Chapter - V

A Promise to Familial Harmony
CHAPTER – V SUMMATION

A PROMISE TO FAMILIAL HARMONY

The research scholar is of strong opinion that the role of women in the family needs broader and deeper investigation. Hence the scholar has taken up this issue which requires dire attention. Being a woman and a mother herself, the scholar understands the universal relevance of this issue, thus attempting to bring it to limelight. The heritage of a family is not being given due recognition by men, but it is the women who care much about it. Certain aspects have been totally neglected and overlooked by the writers on this issue. This oversight had given rise to certain imbalances causing wrong attitudes that prevail among the family members.

The feminist movements have mainly given focus to women’s rights and assertions. But their movements have distinctly shown a woman’s significant place in her family. People of every country, community, race and ethnic group and section will have their own specific problems and responses in the family. It would be difficult to reduce them to types and it will be even more difficult in the fictional world to capture the complete reality of women in the family. But
Walker is able to visualize and bring her fictional women characters, successfully and elegantly, to life.

Part of Walker's understanding of herself as woman and as artist comes from her awareness that she is linked across continents and through generations with women who have exercised their creativity despite the racism and sexism that would deny its expression. In *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, she asserts, "To be an artist and a black woman, even today, lowers our status in many respects, rather than raises it, and yet, artists we will be."

(*Gardens 237*)

Alice Walker is yet to be adequately welcomed and acclaimed by her feminist and womanist readers. To date, she has either been rejected by them as insufficient feminist, or praised on the grounds that seem to exclude her fiction. By their more or less subscription to humanist aesthetic categories of the traditional male academic hierarchy, feminist critics have seriously undermined the impact of their challenges to that very institution. The only difference between a feminist and a non-feminist critic in this tradition is that it becomes a formal political perspective of the critic. The feminist critic thus and unwittingly puts herself in a position from which it becomes impossible to read Alice Walker as a progressive feminist writer of
genius, she undoubtedly is. A feminist criticism that would do both justice and homage to its great mothers and sisters of the world surely is the goal of Alice Walker's writings.

Everywhere the research scholar visualizes in all the novels the battle for mastery of women that rages between classes, people etc., reproducing itself in an individual scale. Is the system flawless? Is it not possible to by-pass? On the basis of the researcher's desire, she imagines that the system exists like the researchers exist. If their desire is possible, it means the system is already letting something else through. So, whatever is thinkable is real, as William Blake suggests. And it is true. This desire would invent love, and there would have to be recognition of each other and this grateful acknowledgement has come about, thanks to the intense and passionate work of knowing. Finally each would take the risk of other, of difference, without feeling threatened by the existence of an otherness, rather delighting to increase through the unknown that is to discover them to respect, to favour, to cherish and above all to love humanity. Alice Walker's works that the researcher has taken for discussion have got these qualities in plenty, especially in women.

This love would not be trapped in contradictions and ambivalences entailing the murder of the other indefinitely. Nor
would it be caught up again in the huge social machinery taking individuals back to the family model.

In home and elsewhere the woman begins her long preparation for the role; their conceptions of what kind of woman she is eventually to become are moulded through her associations with older sisters, mother, grandmothers, aunts and a variety of other female role models. Her duties include such as caring for siblings, doing housework, interacting with adults on an equal basis. Black women are influenced by a set of traditions, a common value system and a set of beliefs, their aspirations for being the hardworking backbone of the family, for child care, for providing education and for a kind of spiritual quality of empathy, the ability to understand and develop the necessary resources to fight oppression and make healthy adaptations to what sometimes overwhelming circumstances are common features.

To see overleaf as eviction is to know from feminism that one has already sustained injury, and that one lives exposed to injuries - one has been at worst mutilated, at best diminished, in one’s being. But at the same time, womanist consciousness of Alice Walker is a joyous consciousness of one’s own power, of the possibility of
unprecedented personal growth and of the release of energy long suppressed.

The film The Color Purple has provided the scholar multi-ethnic, multicultural experience which has deepened her own understanding and commitment to radical feminists, when it was viewed by the researcher. Feminism is not part of a woman's issue; rather about the creation of a system that allows full participation by all feminism or womanism in all of its diversity, can enlighten, enlarge and empower everyone.

Alice Walker struggles with the question of the relationship between the local community and the larger imagined community. Walker sees the necessity of a sense of place, of a local community. Her essay, "Choice: Attribute to Martin Luther King Jr." concludes with the homage to King, "He gave us a continuity of place, without which community is ... He gave us home."(Gardens 145)

Walker's essay on the Southern black writer is an eloquent statement of responsibility that being a part of such a community brings. No one could wish for a more advantageous heritage than that bequeathed to the black infer, in the South: a compassion for the earth, a trust in humanity beyond one's knowledge of evil and an abiding love of justice. One should inherit a great responsibility as
well, for one must give voice to centuries not only of silent bitterness and hate but also of neighbourly kindness and sustaining love.

In a paragraph from, “Saving the life That is Your Own,” she regrets with a similar sentiment, about the society in shortcomings then of joy about the black writer’s heritage:

What is always needed in the appreciation of art, or life, is the larger perspective. Connections made or at least attempted, where none existed before, the straining to encompass in one’s glance at the varied world the common thread, the verifying theme through immense diversity, a fearlessness of growth, of search, of looking, that enlarges’ the private and the public world.

And yet, in our particular society, it is narrowed and narrowing view of life that often wins.

(Living 89)

In an essay about Flannery O’ Conner, “Beyond the Peacock”, Walker’s mother asks, “what is it exactly ‘that you’re looking for’ on trips to the South?” Walker replies, “A wholeness.” Her mother’s response, “you look whole enough to me”, (Gardens 329) provokes an even next direct explanation from Walker. She replies,
No, I answer, because everything around me is split up, deliberately split up. History split up, literature split up, and people are split up too. It makes people do ignorant things. (*Gardens* 331)

In her essay titled “The Black Writer and the Southern Experience,” Walker writes at length about community. “What the black Southern writer insists as a natural right is a sense of community, something simple but surprisingly hard, especially these days, to come by.”(*Living* 81) She speaks of her mother as “a walking history of the community.”(82)

Every African-American woman echoes of one level or another affirmation in the ringing words of Celie, “I’m poor, I’m black, and I may be ugly and can’t cook.... But I’m here.”(*Purple* 18)

In an essay on the Civil Rights Movement, Walker says:

Part of what existence seems to me is, knowing the difference between what I am now and what I was then... It means being a part of the world community, and being alert to which part it is that I have joined, and knowing how to change to another part of that part does not suit me. To know is to exist; to exist is to be involved, to
move about, to see the world with my own eyes.

(Gardens 136)

Walker makes an eloquent case for empathy, although she does not use that term, one of the themes that Walker develops is that a basis for empathy, an understanding of the other, must be a part of communal values if the appeal to community is indeed to enrich American culture. Walker further says,

It is a part of the black Southern sensibility that we treasure memories, for such a long time that is all of our homeland those of us who at one time or another were forced away from it have been allowed to have. "I believe it is a human trait and for all I know, even a nonhuman, animal one and that what the black, the Native American, and the poor white share in America common humanity's love of remembering who we are." (Gardens 146)

Language, for Walker, is a means of reclaiming or reconstructing the past. She connects language with the history of the community. Whether language primarily reflects culture or shapes culture is a crucial question. Walker suggests that blacks
view their memories as unique because their language has been suppressed. Walker obviously believes in the power of words and sees no language except black as inherently having more power for change than any other.

In a 1976 essay titled, “The New Consciousness and the Crisis in Modernity” Robert Bellow, an American Sociologist and Philosopher attempts to evaluate the impact of the counter culture of the 1960’s, at the religious level. He notes that much of society is related to the belief in non-dualism - the belief that man and nature, men and women, white and black, rich and poor are really one. He describes three possible scenarios for American society as a whole: liberal, traditional authoritarian, and revolutionary. One might assume that Bellow would hope for the liberal scenario, but on the contrary, he clearly favours the revolutionary scenario. In the liberal scenario, American society would continue as in the past to devote itself to the accumulation of wealth and power, “creating a society very much like the present society only more so.” But only the revolutionary scenario “would bring fundamental structural change, socially and culturally.” (The Journal of American Culture 21-22)

Walker’s exploration of women has got greater depth because not only does she comprehend the past lives of these women but she
also has questioned their facts and dared to see through a time when black women would no longer live in suppression when there would be a place for them to move into.

The first cycle of Walker’s construct of the history of black women is the women who belong to the decades of the forties and fifties, those decades when black people wanted most to be part of the mainstream of American life. Walker writes of her black woman as a woman pushed and pulled by the larger world outside to her, urged to assimilate in order to overcome her background. In Walker’s historical construct, these black women were, ironically, victims of what were ostensibly greater opportunities.

I have this theory that Black women in the 50’s in the 40’s—the late 40’s and early 50’s—got away from their roots... could be the one and my sister was the one. But I think she is not unique. So many, many, many Black families have a daughter or sister who was the one who escaped because, you see, that was what was set up for her; she was going to be the one who escaped, and the rest of us weren’t supposed to
escape, because we had given our one. (Byrent 24)

The women in this cycle are also victims, not just of physical violence, but also of psychic violence that alienates them from their roots, cutting them off from real contact. As a writer especially concerned with the need to acknowledge and respect their roots, Walker is sensitive to these women who are divorced from their heritage. As she describes them, the chosen ones were always the bright and talented ones in the family.

From the black women’s superior position, she can only see the negatives - the silent, fearful, barefoot, tongue-tied, ignorant brothers and sisters. She finds the past, her background family unbearable, and though she may have sensed their groping after life, she finally leaves the family for good.

The women of the second cycle are destroyed spiritually rather than physically and yet there is still some movement forward, some hope that did not exist for the earlier generation of American black women. The women in this cycle are more aware of their condition and they have greater potential for shaping their lives, although they are still thwarted because they feel themselves coming to life before the necessary changes have been made in the political environment.
before there is space for them to move into. The sense of two-ness is perhaps most evident in the lives of these women. They are the most aware of and burdened by the double consciousness that makes one measure one's soul by the yardstick of the other world.

In June of 1973 in an interview with the writer, Du Bois, Walker made one of the statements about the direction and development of black women characters into a third cycle.

My women, in the future, will not burn themselves up—that's what I mean by coming to the end of a cycle, and understanding something to the end... now I am ready to look at women who have made the room larger for others to move in... have changed the options of Black people generally and of Black women in particular. So that my women characters won't all end the way they have been, because Black women now offer varied, live models of how it is possible to live. We have made a new place to move. . . (Washington 2)

The women of the third cycle are, for the most part, women of the late sixties, although these are some older women in Walker's
fiction who exhibit the qualities of the developing, emergent model. Greatly influenced by the political events of the sixties and the changes resulting from the freedom movement, they are women coming just to the edge of a new awareness and making the first tentative steps into an uncharted region. And although they are more fully conscious of their political and psychological oppression and more capable of creating new options for themselves, they must undergo a harsh initiation before they are ready to occupy and claim any new territory.

Alice Walker, herself a real life prototype of the emergent black woman, speaks of having seen called to life by the Civil Rights Movement of the sixties, as being called from the shadows of a world in which black people existed as statistics, problems, beasts of burden, a life that resembled death; for one was not aware of the possibilities within one’s self or of possibilities in the larger world outside of the narrow restraints of the world, black people inhabited before the struggles of the sixties. When Walker and other civil right activists like Fannie Lou Hammer began the fight for their lives, they were beaten, jailed, and in Fanny Lou Hammer’s case, widowed, and made homeless but they never lost the energy and courage for revolt. In the same way, Walker’s own characters through suffering
and struggle try to be mentally strong by the groundwork for a new type of women to emerge.

The process of cyclical movement in the River of Walker's black women is first evident in her first novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*. The girl, Ruth, is the daughter of Mem Copeland and the granddaughter of Margaret Copeland - two women, whose lives were lived out under the most extreme forms of oppression. Under the pressure of poverty and alienation from her husband, Margaret kills herself and her child; and Mem, wife of Brownfield Copeland, is brutally murdered by her husband in one of his drunken rages. Ruth is brought up by her grandfather, Grange, who in his third life attempts to salvage some of his wasted life, by protecting Ruth. She emerges into a young woman, at the same time as the revolutionary woman.

If nothing else could have moved Walker to put aside the anger so characteristic of her early years, her concern for her planet has done so, she told Winfrey in an interview,

*There is no heaven. This is it. We're already in heaven, you know, and so in order. . . for the earth to survive, we have to acknowledge each other as part of the family, the same family and*
also reaffirm those things in ourselves and in other people that we've been brought up to fear or to hate. (Winchell 133)

Resurgence and resurrection, the simplicity of a soul raised from the dead in a repetitious rise of rebirth, renewal and reproduction are all the missions of Walker's novels, poetry and stories.

Across the world, the family is still the basic unit of society that performs various valuable functions for its members. Its most important function is to provide emotional and psychological security for the children that are born into the family and grow up with it. The warmth, the love and the companionship that exist and evolve between the parents of these children largely determine this sense of security. Though the nuclear family appeared to offer a better alternative to the extended family in urban metros, it remained patriarchal or male-dominated. The women's movement in the 1970's drew attention to another aspect of the family - the family as an institution that perpetuates violence. Newspaper reports speak volumes of the nature and extent of violence that has taken place within the family. The social pressure on the woman to confirm and hold the family together makes it necessary for her to suffer in
silence and resign herself to her fate. If the wife has a lower threshold of tolerance, it leads to early breakups, separation or divorce. The fragmentation of the family leads to the fragmentation and decimation of the child's physical, emotional and psychological growth.

Post September 11 incident of 2001 which collapsed the entire family system of people who wanted to make money by working at The World Trade Centre in New York needs to be recognized at this moment. The families of these professionals from all over the world were thrown into pieces in a second. This tragic scene, in the history of human lives has reminded the people that family to be lived harmoniously and happily is more important than mere material gains. Since then, the people across the globe would like to have a happy family without any friction between the men and the women as there is no security for human life. (Courtesy The Hindu, September 12th 2001)

The family as a living, evolving social institution, is facing its most difficult challenge in the history of man as a social animal. One of its major challenges is a total redefinition of the term ‘family’ in the light of changes in marriage as the social institution that forms the very base of an integrated family unit. Apart from the death of the
spouse within the first ten years of marriage, desertion, separation, divorce of both or either parent are the elements that demand a redefining of family values and a shifting of parental responsibilities towards the children. It is therefore necessary to respect these diversities and changes without always questioning them with some logic, and to promote concepts based on family rights and responsibilities.

There is no ideal model of a family. But the ideal model of a family is not one where status inequalities, discrimination and violence are perpetuated, especially against children, regardless of whether views on the family are reformative or constructive, futuristic or nostalgic or whether families are seen as part of the problem or part of the solution.

Here the critic is reminded of the new concept ‘Androgyny’. The term ‘androgyny’ has Greek roots: andros means man and gyne, woman. An androgynous person would combine some of the characteristic traits, skills and interests that can be associated with the stereotype types of masculinity and femininity. He is also one who is neither masculine nor feminine but human: who transcends those old categories in such a way as to develop positive human potentialities denied or realized in an alienated fashion in the current stereotypes.
He should have the desire and ability to be autonomous and to relate lovingly to other human beings. The concept 'androgyne' is very much emphasized in the institution of family. Even in Hindu mythology, the God's posture of 'Arthanareeswarar' (union of masculine and feminine qualities) represents androgynous concept.

Though black women are the most suppressed part of the society, though none in the society comes forward to commune and recuperate them from their mental illness, it is only they, who have developed the extraordinary therapeutic nature of bonding and healing, not only their own people but the entire society. Here 'Bonding' refers to the process by which a close emotional relationship is developed and 'Healing' to recover from mental injuries, especially due to suppression. Women can achieve their own selves, if they accept the responsibility of their lives, with regard to healing through bonding and also realize how much they have contributed to their own victimization and how much they should contribute to the lifting of their own sisters from their suppression.

Women must organize as women, in order that, their own culture be liberated. The becoming of women in sisterhood is the counter cultural phenomenon par excellence which can indicate the future course of human spiritual evolution. All of Alice Walker's
women, at the end have achieved their womanist consciousness. Their bold act is certainly a feminist accomplishment.

Walker's fiction provides her women the possibility of promoting sisterhood and female culture and creates her female protagonists as role models. Walker's female psyche as a construction of cultural forces, acknowledges class, racial, national and historical differences and determinants among women but offers a collective experience that unites women over time and space – a 'binding force'. Walker's fiction reveals her concern in reconstruction of social system in which man and woman live together equally and harmoniously without any contradiction. She believes that androgyny redeems women from the clutches of male supremacy and eradicates male inadequacies and false assumptions about women. Walker hopes that in an androgynous society, women can enjoy their freedom and their values may be recognized and therefore Walker recommends the androgynous family which is the linchpin for a better society and a better nation. This study takes into account Walker's faith in androgyny that is the culmination of the evolution of womanist consciousness of her women.

In Walker's novels, most of the families become disintegrated only because of the lack of androgynous status in the family. For, the
family is the nutrient of humanness of individuality. Her women show great political wisdom as well as personal survival skills in holding on to the family as the base of their identity and human control. By reconstructing the family system, Walker desires to have the transformation of the society. One should believe in family values for the welfare of the individual members, for the welfare of the society and also the larger welfare of the nation.

Thus Walker attempts to achieve the establishing of women on their rightful throne and advises her women- Mem, Meridian, Celie, Fanny and Carlotta, Tashi and Susannah to throw away those limitations that prevent them from emerging as their own selves. Walker suggests that their individual identity should be within the social limits. She unfolds the truth that domesticity is a spiritual endeavor and it should be equally shared by men and women. If any one of them fails, it is a great loss, not only for them but also to their family.

In her letter to the former President of America, Bill Clinton, Walker rightly points out the human flaw of the individuals that should be rectified. She pens,

We are all substantially flawed, wounded, angry, hurt, here on Earth. But this human
condition, so painful to us and in some ways shameful – because we feel we are weak when the reality of ourselves is exposed – is made much more bearable when it is shared, face to face, in words that have expressive human eyes behind them. (Letter to Bill Clinton, March 13, 1996, 1)

The scholar critic strongly believes that the black women are the real pillars to maintain the thread of black family heritage and culture and not the black men. Alice Walker’s women characters try to prove the American Society that they are capable of loving, nurturing and respecting themselves and others. She says “It is the medicine of compassionate understanding that must be administered indiscriminately. Harmlessness now must be our peace cry.” (Ibid 2) Her commitment to the future, seen in her desire to bring harmony between men and women echoes the most distinctive ideal of the family heritage. As the black women attach more importance to their ancestral tradition and heritage, the black culture is still kept alive. The potentiality of their language also plays a significant role in developing the cultural heritage of the black family. Indeed she is the person who brings unity and harmony in her family system.
When black culture and the hierarchies inherent in black families are critically examined and destabilized, the hidden values of black heritage are reconstructed. The heritage of a family helps the black women to be morally bold and revolutionary to fight back for her rights. She has to be universally accepted as revolutionary in nature, if the societal forces demand her to be.

The scholar feels that certain areas of Walker's fiction have not been adequately pondered so far. Hence the critic suggests that the future scholars may do research on the historical and religious perspectives of Walker's fiction. How the black woman can get her rights for her freedom along with the family ties of love and affection can also be taken for further research so as to shed more light on these aspects which are vital to the delicate thread that binds the family in particular and the society in general, harmoniously.

While summing up, the scholar establishes that the ultimate aim of Alice Walker, as a womanist lies in reintroducing the black woman as a survivor largely because of her unique cultural heritage and revolutionary spirit to play significant role in the affairs of the family and community at large. With the association of her indomitable spirits, she becomes successful in bringing reformation in men. Thereby she welcomes the androgynous status in the family.
She is able to bring harmony in her family and her community as well.

Healing and bonding nature of the black women will certainly result in an androgynous society where women's freedom and their values would be recognized. This changing scenario of black family will have unbelievable strides in life, with the woman as the nucleus of black family and its cultural heritage. It is apt to sum up that one should have the positive nature of forgiving others (men or women) and thereby one can visualize a harmonious family, where the black man lends a hand in raising the status of the black woman and the black woman in raising the status of the entire family and the society at large. It is appropriate to recall Walker's own words,

The healing

Of all our wounds

Is forgiveness

that permits a promise

of our return

at the end. (GNM 53)