker. However the effect of women’s liberation movement could be seen clearly only after sixties when a National Organization for Women (NOW) in 1966 was found which sought equality for women in education, employment and legal status. In fact feministic perspective starts with the view that men and women are continuously equal and share the same capacities. But even Civil War could hardly abolish this discriminatory attitude and the black women easily victimized. Consequently, they have developed some peculiar feelings of others; they were betrayed by their own men folk whose ideas of the black women community was far from real. In the words of Stephen E. Henderson.

The contradiction between knowledge and action that surfaced in The Civil Rights and Black Power movements forced sensitive and Intelligent women to reexamine their position vis-à-vis the men and to conclude that they were the victims not only of racial injustice but of sexual arrogance tantamount to dual colonization—one from without, other from within, the Black Community.”(xxiii).

The root of Black Feminism can be guessed out in the past 19th century abolitionist movement in the US.A. This movement not only launched crusade against slavery but also led the path way to give impetus and strategies to black women for their fight against sexual discrimination. Afro-American means black people including men and women both were colonized and slaved. US Census described African American whose
ancestry is rooted in Black racial groups of Africa. Angela Davis in *Race, Sex; Class* (1981) traces the history of the Black Women from slavery to the present. She gives a sketch how the Black woman was denied her femaleness in race issues and denied her blackness in sex issues. Both these indices were critical in determining the rights of Black men and white women.

While the Radicals highlight the politics of gender, sexuality and women culture and Marxists talk of class and material basis of exploitation. Black feminism on the other hand talks on the dual issue of racial and sexual discrimination and proposes a different attitude with which one could approach and appreciate woman’s experience in Black or Third World communities. The need to fabricate such an approach arises from the fact that the historical and social realities of black women were obviously quite different from those of western white women. Though the experience of women’s oppression as women’s experience is universal yet the dominant patriarchy and trauma of a colonial experience lend a different dimension to their experience as black women.

So the most decisive factor which distinguished black feminist perspective from the ideological basis of white feminist was the specific historical background of the black women while the white woman is oppressed as women only, a black woman is oppressed by the same white patriarchy as a non-white and very often by the white women as well. So feminism for white women was a plea for identity while for black women, it was a struggle for survival.
Past history reveals that it were the black women themselves, who were pleased and happy in the happiness and freedom of black men. In the words of Gerda Lerner:

Black women speaking with many voices and expressing many individual opinions have been nearly unanimous in their assistance that their own emancipation cannot be separated from the emancipation of their men. Their liberation depends on the liberation of the race and the improvement of the life of black community (xxv).

When we look at Afro-American women’s position in America we find them triply oppressed. They are black, female and economically under-privileged. This triple burden restricts them from a fuller and meaningful participation in American society because they are confined to their race and narrow enclosures of sex. As a result they suffer as black amongst the blacks, ‘slaves of the slaves’. They are forced to occupy very marginal place in their social life. They were the most disadvantaged lot who had to face severe hardships for the survival. They were poorest paid workers, had shorter life expectancies, higher infant mortality rates, and were prone to stress-related diseases. They were forced by the society to feel insignificant, faceless subservient and devoid of identity. In the words of Filomina Steady, Black women are the “Original feminists”. Black women in the society are the only ethnics or radical group which has had the opportunity to be woman. By this I simply mean that much of the current focus on being liberated…to survive. Neither is its peculiar humanistic character and quiet courage viewed as the epitome of what the American model of Feminity should be.
A feminist and lesbian poet, Audre Lord lucidly pictures not only Black woman writers but all Black women in her poem titled ‘who Said It Was Simple’,

But I who am abound by my mirror as well as my mirror see causes in color as well as sex and sit here wondering which me will survive all these liberations(1973,p39)

Black feminism in American literature is still oriented to ‘white face’ but unless ‘woman of black color’ who constitute the major American fabric, will not be valued, the term feminism will lose its sanctity and the future of feminism will be in wilderness. The black woman’s curious positioning at the intersection of the axes of race, sex, and class, backed her to the inferior position of denominators that affect group membership. So, she was suppressed in the ‘dominant’ and ‘mute ‘area of American society.

Black feminism is a politic born out of the need to challenge those ideological positions that denies Black woman’s existence and were treated as commodity. Critic like Joseph and Lewis stated many a times that ‘White skin is to racism as the penis is to sexism, as class, profit and corruption are to capitalism’(1981,p.19)Black Women’s personal theory is feminist in approach. Barbara Smith an influential Black feminist critic states that the ability of Black women to survive in ‘the face of white America pointes to an innate feminist potential’ (1983).Barbara Smith in her path breaking essay Towards a Black Feminist Criticism said;

Feminism is the political theory that struggles to free all women; women of color, working class women poor women, disabled women, lesbians, old women- as well as white, economically privileged,
heterosexual women. Anything less than this vision of total freedom is not feminism but merely feminist self-aggrandizement.

The Combahee River Collective was one of the most important black socialist feminist organizations of all time. Primarily a black feminist and lesbian organization this group began meeting in Boston in 1974, a time when socialist feminism was thriving in Boston. The name Combahee River Collective was suggested by the founder and African-American lesbian feminist, Barbara Smith, and it refers to the campaign led by Harriet Tubman who freed 750 slaves near the Combahee River in South Carolina in 1863. Smith said they wanted the name to mean something to African American women that “it was a way of talking about ourselves being on a continuum of black struggle, of black women’s struggle”.

The Combahee River Collective met weekly throughout the year to discuss the different issues related to the welfare of underprivileged women. Black feminists like to institutionalize black feminism and develop an ideological separation from white feminism. They also gave a helping hand to the most needy and suffer. They founded a local battered women’s shelter and worked in partnership with all community activists, women and men, gay and straight playing an active role in the reproductive rights movement. This institution ended their work together in 1980 and is now most widely remembered for developing the concepts of identity. One of the masterpiece texts of black feminism is An Argument for Black Women's Liberation as a Revolutionary Force, authored by Mary Ann Weathers and published in 1969, in radical feminist magazine No More Fun and Games: A Journal of Female Liberation. Weathers states her belief that "Women's Liberation should be considered as a strategy for an eventual tie-up with the entire
revolutionary movement consisting of women, men, and children," but she posits that "(w) e women must start this thing rolling" *(Cell 16* vol. 1, no. 2 (Feb 1969)

In the words of Showalter, for both, Afro-Americans and feminists, the black woman is “other woman, the silenced partner”.(214) She says that black women have protested against “the sexism of black literary history” as well as against the racism of feminist literary history(214). They had to battle on many more fronts against white patriarchy, against white women’s racism and against the sexism of black men. So, in the words of Smith finding themselves and their works irrevocably excluded from both modes of inquiry they are in no men’s land. So, remaining silent they have always militated against the tendency of white feminists to take their own situation as the paradigm of women’s position. They view white women as privileged because of their witness or their heterosexuality as political institutions which have cushioned them against the worst effects of racist and sexist violence. So in the words of Bell Hooks this marginalized position put black women to question their oppression.

Every Black person concerned about our collective survival must acknowledge that sexism is a destructive force in Black life that cannot be effectively addressed without an organized political movement to change consciousness, behavior and institutions. What we need is a feminist revolution in Black life. But to have such a revolution, we must first have a feminist movement. Many Black folks do not know what the word feminism means. They may think of it only as something having to do with white women’s desire to share equal rights with white men. In reality, feminism is a movement to
end all sexism and sexist oppression. The strategies necessary to achieve that end are many. We need to find ways to address the specific forms that sexism takes in our diverse communities. (Hooks, 1992: 124)

According to Hooks, such a specific black feminist movement will not harm or hamper the image of the Blacks Men – as many of them fear – but will instead bring liberation of the race at large closer. A feminist movement that addresses the needs of Black women, men and children can strengthen our bonds with one another, deepen our sense of community and further Black liberation. (Hooks, 1992: 124)

One of the theories that evolved out of the Black feminist movement was Alice Walker’s proposition of womanism which allows her to discuss gender-issue within the frame work of African-American tradition and culture. It is obvious from above description that black women’s situation in society is quite different from white women’s situation. African-American women is both a female and black. So their problem is equal like those two minority groups who are black and those who are female in the society. So, Walker forms her own stand in domain of feminist theory that black feminism stands to white feminism as a “purple to lavender”. (Walker 1984: X11) She borrowed the term “womanism” from her classic essay book *In Search of Mother’s Garden: Womanist Prose* (1983). The word refers to African – American feminism or the feminism of women of color. In a letter published in New York Times Magazine, Walker says:

I don't choose womanism because it is 'better' than feminism.... Since womanism means black feminism, this would be a nonsensical
distinction. I choose it because I prefer the sound, the feel, the fit of it; because I cherish the spirit of the women (like Sojourner) the word calls to mind, and because I share the old ethnic American habit of offering society a new word when the word it is using fails to describe behavior and change that only a new word can help it more fully. (Walker 1984b, 94)

At the beginning of the collection she gives a definition of this “feminist, Afro-centric, healing, embodied, and spiritual” (Razak, 2006: 100) concept:

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

2. Also: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women’s strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally Universalist, as in: “Mama, why are we brown, pink,
and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige, and black?” Ans.: “Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented.” Traditionally capable, as in: “Mama, I’m walking to Canada and I’m taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me.” Reply: “It wouldn’t be the first time.”


4. Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender. (Walker, 1984: xi-xii).

Walker’s womanist theory imbibes Afro–centric historical background which aims struggle for human dignity and empowerment. It also reflects the characteristics of boldness, premature adulthood, and a spirit of inquiry inappropriate to children particularly female children, but which also suggests capability, responsibility and leadership. In the first stanza walker explains its (etymological) origin. This noun form is derived from the black folk adjective “womanish” which is used traditionally between a mother and a daughter talk “you acting womanish “means you trying to be a grownup. Even the four adjectives “outrageous to willful behavior” explains strong determination and a lot of motivation.

Defining the term from ethical and spiritual perspective Gretchen E. Ziegenhals states that womanist is one who is “committed to mutuality, sensuality, creativity and freedom, who speaks out, speaks up speaks against or in defense of something important – a woman who loves herself, her culture and one who is committed to survival”(Smith, Pamela Internet).
She is also, by definition and common usage, women of color, women who inevitably has viewed life and society from the underside.

In this way, I must say that a feminist narrows down her perspective because she limits herself to the emancipation of her sex, a womanist on the other hand is a humanist committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male as well as female. For her the world is garden with every color of flowers represented in it. The validity of black womanism lies in its ability to speak on behalf of and about all human beings. The colored women feel that woman’s cause is one and universal; and that… not till race, color, sex and condition are seen as accidents and not the substance of life: not till the universal title of humanity to life, liberty and pursuit of happiness is conceded to be inalienable to all, not till then is woman’s lesson taught and woman’s cause won not the white woman’s nor the red woman’s but the cause of every woman who has writhed silently under a mighty wrong (Collins 1991: 37)

So the ripe time has come. It was the beginning of modernism in which fight to achieve ‘self’ was the main motto of feminism especially of black women. Since long back in the past the controlling images applied to black women by the Eurocentric masculinist culture are so negative that they were resisted by African woman who sought to replace them with positive self-images. The feminist novel of these writers is an effort to articulate this positive self-image.

The African-American literature reveals Alice Walker’s position as an author and scholar. But an overview of her predecessors, the Afro-Americans’ creative writings and tradition, is essential to understand to
which they have come and the conflicts of image with which their foremothers have had to contend. Their writing which is isolated across time and space is conducted towards radical revision. Hortense J. Spillers comments:

The room of one’s own explodes its four walls to embrace the classroom, the library, and the various mechanism of institutional and media life…. And collection of critical essays. These new arrangements, when perceived against the background of the Black Nationalist Movement and the most recent phases of the women’s Movement in the United States, give us striking insight into the situation of tradition. Traditions are not born. They are made. (Pryse and Spillers 1985, 250).

It goes without saying that, although often neglected, almost from the moment the black set foot on American soil, they have started documenting their feelings. However diverse their situation and their time of writing, black people’s experiences “of Africa, the transatlantic or Middle Passage, slavery, Southern plantation tradition, emancipation, Reconstruction, post-Reconstruction, Northern migration, urbanization, and racism – have produced a residue of shared memories and frames of reference” (Bell, 1981: 5). Unquestionably, throughout the centuries, black people have always considered themselves and their experiences as integral part of American life. Besides they also identified and preserved their own specific black heritage.

The tremendous blossoming of black women writers in America has led to a vigorous questioning of the Eurocentric masculinist worldview.
The literary fashion of ignoring women writers have been challenged by “voices” which were virtually unheard. Through their writings the contemporary Afro-American writers create a self-affirming protagonist; protagonists who are able through their own self-definition to discover their inherent divinity. This inner-spiritual awakening empowers them to establish and overcome their lost glory produced by split up history.

However being born in slavery, the Afro-American literature, before World War I, was called slave–narrative. The writers expressed their psychological trauma due to bound in the shackles of physical and spiritual bondage of American Slavery.

The first African-American work of literature was gifted by poet Phillis Wheatley. Her poem entitled *Poems on various subjects, Religious and Moral* first the first time published in 1773, though it created great disbelief among the white who wondered whether black people could ever excel in the arts. Brought from Africa, as a child slave, she was sold to a merchant. She had no knowledge of English at that time by that time. But gradually and willfully at the age of sixteen, she had managed to master the language with the help of her owners. Wheatley became famous after she wrote a poem on the death of a popular evangelical preacher in 1770. Three years later, her thirty nine poems were published in London. Her work was well appreciated by prominent figures of the time including George Washington, whom she praised in one of her poems.

Slavery narratives, which depicted personal experiences of slaves who had escaped slavery and run to the North, developed in the middle of the 19th century. Their common pattern included physical and psychological
abuse of slavery, hypocrisy of the white owners and the slaves' quest for freedom, peace, honour and education. The narratives gave the people who lived in the North a glimpse of the slave’s relationships with each other, the bond and love between family members and respect of the elders.

Protesting against the sub-human status, the writers of the time used oral and folk tradition known as folklore celebrating the power of “wit” in the face of oppression. Harriet E. Wilson, the earliest known female Afro-American novelist, published her novel, *Our Nig* (1959) highlighting the plight of Mulatto heroine. She confronted hostile reaction due to dealing with taboo on inter-racial marriage. Frances Harper’s most respectable novel *Iola Leroy* (1895) gives a panoramic view of the courage and commitment of mulatoos to freedom, justice, race, and family especially motherhood.

The Harlem Renaissance (1920-1940), originally called the New Negro Renaissance is usually represented a literary and intellectual flowering, based in the African American community in Harlem, New York City. The years between World War I and the Great Depression were characterized by an economic boom which resulted in many jobs. Between 1920 and 1930, around 750,000 African Americans migrated from the South to the North, 175,000 of them to Harlem, which became the largest concentration of black people in the world. Poets Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes, as well as novelists Rudolph Fisher and Zora Neale Hurston are the most famous figure of the era.

The following quote gives authenticity of this duration as one of the most prolific and artistically sound for literature.
In poetry, fiction, drama, and the essay, as in music, dance, painting, and sculpture, African Americans worked not only with a new sense of confidence and purpose but also with a sense of achievement never before experienced by so many black artists in the long, troubled history of the peoples of African descent in North America. (*Norton Anthology. African American Literature*, 1997: 929)

Though male writers maintain themselves as key figure yet mostly women writers suffer and sink into oblivion. Some of them promising women faces of the era continue their importance. Nella Larson’s *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929) reject the romantic extremes of nationalism and assimilation in favour of cultural dualism. She rejects the concept assimilation of black and guides to dare and confront the inner soul-the divided and searching. So to a large extent and essentially till 1940s most black women fiction writer’s deals with refuting the black negativity rooted deep in the society and decidedly imposed by masculine writers of the time. These writers try to project that black women are women, that they are beautiful (fair), pure, upper class, and would be nonaggressive, dependent beings if only racism did not exist.

Actually the Afro-American women, due to “contrary instincts” could not survive because of lack of any particular measure of self-definition. If they hanker or aspire American Dream as pure, refined, protected and well-provided for, they were often destroyed, as in Ann Petry’s heroine in *The Street.* (1946) and in West’s *The Living is Easy.* So, as per saying “every cloud has a silver lining” Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) became the role-model for further writing The follower of Hurston found great inspiration from the protagonist of *TEWG*
who achieves self-fulfillment and understanding. Hurston does present us some vision of possibility in terms of some parity in a relationship between a man and a woman, based not on material gain or ownership of property but on their desire to know one another. So in its radical envisioning of the self as central, and its use of language as a means of exploring the self as female and black, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a forerunner for the fiction of the seventies and the eighties.

The Civil Rights movement had a great impact on black writers from 1940s to 1960s. Just as black activists were trying to put an end to racism and segregation, so were black authors addressing these topics in their writing? Gwendolyn Brooks and Amiri Baraka were famous authors of the time. In the words of Dickson-Carr “African American art and politics often inspired each other.” (12). This is especially relevant for the literature written during this time. An important face of this period is the celebrated poet Sonia Sanchez, who is also a member of the Nation of Islam. Like many artists in the Black Arts Movement she expresses herself in poetry as the genre. Other successful and popular women names are June Jordan, Carolyn Rodgers, Nikki Giovanni, Jayne Cortez and Mari Evans and Gwendolyn Brooks.

The decade of 70s represented another renaissance in black women’s writing. The issues that were addressed included gender, sexism, black womanhood and black female identity; mother-daughter relationships, sisterhood, sexual orientation, black heterosexism, domestic violence, community and culture. The novelists like Toni Morrison, first Afro American to receive the Nobel Prize in 1993, Toni Cade Bambara Jamaica Kincaid, Gloria Naylor and Alice Walker created a body of literature that has been canonized and accepted as part of university curricula. They have
enabled in the words of Alice walker black women, especially those most marginalized by race, caste and class, to have their voices heard and histories read’’. In the field of literary criticism, black women struggled to establish a tradition that would reflect their distinct concerns. The famous literary figure Virginia Woolf said a woman must have a room of her own if she is to write fiction.

Among the black female stalwarts of the contemporary era Maya Angelou’s position is noteworthy. On request of her fellow Arkansan, President Bill Clinton, Angelou read “On the Pulse of the Morning” at the first inauguration on January 20, 1993. Continuing as public poet she also read “A Brave and Startling Truth” at the celebration of the United Nations on June 26, 1995. Her association with Oprah Winfrey has increased her visibility and has secured her role as the mater familias of America’s popular literature. Her first autobiography, I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings (1969) has certainly secured her a place in the canon of American Literature.

Audre Lorde, a self identified “black lesbian feminist warrior poet,” “is the most famous African American writer and activist. She explored her multiple identities as female, black and gay in her writing her political consciousness has deep impact on her lyrics. She put it, “The question of social protest and art is inseparable for me”. Lord gave voice to the voiceless through her work claiming “When I say myself I mean not only the Audre who inhabits my body but all those feisty, incorrigible, beautiful Black Women who insist on standing up and saying I am and you can’t wipe me out no matter how irritating I am”. Her masterpiece book Zami which she herself defines a “new spelling of my name”, a fictionalized account of
Lord’s coming of age as a lesbian and a poet. During the thirties, forties, and fifties Zami is a synthesis of history, biography and mythology that draws on the imagery and symbols of her Caribbean ancestry. It explores women’s emotional well as ironic connection in the context of American sexism, racism, and homophobia, affirming female bonding as an important source of power.

The African American poet playwright and dancer Ntozake Shange provocatively crosses boundaries among poetry, drama and dance, as well as politics, aesthetics, and spirituality in her creative work. Catapulted to national fame with the 1976 Broadway production of her “chore poem” for colored girls, Shange claimed for black women both a beauty and an artistic voice that had been previously denied them through her ground breaking theatrical creation.

Toni Morrison first Afro-American women writer who won Noble Prize and whose popularity has been increasing with the publication of her first novel The Bluest Eye.(1970)Morrison’s assertion informs that for an African American woman writer it is more essential to create for something that provides a stimulating and healthy emotional or intellectual environment for the African American community including both men and women than separate herself from it by assuming a Black feminist stance.

Moreover, many of black feminist authors use the black language and highlighted Afro-American cultural heritage like musical forms, like Jazz and blues hip hop and rap music in their creative writing.

Thus, regarding the context of African American literature it can be briefly judged and concluded that, the writers must have become fed of
depicting recurring struggle due to historical outcome of slavery, from nineteenth century to the contemporary era. But they had firm faith in their efforts which was rewarded at last. And, despite the portrayal of continuous grief causing due to racism, sexism and economic operation of black people, the fiction of Afro American writers in the word of Dickson-Carr from “three decades between 1970 and 2000 constitute the most productive and successful period in Afro-American literary history”(2005,1).

They now frequently appear on best sellers’ list. Their fictions receive wide critical acclaim. They are also being introduced in the curriculum of academic institutions. Besides being the most controversial the fictions are being treated as most exciting and mind-churning. Is it the not surprising fact that many of the pre-eminent leaders of these pioneering new fictions are black women who, as a group, were on long the ‘invisible’ authors in a literary tradition almost as old as the nation itself? Yes, now the same invisible have become visible and its successful signal is being heralded in my further chapters. The novels of Alice Walker’s are going to be explored and churned out with the magic-wand of intellect and consequently they are going to be proved as safe harbour for black women being buffeted about in the high seas of racism, sexism and classicism.
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Chapter-III

Feminism in *Meridian*

She dreamed she was a character in a novel and her existence presented an insoluble problem, one that would be solved only by her ….

Repeat

Repeat *(Meridian,)*

Even when she gave up reading novels that encouraged such a solution and nearly all of them did the dream did not cease. By repeating “She Dreamed” the narrative moves away from reality towards literary consciousness. Moreover the text itself seems ironic because Meridian, the presumptive “she” of this discourse is a black women character whose struggle is focal to the novel’s theme.

*Meridian*, the second novel, occupies a special place in the oeuvre of Alice Walker in the sense that it presents predominantly the women’s world. It is a world where women outshine men in terms of their clear perception of things around them, their courage to cope with their surrounding and come to terms with their losses, their ability to forge an alliance among themselves and learn to live. In an interview to Alice Walker, John O’Brien gives statement that: “central to any consideration of Alice Walker’s fiction is her preoccupation with black womanhood and its myriad shading.”(192)

Walker prefaces her novel with a lengthy list of definitions and traditional usages of the word Meridian. A total of twelve different meanings
are included for both the word’s noun and adjectival form. This alone signifies the fact that Meridian resists easy definition or simple categorization. She is a complex and capacious character whose presence and identity cannot be reduced to a simple phrase or formulation. By symbolically naming her protagonist and by using dictionary excerpts for an epigraph, Walker points out immediately that her central concern is with concepts. Thus *Meridian* shows a remarkable shift in the sense seeking an individual black woman’s situation for its roots and possibilities.

The true meaning of Meridian is related to the mid-sun when the light is brightest and there are no shadows. This title reminds and appears twenty five years after Albert Camus’s *The Rebel*. Camus views that ‘rebellion’ is the act of one who says no, who says there is a limit beyond which you shall not go “reminds that “we are” into the world. He further admits that the rebel ultimately takes his stand not merely out of personal suffering but in the name of “right” and something larger than himself. He believes in common goodness of his community. Talking about the title, Walker gives outstanding comment in her poem in *Once* that “Poverty” was not a calamity for me it was always balanced by richness of light….. Circumstances helped me. To correct a natural indifference I was placed halfway between misery and the sun. The sun taught me history was not everything.” (12)

Walker’s first novel *The Third Life of grange Copeland* has given the ambiguous characterization of women. Raised in 1960, Ruth, the third generation protagonist, comes in contact with some Civil Right activists, who bring changes in her outlook. Guided by her grandfather’s wisdom, she stands poised for a change at the end of the novel.
Walker gives a clarion call to modern black women in *Meridian* which is Walker’s latest and most artistically mature work. She heralds the rise of the feminine consciousness. Among the various relevant issues, the narrative explores the celebration of the female, within the context of a new mythology. The most revolutionary is deconstruction of traditional social and moral values particularly those governing women’s sexuality and motherhood; and the problem which are central to Black-White feminism:

Black women are called in the folk lore that so aptly identifies one’s status in society “mule of the world” because we have been handed the burdens that everyone - else refused to carry we have also been called “Matriarchs,” “superwomen” and mean and evil Bitches” not to mention “castrators” and “sapphire’s” “mama”.(*In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*, p. 237)

However in *Meridian*, Walker enters into a broader arena and portrays a dynamic protagonist Meridian Hill, who rises from her state of oppression to become a leader of the people. She is Walker’s first woman character to survive by her own efforts. *Meridian* is also a political novel, as its theme is based on Civil Rights and Black Nationalistic movement. Walker herself has been active civil right activist. Meridian, who represents Walker, has to undergo a difficult situation in the start. In the words of Deborah E. McDowell:

Hers is a formidable struggle, for she lives in a society that domesticates conformity that censures individual expression, especially for women; but she flourishes notwithstanding and evolves
into a prototype for psychic wholeness and individual autonomy”.

(168)

The story has three phases to understand clearly. *Meridian* talks about three types of black women that walker described in her womanist essay, ‘*In search of Our Mothers Garden*. Like some of her ancestors, Meridian is a “Looney” woman, physically and psychologically abused. Like Phyllis Wheatley and Nella Larsen, she is given the opportunity to become an exception, torn by contrary instincts.” And like the contemporary black woman that Walker envisions Meridian becomes an artist by “expanding her mind with action (Christian 73).

The story begins at a point in the 1970s and is then taken backward to the 1960s, thus tracing the beginnings of the Civil Rights Movement, its violent effect. Walker as a black feminist explores racism and sexism in America which has marginalized the black women’s position from the mainstream. She feels pity of black women’s position even after Civil Rights Movement, Black Arts Movement and movement of Black Nationalism of 1950s 1960s which was firmly rooted in blatant male chauvinism. In the words of Calvin Hernton “The women’s place is seven steps behind the men.”!(41)

It was also observed that in 1963, when Martin Luther king was to deliver his famous speech “I Have a Dream”, the organizers had overlooked to include any women speakers on the original agenda. Thus the document of black male ideology had been primarily the document of machoism and misogyny. The black women for them never appeared as the equal partners
in any field of life. They were just sex-toys and creatures of supportive roles. Alice Walker’s poem “He Said Come” makes it clear:

He said come
Let me exploit you,
And wouldn’t you
Prefer your brother? (50)

The history of blacks in America depicts that prolonged slavery has majorly broken the black women bodily and battered psychologically. Their overall social status was lower than any other social group, so they became more vulnerable to social attack ‘in the words of Gloria Wade Gales:

American is an oppressive system that divides people into groups on the basis of their race, sex and class, creating society in which a few have capital and therefore are able to influence the lives of many. There are three major circles of reality in American society, which reflect degree of power and powerless. There is a large circle in which white people, most of them men, experience influence and power. Far away from it there is a smaller circle, a narrow space, in which black people, regardless of sex, experience uncertainty, exploitation and powerlessness. Hidden in this second circle is a third, a small dark enclosure in which black women experience pain, isolation and vulnerability. (3-4)

Caught in a tripartite crossfire of racism, sexism and classism the black women’s position became pathetic. Bell Hooks argues that “No other in America has so had their identity socialized out of existence as
have black women.’’(7) Historically speaking black women were socialized through oppression which according to Patricia Collins (1990:7) was structured along three independent dimensions: economy, polity, and ideology.

Besides blatant racism and sexism, it is the seamless web of misconceptions, myths and stereotypes that chiefly devastated the personality of black womanhood. Labeled as sub-human, she was provided with a DuBoisian veil not only by the white racist society but also by the sexist black patriarchy. Alice Walker observes “where white women are depicted at least as human beings, black women are depicted as shit.”(52)So, the loss of black woman is irreparable .and incalculable. Alice Walker’s comment is poignant. She says “there is so much ours that is ours that we’ve lost and we don’t even know we’re missing it”.(Tate,83) As a visionary soul she urges black women to quit from the Prefall Edenic state of consciousness, to free themselves from the male assigned position by causing the fortunate fall into knowledge.

In the opening of the first phase of the novel, frail-looking and loony Meridian is in a state of decay. She suffers from “…a faint spell and her hair has fallen out her face is wasted and rough, the skin a sallow unhealthy brown, with pimples across her forehead and on her chin. Her eyes were glassy and yellow and did not seem to focus at once. Her breath like her clothes was sour.” (M7). Walker reflects Meridian’s way of life that is “held by something in her past” (M11). She continues to stay within the action of sixties until she can formulate effective action for the seventies. She is in Chicokema one of the town of South to serve her community people. Herself a civil right activist, Walker tries to show how her heroine’s
life is transformed by the movement due to its violent aftermath and eventual decline. She also presents Meridian’s persistent identification of her body with her soul, her past with her present. Meridian’s close well-wisher and black civil right activist Truman comments on the fluctuating state of Meridian’s life.

He says: I’ve never understood your illness, the paralysis, the breaking down… the way you can face a tank with absolute calm one minute. And the next be unable to move. I always think of you as so strong, but look at you. (M 19)

As an embryo, the first chapter pictures us with the whole. The rest of the novel gives us flesh to Meridian’s essence. The book is a saga of Meridian’s continuous nonviolent protest as conditioned by her own past and the history of the South, a history that has led her to ask impossible questions, she pursues absurd paths. The story moves back and forth from past to present. It means it begins at a point of time in the 1970s and is then taken backward to the 1960s and tracing the cause and effect of the Civil Right Movements.

Meridian’s journey starts from high school dropout and teenaged mother. She musters enough courage to break the “reproduction of mothering” and challenge the stereotype of maternal self-sacrifice (Palmer 204) from black ordinary female to self-assured person which is a great achievement. The novel also pictures the heart-melting slave-stories of Meridian’s mother, grandmother; great-grandmother….that highlights the systematic and continued victimization of black women by whites as an on-
going process. They had a precarious existence due to slavery which causes starvation and slow death.

Mrs. Hill, Meridian’s mother, herself has very bitter experiences from white men and even boys. In a very early age like Alice in Jazz, she “learned to scurry out of the way of the white men because she was good-looking, defenseless and black (M123). Unfairness deep rooted in racist and sexist society towards women comes as an illustration with marriage of Mrs. Hill. Earlier, she roams in fantasy wonderland. As women “they lead a life of euphoria about future happiness but assumed they lived someone else’s, they tried to live of their movie idols; and those lives were fantasy. Mrs. Hill had repentance for not living the desired life. She is a woman who has to suffer for entirely different reason. She never forgives her community, her family, his family (her husband), the whole world, for not warning her against children.(M29). Keeping in view her misery due to marriage and her first pregnancy, “she became distracted from who she was.” and understood that “her personal life was over.”(M29) This example in a way, describes the fate of many women who stoically accept marriage under any condition is the only goal in life for any girl .Walker outlines that most of the black women of this phase do not understand their problems because of their limited worlds where they are treated haphazardly. The experts also observe that as the twentieth century advanced, Black women writers increasingly expressed their sense of betrayal by their male contemporaries, whose ideas and images of the Black community were divorced from what emerging women writers knew to be realistic images of Black men, marriage, and, particularly, motherhood.
In *Meridian*, the emotional aridity of Mrs. Hill’s married life is the root cause of her suffering. So, with a heavy soul and neutral behavior she looks after her children. Her attitude means to all other women that living for children means a dead life as she becomes aware that she is “being buried alive, walled away from her own life, brick by brick” (M51). She feels her children as burden, loses her inner urge and zeal of creativity. Her wish to go back for teaching remains unfulfilled because she does not pass any exam and does not like the new generation students. She gives a very cool and indoctrinated response towards her children.

Mrs. Hill’s daughter, Meridian, the protagonist, as she is very sensitive, realizes her mother’s unwillingness for doing sacrifice for her. She feels guilty for stealing her mother’s serenity, and mother’s emerging self. She knows well that her mother does not give basic and civic knowledge to her adolescent daughter, about sex and motherhood. She never allows her to benefit from the knowledge that she has gained from the past. She keeps Meridian in a “state of ignorance and denies her a chance for a better life” (107). It only perpetuates the general ignorance so pervasive in the black community. She tries to regiment Meridian into role of a mother with a type of vengeance from self-fulfillment and self-realization. Consequently the child Meridian gets molested at her teen age. Losing her virginity she loses the purity and serenity of the girlhood.

While studying in school, she fell in love with Eddie, her class-mate. She enjoys bodily pleasure and gets pregnant at her teenage. In fact like her mother, Meridian too does not relish physical pleasure; rather she loves the warmth, the lying together, the peace. Like Zora Neale Hurston’s protagonist of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Meridian finds her way to understanding
the love that can’t be achieved autonomously but through male acceptance. She expresses her need of Eddie’s, company as social protection:

Being with him did a number of things for her. Mainly, it saved her from the strain of responding to other boys or even nothing the whole category of Men. This was worth a great deal, because she was afraid of men- and was always afraid until she was taken under the wing of whoever wandered across her defenses to become – in a remarkably quick time- her lover. This, then, was probably what sex meant to her; not a pleasure but a sanctuary in which her mind was freed of any consideration for all the other males in the universe who might want anything of her. It was resting from pursuit. (M,54-55)

She further continues:

Once in her “sanctuary,” she could, as it were look out at the male world with something approaching equanimity, even charity; even friendship; For she could make male friends only when she was sexually involved with a lover who was always near- if only in the way the new male friends thought of her as “so-an-so’s girl”. (M54–55)

She bears sex because she “perceived there might be something more (M43), but for Eddie, it was enough that his pleasure should please her. (M43) One of the critic Paula Giddings comments that “what makes a women appealing is femininity and can’t be feminine without being submissive.” (318) Black history evidences that suspending their own feelings the black women became a willing scapegoat to liberate their own men and family. They shrouded their own identity and received their traditional
assigned ‘place’ for the happiness of their better half. Famous and a radical black feminist Bell Hooks comments:

Racist, sexist socialization had conditioned us to devalue our femaleness and regard races as they only relevant label of identification…We clung to the hope that liberation from racial oppression would be all that was necessary for us to be free. We were new generation of black women who had been taught to submit, to accept sexual inferiority and to be silent. (1-2)

Feeling broken and direction-less, she is in a fix, ‘what to do not to do’ to establish herself. Here Walker is focusing on faulty, jaded and jeopardized cultural pattern which assigns traditional ‘place ’and considers female as a subordinate object whereas in the words of Hook “black women and men had struggled equally for liberating during slavery and much of the Reconstruction era….“(4)  She also discovers sex as sordid and emptiness of a premature marriage in Meridian’s cultural milieu. Meridian’s relationship with Eddie, her boyfriend who later becomes her husband also discovers falsehood of a premature marriage in Meridian’s personal history.

Rigidity with such Christianity which costs woman’s happy life, stirs in Meridian a feeling of revolt against it. Neither she accepts herself to be a traditionally devoted wife nor does she accept her subjugation before her husband. Eddie had wanted her only to act as instrument of his sexual satisfaction. Meridian feels hurt and now she becomes conscious of the value of her freedom and identity. She maintains sanctity for her autonomy as a wife and disallows Eddie to be superior as a husband. She resents deeply the privileges Eddie claims as a man. She does not run at his
command. She questions “Why did his pants and shirts to be starched and ironed after every second wearing? Whereas, she herself had “learnt to wear her clothes longer than two days without changing them.”(44)

Moreover she does not even accept him as her intellectual superior only because he is a man. She complains that he, like most of the boys of his age will never grow even to become the “president” of the local bank (70) . But she feels disturbed when she finds that Eddie still goes to school only because he is a boy, though he knows nothing about books or about the world (M71) but she is deprived of it because she is married and pregnant. This discrimination infuriates her and she alienates herself from her husband, Eddy, leading to the end of her marriage in divorce. This step is totally shocking for her mother.

Walker attacks the double standards of men. She, much like any other Afro-American writers, exposes the conflict between the female protagonists with their father, brother, husband, sister, society and conventional custom. The fiction of these novelists is generally proposed by similar themes and motifs. There is usually a black heroine who is involved in quest to find a meaningful identity and to survive for dignity in the society- a society where norms and standards of living, conduct and beauty are totally different from the standards of the protagonists. They strive to overcome triple oppressions as black in white supremacist society, as women in a patriarchy, and as workers under capitalism.

Walker gives another example of patriarchy through the episode of “The True Story of Marilene O’shay” which proves that the society could not ignore enough, even mummy’s (wife’s’) sexual adventures
for her own pleasure but strangely ignores husband’s cruelty of commodifying the wife. Marilene O’shay a white woman was supposed to be “lay back and be pleased” (M.3) But the high-headed husband Henry charges adultery on her, that “she, corrupted by the honeyed tongues of evildoers that dwell in places far way, ”had gone outside the home to seek her “pleasuring”, While still expecting him to foot bill.” His further wonton acts are as follows

Just because he caught her giving some away .he shot the man, strangled the wife Threwed’em both into salt lake….everybody forgive him. Even her ma. ’Cause the bitch was doing him wrong, and that ain’t right...years later she washed up on shore, and he claimed he recognized her by her long red hair… Thought since she was so generous herself she wouldn’t mind the notion of him sharing her with the American public. He giggles then “he drags her around from town to town”. (M22)

An Indian scholar Shobha De comments on necessity of marriage in a women’s life in India in her Socialite Evening “A woman cannot live alone .It is not safe….A woman needs a man’s protection. Society can be very cruel…. A woman’s real place is in her husband’s house-not in her parents…”(275-276) But there is no value of marriage and its sanctity in America. Walker’s Marilene has no protection even by her husband, who is a male brat .Thus; Walker’s Meridien sensed the male’s intriguiness and cunningness who used wife as a commercial commodity to earn money by displaying her as “freak-show” and collects the black children to unmask the treachery. She says “She was a fake they discovered that. There was no salt, they said.”(22) If Marilene O’shay was objectified and privatized while
alive, she is commodified and marketable once dead. A better analogy would be the corpse of the Grimms Brother’s Snow White, displayed in her shining glass casket, with Prince Charming telling the dwarves he must have “it” no matter what the cost is!

It is also similar case in Arundhati Roy’s *God of Small Things* where Ammu, the miserable female protagonist’s forbidden sexual relationship with an untouchable can’t be ignored but Chacko’s (the male protagonist) sexual adventures were totally overlooked. Roy too assaults the lop-sided values of this male dominated society. Emma Goldman in *The Traffic in women and Other Essays on Feminism* very rightly comments, “Society considers the sex experiences in the life of a woman, as looked upon as a terrible calamity, a loss of honor and all that is good and noble in a human being.” (77) For black leaders, black were never beautiful and black women were no more significant than merely as sex objects. Their hypocrisy became clear when they accepted white feminity as the mark of real beauty. Eldrige Cleaver’s hatred for black women and fascination for whiteness is worth noticing:

I love white women and hate black women. I would jump over ten nigger bitches just to get one white women …. A white women is beautiful even if she is bald headed and has only one tooth… There is softness about white women, something delicate and soft inside. But a nigger bitch seems to be full of steel granite hard and resisting, not soft and submissive like white women. Ain’t nothing more beautiful than white woman’s hair…She is like a goddess, a symbol. My love for her is religious and … I worship her I love a white woman’s dirty drawers. (159)
Malcolm X’s autobiography discloses his love for pimp duties and bold negation for feminity. While going through his autobiography one can easily smell his antagonistic attitude towards female. Mr. Ramond is an aged black sexist character in the novel. He is a university professor and renowned as he has written many books on various aspects of farming. But he too tried to rape Meridian. She comments:

He wanted her to sit on his lap, which she would sometimes do. Then he would open up his desk drawer and pullout the goodies he bought for her. Tins of tuna, bags of mints and … nestled his long nose in her hair … so that some of the desperate delight he was experiencing would work its way up into his limp penis. (M77)

In Meridian, Truman, is represented as chief black sexist who idealizes, in his paintings and sculptures, an abstract African woman as “Superhuman strength,” W.E.B. Dubois (1961:23), one of the eminent Afro-American thinkers and Sociologists of the twentieth century, makes an open proclamation that “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of “color line”(23 ) (emphasis added). The editor of The New Negro Alain Locke also opines that New Negro are the advance guard of the African peoples. He means to say that black women are sidetracked merely as sex objects.

After an early marriage and divorce, Meridian, yet a teenage mother, gives up her child to accept a scholarship to go to college. Then, she meets Truman who is black and political activist from North. He is the staunch supporter of black people’s rights. He also protects the virtue of black women from white men. However in his private life, he oppresses the black
women as much as the white do. Meridian is in love with him in her seventeen. She comments “You looks fantastic, She threw open the door for him, she cuddles up in his arms (M64) She enjoys his company, She loved being with Truman. However Truman starts dating a white girl, Lynne Rabinowitz. He does not reject Meridian outright but marries Lynne because she is white-skinned girl. Meridian feels bad and insulted and compares the quality between the conditions of the two. She remembers everything that she can about white women. According to her:

The white women only seemed to hang about laughing, after school, until when they were sixteen or seventeen when they got married. Their pictures appeared in society columns, you saw them pregnant couple of times. Then you were no longer able to recognize them as girls as you once “knew.” They sank into permanent oblivion. One never heard of doing anything very interesting.”(M108)

Black women on the other hand, were always “escaping to become something unheard of”. Meridian notices that since “sex”, the major cause is, rife with dangers; it bounds to make extraordinary sacrifice. Throughout the novel the role that sex plays in the development of girl child into woman boy child into men, is at best static, at worst tragic .The body as sensual is always problematic. Girls, often realize it too late that it is through the fecundity of their bodies their lives can be ruined and limited and this becomes worth only for appealing men, who enjoy the fruit and this realization comes too late. For all their bodies’ assertion, the girls moved protected in a dream that had little to do with the real boys galloping past them. For they did not perceive them clearly but as they might become in a different world from the one they lived in [M].
Truman cajoles Meridian as “African Queen” upon whom he would like to bestow the honour of bearing his “beautiful black babies”(M”80). He exploits Meridian with soft words like “I think I’m in love with you, African women .Always have been. Since the first.”(M79) She gets acquainted with the fact of his marriage with Lynne a white lady. She feels ashamed of herself as being black as if “she is less”(106) whereas Lynne is a beacon of victory, the symbol that proclaims Truman’s equality with the white man since he possesses a white woman, as it is already discussed in Introduction,

Looney women are Walker’ suspended characters who belong to eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and early decades of twentieth century. Walker calls them suspended because they are physically and psychologically abused. Meridian’s early phase is depicted as suspended due to being trapped under external circumstances. She is one of those black girls who become rape victim in her early age. Her frequent sexual exploitation by many male characters like funeral- parlour director Dexter at the age of twelve, by his assistant, then Raymond a black professor her lover- cum- ex husband Eddie and then cunning Truman reminds the fate of all those who in the words of June Jordon are “black-eyed Susans –flowers of the blood-soaked American soil.”(40)

Walker questions the relative importance of sex in a woman’s life. She tries to suggest that notion that women’s existence is only for sexual pleasure is a sexist myth which celebrates the power of man’s potency. Besides, she criticizes pregnancy as second negative experience with Meridian which changes her velvety skin into “bloated and tight”.(M72) But she boldly struggles and overcomes her turmoil by searching an alternative, because, unlike her mother and great-grandmothers, Meridian lives in an
age of choice. As an extension of Ruth who has achieved “self-realization, spiritual and psychological triumph,” (Winchell, 1992, 56) Meridian develops her historical consciousness at the age of seventeen. She moves to Atlanta to join civil rights movement.

Even after the heyday of the Civil Rights Movement, discrimination continues. She, as social worker, joins midnight march in protests against town’s segregated hospital facilities. She participates in freedom march to the freedom songs and keeping midnight vigil. She is trampled and knocked down in a mass violence causing people running back and forth. The sheriff grabs her by the hair and other punches and kicks her in the back. She sees old women dragged out of stores and beaten on the sidewalk, their humility of a lifetime doing them no good. She sees young black men of great spiritual beauty changed overnight into men who valued nothing.

Walker recalls the days of slavery when the poor black female were tagged as production house where black children were snatched from mother’s womb and were forcibly changed into bond-labour. It is positively correct that, Motherhood is one of the much-talked postmodern feminist themes which the writers like to highlight. Specially Alice walker’s *Meridian* broadly focuses on image of African-American mother who were projected as “Superwoman”. Walker and her contemporaries work towards dismantling traditional stereotypes of Black Motherhood particularly the Black superwoman stereotype, and thereby, ultimately redefining Black womanhood. As it is quoted by Barbara Christian in *Novels for Everyday Use*: 
Since, in principle, society places motherhood on a pedestal, while in reality, it rejects individual mothers as human beings with needs and desires, mother must both love their role as they are penalized for it. True for all mothers, this double-edged dilemma is heightened for black women because society does not value their children. As they are praised for being mothers, they are also damned as baby machines who spew out their products indiscriminately upon the society. (87)

Walker, in regard to Meridian, repents that it is very tough decision for her, to give up the own baby, because a ‘mother’ is the supreme asset on earth because of her good luck to give birth to a baby. This makes the mother preserver of new generation. A mother gives strong moral values to her child who becomes the base of the future generation. In her recent interview, Walker says that a mother can end war from earth because of her motherly love and forgiveness. The battle fatigue which Meridian bears and encounter, creates the endless guilt-feeling. Her emotional fatigue due to crushing motherly instinct gets dominant due to putting child for adoption. Even though knowing that he is being nourished and fostered better than her own care, yet, she doesn’t forget and forgive herself. She feels that she has abandoned both her son and her own heritage.

Meridian knew that enslaved women…had laid their lives, gladly, for their Children, that the daughters of these enslaved women had thought their greatest blessing from “freedom” was that it meant they could keep their own children. And what had Meridian Hill done with her precious child? She had given him away. She thought…of herself as belonging to an unworthy minority, for which there was no
precedent and of which she was, as far as she knew, the only member. (M, 91)

Meridian has no objection regarding children. But she has great objection against the role of mother regarding child-rearing. According to this rule, a mother, particularly, the mythical Black Mother should herself sacrifice to provide all happiness to the child at the cost of her own independence. As it is obvious that sacrifice is the core of any relationship and at the peak of this sacrificial hierarchy stands the relationship between parent and child. In nurturing them Walker’s parents also had to give up their own lives. Even children know that their pleasure and survival is the outcome of parent’s committed acts of extraordinary suffering. A mother not only plays many important roles in the family but also she inculcates old values and tradition to the new generation thereby providing a strong cultural base for the young generation. Great honor and prestige is obtained by a woman as a mother for motherhood is the cherished ideal.

So, Walker breaks this societal myth of black women as stereotyped. Black Motherhood proves big constraints to Meridian’s life as her own existence becomes secondary to the child. This makes her think “so this is what slavery is like”. (69) She reacts badly and even she dreams to search the way to murder him. In characteristic fashion, she is consumed by self-doubt and vacillation. This leads her towards frustration and even thoughts of self-destruction. Here, the writer intends to present a grim situation of ambitious young woman who are sandwiched between her convention and self-independence. This shows that a woman loses her identity after her marriage.
Meridian takes another step in the direction of her freedom by refusing to play the role of an adopting mother by the Christian religion. She was so firm in her decision that even her mother’s emotional appeal failed to persuade her to carry the burden of rearing her child. After the birth of her son, he did not feel anything to her but “a ball and a chain” (M-69), tending the needs of the child was slavery. She hankered for freedom and realized as though something perched inside her brain, was about to fly she does not want to raise her child in a society, “where children are not particularly valued” (M124.)

The feeling of endless guilt causes deep frustration to Meridian, so she is plagued by a mysterious illness, much like epilepsy, which parallels and triggers her spiritual and physical transformation. The sickness renders her unconscious, she refers to as “falling down,” and it subjects her to paralysis, blindness, and hair loss. On one hand, the condition connects her directly with her father and great-grandmother, who had suffered the same burden. The illness is also the physical rendering of Meridian’s deep emotional and spiritual anguish, the grief and sadness that have marked and gripped her throughout her life. The illness becomes a means for Meridian to suffer, to perform penance for this ambiguous wrong she felt she has done. It also offers her atonement and, ultimately, self-acceptance. She explains to Truman that she had volunteered to suffer until her people are released from oppression. She limits her needs and controls her desires: “each time visited Meridian he found her with less and less furniture, fewer and fewer pieces of clothing, less of a social position in the community-when ever it was—where she lived” (24)
Thus by weeding out her guilt-ridden unbecoming attitude she shows her penance for those historical mothers whose children were snatched by racists for using them as bond-laborer. In a state of utter dejection and depression, she heard Miss Winter’s whispering in her ear “I forgive you”. (M, 158), whom she mistakes her mother; she is sufficiently healed to agree to live. Her existential alienation marks the symptom of twentieth century individuals.

So at the advent of twenty first century there is an important development for Black women. Black women writers increasingly reject the distorted image as exhausting and burdensome, thus shaking the heavy load from their collective background. Walker never advocates the traditional picture of black women which were depicted ‘as black Madonna image’. She follows Zora Neale Hurston, her literary mentor. Like Hurston, Walker, frequently depicts to borrow Barbara Christian’s term, “wayward” (457) artist-women who begin as frail and dependent and evolve into spiritually strong, independent characters controlling their own lives and severing themselves from anything that diminishes their hard-won sense of self, most notably domesticity.

The continuous ordeal opens the canvas of Meridian’s mind. Her mental journey leads her to form an alternate set and values rejecting the sterile and meaningless western orbit. She prefers to lead an independent life of her own, separated from her family and the cadre that excluded her alone. She performs spontaneous and symbolic act of rebellion, like carrying a corpse of a drowned black child to the major’s office, to protest against the town’s officials neglect of drainage and ditches in black neighborhood. She accomplishes better social works to justify her human life. Stein writes:
Walker’s novel affirms that it is not by taking life that true revolution will come about, but through respect for life and authentic living of life... gained only through each individual’s, slow painful confrontation of self.”(140)

Living in an age of choice, Alice walker as a black feminist has tried to champion the freedom of black women from oppression of all kinds to total empowerment of self as well as the wholeness of the community. The opinion of Robin R. Warhol about female identity is described in black feminism is as follows:

Generally speaking, female identity is a political, social and cultural stance that is pro-women – what keeps feminism in a constant state of dialogue, however is the fact that feminists do not necessarily agree about the definitions of terms as basic as women. Let alone what it would mean, precisely, to be pro woman “(308).

As the novel progresses to the middle phase there comes changes in the perception. There is inner - awakening in her various protagonists. They establish sisterhood and take precedence over relationships of men and women. The novel Meridian presents several instances of black women in the past who committed infanticide in the pattern of Morrison’s ‘Sula’ in which Eva Peace finally frees herself from motherhood by burning her own son. In Meridian there are many black women who raised their voice against injustice done by male dominated society. Like Ursa and Sula, Meridian achieves a new and free black feminine identity by denying the reproductive imperative of her maternal ancestress Sula’s often quoted refusal of motherhood: I don’t want to make somebody else. I want to make myself.
Viewing childrearing as a kind of slavery. (Sula 14). These stories of several black women for whom reproduction entails suicide or murder serve the function of demythicizing the tradition of ideal black motherhood.

Pretention is a kind of shallowness. The Saxon College represents bureaucratic mentality which gives stress on “form” and “rule”. Walker does its mockery through the episode of Wild Child. It is given as an anecdote in the novel, is related to the sufferings of other women through images of childbearing, murder and suicide. The Wild Child is a young girl who has managed to survive without parents, relatives or friends. At the age of thirteen she is observed to be pregnant roaming into slum area near to Saxon-college campus. Unkempt, unpredictable loud and independent Wild Child embodies the opposites of every Saxon’s societal norms. Her only language comprised of obscenities…. She kills herself and her unborn baby by running under a car, another nameless girl in prison kills her own child. When the president of Saxon College denies coffin into the chapel of Saxon college, it touches Meridian emotionally, she realizes the mockery and falsehood of so-called intellectual climate at college which aims to teach the lesson of humanity.

The episode of Louvinie clearly depicts how she reacts against white racist family. Louvinie is a black slave who was brought from West Africa to the South plantation. She gives service to white family. The children in family insist her for listening horror stories. Her stories were blood-chilling which cause a boy of seven year suffering from flimsy heart. As a result they cut Louvain’s tongue. Louvinie too violates the mammy’s role assigned on her by her slave master by indirectly killing of a white child who was in her charge and it was considered as an act of political resistance against
enforcement, which is literally a symbol of loss of speech. Louvain buries it in the ground, which nourishes the flourishing growth of the magnolia tree. For the coming generation of black women this tree is symbiotically a non-reproductive black feminine community.

After decades of Louvain’s demise the girls at Saxon college manage a “commemoration” around the magnolia tree to which “any girl who had ever prayed for her period to come was welcome”. (M45) “It was the only time in all the many social activities at Saxon that every girl was considered equal on that day they held each other’s hands tightly” (M45) Later on, the girls at Saxon chop down the sojourner tree. It was a symbolic destruction of their reproduction. The very name of historical figure Sojourner Truth, the originator and an activist who worked against black enslavement is celebrated here as a maternal history. Walker’s imaginative inclusion of “Sojourner, a giant magnolia tree, contains with it the quality of powerlessness as well as strength. Susan Willis writes:

Named the Sojourner, the magnolia conjures up the presence of another leader of black women, who like Louvinie, used language in the struggle for liberation. In this way Walker builds a network of women, some mythic like Louvinie, some real like Sojourner Truth, as the context of Meridian’s affirmation and radicalization (114).

Throughout the novel, Meridian tries to bridge the gap between this mythical black mother and her own experience of motherhood as an oppressive burden. Like Ursa Corregidor, Meridian feels tortured by guilt as she can’t live up with expectation to the maternal history of her ancestors. While Ursa feels unworthy because her hysterectomy makes her incapable
of fulfilling the reproductive goal of her maternal ancestors history, on the contrary, Meridian disqualifies herself from the historical tradition of black motherhood by rejecting away her our child.

It is well said ‘educated people are easy to lead but hard to enslave’. Through her text Walker makes it clear that a girl like Meridian who has studied and gained wisdom can understand the amount of sacrifice her mother has done. It is clear that black children survived because their parents “committed acts of extraordinary suffering,” (Christian 82), so Meridian feels guilty. She expresses her deep gratitude to her mother who always dreams about her daughter’s betterment in the following lines.

Meridian found, which she was not preoccupied with the movement that her thoughts turned with regularity and necessity to her mother on whose account she endured wave after wave of an almost primeval guilt. She imagined her mother in church in which she had invested all that was still energetic in her life, praying for her daughter’s soul and yet, having no concern, no understanding of her daughter’s life. WHATSOEVER; but Meridian did not condemn her for. Away from her mother, Meridian thought of her as Black Mother personified, and of that great institution she was in terrible awe, comprehending as she did the horror, the narrowing of perspective for mother and for child it had invariably meant.” (M92-93)

Walker’s history and heritage provide a vehicle to understand modern and independent world where her women characters do not wreath in pangs of slave narrative rather they demonstrate an emergent and emancipated black mother. Meridian thought that had she stayed with her mother-in-law
to look after her child by doing some menial job, her and her son’s life would have become a total waste. She believes in her self-empowerment.

Meridian does embark upon her journey towards self independence by challenging the distorted image by racist and sexist black writers mainly Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright portrays black women as nagging bitches, whores and mute creatures who do not exist equal as partner. They are depicted as ‘scapegoat agents to fulfill masculine will. They grant their female characters neither the attributes nor the opportunities to think, act and feel freely in his literary text. They place the black women as temptresses, loose, immoral. Bell Hooks argues: “the idealized woman becomes property, symbol and ornament she is stripped of her essential human dignity… she is the spittoon in which men realize their negative anti-woman feeling”. (101)

Basically revolting against society’s entrusted rules of female as sub-human, Meridian wants to give some meaning to her life as an individual. She knows that education and struggle are the base to find her own path and identity which enable her to attain, “the highest point of power, prosperity splendor, health, vigor, etc.”(M12) and develops “a completeness of being.”(M130) Trapped in her own lethargy she felt directionless and she was searching a way out. A sudden bomb blast does what the community and family have failed to do.

In fact, Meridian’s involvement in the civil rights movement is the step to compensate her unfulfilled desire for living upto the standard. As a volunteer, Meridian, adopts typing and teaches illiterates to read and write. So she finds a sea-change in her persona which inspires her to join the school on account of scholarship which she receives by a generous and
wealthy white family in Connecticut. After getting a scholarship she joins the Saxon college which was only two hours away and just across the street from Truman’s school. Meridian is energized by a future generation coming into its full power and raising its voice in opposition against the institutional racism that dominated through the 1960s. Through occasional violent protests and demonstrations, Meridian and other activists attempt to institute change and alter perceptions.

Meridian’s education at Saxon college brings explicit changes in her outlook which has become modern. Her stylish dress code is a deliberate reaction against the convention and tradition. She symbolizes a site of radical, redefining of black womanhood against Truman’s nationalistic fantasy of the black woman as an Amazonic bodily plentitude, but also the black middle class ideal of “processed feminity”(M39). She recalls historical sacrifices and becomes aware of herself as an adventurer. She feels proud to be the follower of her racial ancestors women like Harriet Tubman, who led troops in battle. She recollects the courage of Feather Mae, Meridian’s outrageous great-grandmother “the black woman struck out for the unknown”- the pleasure, the ecstasy of the body, she experienced in Indian religion.

Walker highlights the black women’s great passion of becoming modern, independent and fashionable. “They left home scared, poor black girls and came back (some of them) successful secretaries, schoolteachers or doctors, all had one thing in common: They altered their appearance. They bleached their hair, streaked with silver ,or perhaps they wore wig.” and made other things , all under guise of “self improvement”(M108)Meridian, now, herself aware of their good qualities believes that with Eddie and
Truman she had lacked courage, lacked initiative or a mind of her own. This awakening would keep her and Truman apart. She boldly negates his deformed perception about black woman and says “but “I am not just superwoman” (32) I am strong actually. Her skeletal frame clearly marks the bodily difference. Truman comments ‘ you make yourself a catatonic behind a lot of meaningless action’ she reacts and corrects his perception who considers her as repository of black feminity, which marks black beauty as long hair, ‘fat’ “voluptuous” “magnificent giant” “monstrous” flanks and “breasts like melon”. Meridian comes to know that it is desire and attachment which are root cause for women’s marginalization. Here it is apt to quote some lines of the poem *The Binding Vine* by Shashi Deshpandey.

‘Desire’ says is the cause of grief;

But how escape this cord

This binding vine of love?

Fear lies coiled within

this womb piercing joy.

Smiling and joyful ,

Karna Tore off his armour

His body trailed blood.

Will that courage be mine when. denuded, 

I stand naked and bare?(136)
The continued mental progress during inner-self confrontation inspires Meridian to retreat back to move ahead in future. She leaves Atlanta and settles in a small town in Mississippi distinctly known for its backwardness and blatant racism. It is well-said ‘God helps those who help themselves’. Meridian gives up Truman for the sake of greater mission that is to serve the god’s people. The great scholar Alma S. Freeman says Meridian has to reject Truman “in an effort to get a hold of her own life”. Truman also goes to work in the South where Lynn feels cheated because of her love for Truman has been a form of slavery. Leaving no chance of discovering herself, unlike Meridian, Lynn too breaks through her bondage as wife and mother.

Stealing away her mother’s serenity causes Meridian to do penance. So, she struggles with the bitterness she feels as a woman used and discarded by a man. Here she searches the solutions to the “dilemma of human beings ‘injustice to one another”(Christian,1980,210) She returns South which is her root, to recover from long illness, from headaches, seizures, thinning hair, and strange fainting spells. She invites all her near and dear black sisters to celebrate against injustice inflicted upon them by racists and sexist society. Miss winter plays a crucial role in the healing of Meridian. She deliberately rises against Saxon college’s false politics. She teaches her jazz, spirituals and blues in her music class and fighting with the president and the college dean. She is a griot through whom Meridian recognizes her own role to preserve the tribe’s song (M162). Keeping in mind Walker’s believe in androgyny, again it reminds the few lines of the Sashi Deshpande’s poem entitled *The Binding Vine*: 
Come, my brothers, come my sisters,

Let us join our hands,

a new road, a new way

A new age begins…

Rejecting individual motherhood once and for ever Meridian becomes a universal mother to the black children. In the word of Christian, Meridian does not present motherhood itself as restrictive (90). Walker being herself a mother, goes into a deep analysis about role of mother for the all round development of the children. They must be emotionally, intellectually and physically inspired for a healthy growth of a society, a community and of the nation. So, Meridian always favors to be surrounded by the local children after abandoning her own child. She wants to give them new perspective with all sacredness of life. Her suppressed motherhood urge yields to her a new outlook of life that of “expanding her mind with action”. In keeping with this principle walker tells us in her essay “One Child of One’s Own : “It is not my child who has purged my face from history and her story and left mystery just that, a mystery my child loves my face above all others, and refused to let them be denied or myself to let them go” (361).

She collects confidence for a positive self- image and opts for universal motherhood. The opening of the novel features Meridian, a quiet revolutionary, leads a group of children along with the father of her aborted child,(Truman) who follows her to small town in Georgia. He watches bemused as she stares down the town’s gaudy with tank, “brought during the sixties when the town’s people, who were white, felt under attack from
outside agitators, those members of the black community who thought equally. Equal rights for all should extend to blacks (M 18). In the word of Deborah E. McDowell “It is significant that much of the novel is set in coastal Georgia, where the survival of Africanism—particularly of the oral, religious, and musical traditions is said to be most salient.”(272)

It is said that Ethical religion demands the individual attuning himself with the rhythm of moral law. According to Gandhi one who is not prepared to order his life in unquestioning obedience to the laws of morality cannot be said to be a man in the full sense of the term. Ethics is not an outward process but of inward fulfillment of deep conviction accompanied by right action. Socrates’ famous dictum ‘virtue is knowledge’ implies that right thought must result in right action. Meridian finds herself unfit for adjusting with a succession of social group from her church congregation, and a cadre of would-be violent revolutionaries. Likes her father, she is sensitive and listens to her heart, which is an abode of ‘purity’.

Overall, the novel depicts a woman whose chief aim in life is not only marriage and motherhood, but also, a woman who has a conscious moral choice to be an individual. Meridian Hill fights with her emotions, rejects the stereotypical roles imposed on society, commits whole heartedly to serve her community. She braves all impediments and the people honour her for her devotion and dedication. One scene in Meridian delineates the everyday quality of familial rage in Walker’s fiction. A woman who believes that her family and community as well as the racial barriers and social order of the South have all combined to rob her of a full life, irons into her.(M 219) She gives her love, affection and protection to unknown children of the surrounding. Even in Atlanta, she observes a brutal treatment with them.
Once, she invites a young black girl to join a protest march, but as a result of the revenge, she hears a heart breaking screams of the girl, who was lying in a corner of the jail.

In the last phase Meridian is totally unconcerned about her own existence. Leaving north as a failure as Ann-Marion’s type of revolutionary, she returns to the South to live among her own people, choosing life-giving-rather life-destroying concept. It is from South only she discovers the power and receives strength from its vital tradition of religion. Walker insists that to find solace from any pain there must be healthy unity of body and soul. So, Meridian tries to heal up her mental fatigue through music, which is the true medicine for healing the agony of heart which she feels after deserting her son. In the following lines she reveals her passion for music.

Meridian alone was holding onto 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 be, not holding onto 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 by, by the sight of young girls singing in a country choir, their hair shining with brushing and grease, their voices the voices of angles. When she was transformed in church, it was always by the purity of the singers’ souls which she could actually hear the purity that lifted their songs like a flight of doves above her music drunken head. It they committed murder and to her even revolutionary murder was murder_ what would the music be like? She
had once jokingly asked Ann-Marion to imagine the Mafia as a singing group. (M14-15)

The focus on music of course signifies its black cultural background. Meridian undergoes an epiphany in the black church when she feels that music is more martial and the picture in the glass window looks similar to blues singer rather than traditional Christ figure. For Walker, music is her own her strength for creation. In the words of Christian:

But Walker does not merely rest on this often stated truism, for she shows that the reason why music is so central to the culture is because it is the deepest connective between the creative force in human being and nature itself. Through the makings of music, nature is renewed despite man’s attack on it, just as the ripped out tongue of the slave Louvenie becomes the seeds for the Sojourner, the Music Tree, and the most beautiful magnolia tree in the land.”(80)

Walker probably uses black music which grew and gave louder voice in the form of Sojourner. Meridian too belongs to that legacy of the past which embodies the idea of personal suffering for a great cause. Walker makes Meridian modern day griot who will keep the voices of the people alive and soothe the warriors with her song.

Another impressive transformation which Meridian finds is beauty of black church due to external and internal changes. But now it has a changed resonance unlike her father’s time of visiting the same church. What strikes her at first is its physical change: Not like the one’s of her childhood; it was not shabby or small. It was large, of brick, with stained-glass windows…an
imposing structure; and yet it did not reach for the sky, as the cathedrals did, but settled firmly on the ground. (M259)

Now it gives a sermon of different mode and mood. In the voice of the preacher, launches into an attack on “Ticky Dick” Nixon the agenda he has in the 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 when to participate in the Vietnam War. He told the young woman 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 neighborhoods to go to school. He abused the black teachers who did not he said, work hard enough to teach black youth because they obviously had no faith in them” God was not mentioned, except as a reference. (M 195-96)

Meridian’s heart moved to locate the portrait of “B.B. with a sword” (M267) in place of Christ with stray lamb, In the words of McDowell(1981,274) here there is apt reference of blue singer B.B. King. Walker says that by highlighting his contribution, the black community had paid the tribute to a young martyr of civil right movements. Meridian is overwhelmed with the love in her heart for this young man, who sacrifices for the happy cause. She enjoys a feeling of togetherness, righteousness, convergence and communal spirit.

The author who is committed to the survival of the whole (the black community) aims for a transformed soul of the black people who must understand their own heritage, who must know their fundamental duties and
right and who must know the value of honoring humanity with their compassionate conduct. In the process of attempting social change through the movement, Meridian discovers her own personal path, this self-discovery is itself the core of the novel.

“…the music, the form of worship that has always sustained us, the kind of ritual you share with us, (they were saying) these are the ways to transformation that we know, we want to take this with us as far as we can. Listening to the congregation’s hymn, she feels a “breaking in her chest”. (M269)

Finally, she gets spiritually transformed. She understands:

that the respect she owed her life was to continue against whatever hurdles comes up to live and not to give up any particle of it without a fight to the death, preferably not her own under a large tree beside the road, crowded now with the cars returning from church, she made a promise to the red-eyed man herself that yes, indeed, she would kill before she allowed anyone to murder his own son again. (M269)

However she leaves the church with the promises that she would kill before she will let the other be killed. Meridian however is destined like those who only stand and wait to bear arms in defense of a cause. She feels weakened with her promise to the red-eyed man but she has discovered her true role in the revolution. She promises to serve as an artist and not as a killer.

I have been allowed to see how the new capacity to do anything including kill for our freedom…beyond sporadic acts of violence …is
to emerge, and flower but I am not yet at a point of being able to kill any one myself, not except for the false urgings that came to me in periods of grief and rage will I ever be I am a failure then, as the kind of revolutionary Ann-Morison and her acquaintances were. (M271)

Meridian further reminds her promise:

I will come forward and sing from the memory songs they will need once more to hear. For it is the song of the people transformed by the experiences of each generation, that holds them together and if any part of it is lost people suffer and are without soul. (M271)

Walker seems to liberate her characters from social barriers in the past. In the words of Karen F. Stein “In defining herself as an artist, Meridian determines her salvation. Her art, hard-worn from personal struggle, will be life-giving, not death dealing”(139).Meridian’s personal life reflects her that sexism and racism have entrapped black women “in a double encoding system”(Nadal,158) Her struggle for selfhood represents the black woman’s reaction against socio-economic conditions enforced by the colonialist representational paradigm. Meridian neither likes to become Jezebel (sex-symbol) nor mammy (baby sister) she rejects the image of the “happy slave” (Collins 130-131) She has paved her own way by sifting through her cultural heritage within a communal value-system. She reconnects with the black heritage and community in search of an Afrocentric consciousness and a meaningful life.

She seems to derive her strength from the redemptive possibilities of female coalescence in which women’s value-system based on mutual sharing and interdependence becomes the sole strategy for survival. By
doing so, the African-American women writers are known as image makers of black womanhood. Lord’s statement that black women writers should hand not only with “the external manifestations of racism and sexism “ but also “with the result of those distortions internalized within our consciousness of our-self’s and one another” (Henderson 121) seems to be the major concern of these authors. It is assumed that this positive images created by these authors will be helpful in eradicating racist and sexist definition of black women in U.S.

When Truman, devastated by confusion and guilt, asks Meridian if her love for him is changed, she responses, “No, I set you free” (M293). She refuses to be a “port” or “shed” in his life. Yet, he begs her for the true love which flows into a man’s life “like a special sun, like grace” (M 293). She firmly advises him not to take any interest in her and gives advice to attempt for his own to bring “sun “and “grace” in his life. As a friend, she again pitifully suggests to search for his wholeness in life. It proves that releasing herself from the sexual bond she intends to pursue her own wholeness. Meridian comes to know that it is desire and attachment which are root cause for women’s marginalization. She no longer possesses any bitterness and pain:

You are free to be whichever way you like, to be with whomever, of whatever color or sex you like-and what you risk in being truly yourself, the way you want to be, is not the loss of me though she adds that he is not free…to think that she is a fool. (M293)

In the concluding chapter Walker shows that Meridian’s physical deformities are taking its final healthy shape. She looks refloirished and her
hair has grown back. She moves out of Chicokema for still other crusades. Meridian’s friend Anne Marion gifts her note with a picture of gigantic tree stump with a tiny branch growing from it. She has praised Meridian “who would be happier than you that the Sojourner did not die” (M294). It is significant in the sense that Walker has enlivened Sojourner Truth in her personal form because to some extent it presents her own role as a civil right activist while studying in Spellman college. Metaphorically, it is also shown about the immortality of black oral and musical tradition as Sojourner Tree has sprouted in its tiny branches. When she leaves for her mission, Truman is seen using Meridian’s cap in an effort to regain her vitality.

Meridian goes to the rural south in her mission to persuade blacks to register to vote and offers them all types of help. Meridian’s search for wholeness can be defined as her attempt to express the totality of the self and how this self is related to the world. It is a search for freedom, joy and contentment in being a woman, a search for self-love and for yearning of communal love. In keeping with the black literary tradition it is a search for escape from the body and freedom for the soul by discovering “The truth” in the darkness. Walker declares that Meridian is “Free at last”. Her ties are not with a man, a family or with a specific community. Motherhood for her includes not only rearing of children but nurturing life, the continuity of life. She finds her existence inseparable from all black people and writers.

Meridian’s search for self-affirmation and wholeness and to find out the solution to the problems of human injustice is an individual search. She is a liberated black woman who knows what she should take from the past to create a new future. Truman knows that in her pilgrimage Meridian would return to the world “cleansed of sickness”, he would never see “his”
Meridian ‘the new part had grown out of the old” (M294). Thus, Meridian’s incorporation into the community is, in essence, birth into spiritual wholeness. In Barbara Christian's words, it is "a continuing process rather than adventure that ends in a neat resolution"... Truman's sickness clearly is a part of that "continuing process”. Christian writes:

Walker's ending suggests that even Meridian's dearly won salvation is not sure unless we others sort out the tangled roots of our past and pursue our own health. In other words, until the pattern of this society is transformed, no part of it is free and it cannot be free unless each of us pursues our own wholeness. By making the end of the novel the beginning of another such quest, Walker invites us to use the novel as a contemplative and analytical tool in our own individual search. For the questions that she gives flesh to in the novel, questions that are rooted in this country's past, persist in the present. (235)

Walker's novel leaves a moral lesson that it is not by taking life that true revolution will come about, but through respect for life and authentic living of life. This authenticity is achieved by individual’s slow, painful interaction with self. In the novel Meridian it is also targeted that one should not show off false feeling of nationalism. Walker requests to cast of the temptation of martyrdom and false revolutionary consciousness, she warns that these roles are death masks.
Works - Cited


