Chapter V
CHAPTER V

WALKER'S VISION FOR WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

V. Alice Walker occupies an eminent place among African-American women writers. During one of her discussions on the “intimate male-female encounters” over social confrontations in the narratives of African-American women, Walker observes:

Twentieth century black women writers all seem to be much more interested in black community, in intimate relationships, with the white world as a \textit{backdrop}… There just has not been enough examination or enough application of findings to real problems in our day-to-day living. Black women continue to talk about intimate relations so that we can recognize what is happening when we see it, then maybe there will be some change in behavior on the part of men \textit{and} women.

Butler – Evans states, “A commitment to write the “authentic” lives of “real” Black people occupies textual space with an urgency to tell the specific stories of Black women” (03-17) in Alice Walker.

V. 1. Alice Walker’s Preoccupation:

Alice Walker has stated her position as a writer in one of her interviews:

I am preoccupied with the spiritual survival, the \textit{whole} of my people. But beyond that, I am committed to exploring the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties, the triumphs of black
women... for me, black women are the most fascinating creations in the world.

V. 1. 1. Walker’s Commitment and Technique:

Walker feels that a commitment to writing – to be significant – must be combined with social and political activism. She feels that it is the responsibility of the artist to stay close enough to his/her people and “to be there whenever they need” such a presence. To fulfill her commitment Walker uses her narrative, grounded in racial history and focuses on the histories of women of African ancestry. Butler – Evans states:

Generally covering four or more decades in her novels, Walker evokes specific historical events and personages, and her metaphorical and metonymical representations of the experiences of Blacks as oppressed people reflect historical consciousness... she is also concerned with the specific experiences of Black women, a focus that demands a feminist genealogy. (125)

Butler – Evans also states that Alice Walker makes use of a “peremptory moment of a feminine-feminist counter discourse” (126) as a dominant textual activity and “These historical narratives of women, while contained within the framework of racial historical narratives, become signifiers of sexual difference” (126).

Alice Walker traces the history of African-American women’s creativity in her essay In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens. Though she writes of the Civil Rights
Movement with unreserved approval in 1967, Alice Walker contends later that the Civil Rights Movement continued to oppress women and hence failed in its mission of human liberation. These positions taken by Walker indicate that she is more committed to her people than she is committed to her earlier statement.

V. 2. Alice Walker’s Short Stories:

Alice Walker’s collection of short stories such as *You Can’t Keep A Good Woman Down* and *In Love & Trouble: Stories of Black Women* show her concern for women.

The way Walker has chosen her titles for her collection of short stories, *In Love & Trouble: Stories of Black Women* (1973) and *You Can’t Keep A Good Woman Down* (1981), clearly indicate her viewpoint that women remain exploited and oppressed.

*Really, Doesn’t Crime Pay?*, one of the short stories from *In Love & Trouble: Stories of Black Women*, shows how a woman gets exploited so easily. Mordecai Rich, pretends he is interested in a woman, telling her a – “funny/sad”- story about a man who could not move his wife. This man who cannot move his wife, one day sneaks up to her bedroom to hear joyous cries and finds “his wife in the arms of another woman!” His wife chuckles and leaves the house with her friend. Narrating such stories, Rich draws the attention of this married woman, pretends he is interested in her creative activities, gets hold of some of her manuscripts and tells her, “I will see if something can’t be done them. You could be another Zora Hurston – ‘...’ – another Simone de Beauvoir!”
This gives the woman a kind of a temporary satisfaction at least: "Now Ruel will find that I am not a womb without a brain that can be bought with Japanese bathtubs and shopping sprees". She goes to the extent of believing that her "moment of ... deliverance is at hand!"

Rich disappears for weeks, to reappear again "as a little picture" on the back page, celebrated as a new author, "going around looking for Truth".

The woman cheated, seduced and exploited can only have the satisfaction of telling her husband some day that she had relied on the security of the pill, to deny carrying his child.

The unnoticed female character in this short story very much reveals the plight of a woman, living a life of incompatibility with her husband, to be easily exploited by another man.

The other collection of short stories by Walker, You Can't Keep A Good Woman Down also contains stories dealing with women, child abuse and exploitation. How Did I Get Away with Killing one of the Biggest Lawyers in the State? It was Easy and The Abortion may be considered as examples to illustrate the point.

The short story How Did I Get Away... begins with the statement, "My mother and father were not married. I never knew him". — thereby revealing the terrible psychological scar left in the mind of the narrator. Her environment reveals the intensity of the oppressive conditions:
... there was broken glass and rags everywhere. The place stunk, especially in the summer. And children were always screaming and men were always cussing and women were always yelling about something. .... It was nothing for a girl or woman to be raped. I was raped myself, when I was twelve, and my Mama never knew and I never told anybody. For, what could they do? It was just a boy, passing through.

This description of the oppressive conditions of life, emphasizes the fact that the situation has not changed much for the African-American, especially the African-American woman even three decades after Native Son and Lawd Today.

At fourteen the narrator looks “like a grown woman”. Her mother’s employer, a lawyer, takes her to his law office to ‘legally’ rape her.

... he began to touch me, and I pulled away. But he kept touching me and I was scared ... he raped me. But afterward he told me he hadn’t forced me, that I felt something for him, and he gave me some money. I was crying, going down the stairs. I wanted to kill him.

A lawyer raping a fourteen year old, threatening her by saying “he hadn’t forced” her, and psychologically blackmailing the victim, all speak volumes of child abuse and oppression of the female.
Much later, her mother warns her not to have anything to do with a white man whose “daddy goes on the t.v. every night and says folks like” them “ain’t even human”.

But the affair continues, though she does not know much about ‘equal rights’ and cares not about ‘integration’. “I was sixteen! I wanted somebody to tell me I was pretty, and he was telling me that all the time”, states the narrator.

The day she becomes seventeen, the day of her “seventeenth birthday”, she signs papers in his law office and has her mother “committed to an insane asylum”.

She continues with the lawyer, her body doing “what it was being paid to do”. When her mother dies, she kills Bubba.

“How did I get away with killing one of the biggest lawyers in the state? It was easy. He kept a gun in his desk drawer at the office and one night I took it out and shot him”, states the narrator.

No one came after me, and I read in the paper the next day that he’d been killed by burglars. I guess they thought ‘burglars’ had stolen all that money Bubba kept in his safe – but I had it. One of the carrots Bubba always dangled before me was that he was going to send me to college: I didn’t see why he shouldn’t do it.

...
On the day he was buried I was in his house, sitting on his wife's bed with his children, and eating fried chicken his wife, Julie had cooked”.

This short story reveals not only the exploitation of African-American women, but also reveals the unexpected extreme reaction of the oppressed. The exploited has turned the tables on the oppressor, for a change.

Another short story The Abortion, also deals with the plight of women. The theme of abortion occupies the central stage in this short story.

A married woman, with a child, wants to have abortion – she wants to avoid unwanted pregnancy. As she flies to New York to have her abortion, her husband is needed elsewhere. “He was needed, while she was gone, to draft the city’s new charter. She had agreed this was important”.

Then in her self-pity she realises, “she had expected him to take care of her, and she blamed him for not doing so now”.

Imani remembers the first abortion she had while she was still at the college: “It was a Saturday, no nurses in attendance and she presumed it was the doctor’s wife”. Though told “It’s nothing, nothing”, and after shelling out a thousand dollars, “she hemorrhaged steadily for six weeks, and was not well again for a year”.

Her present abortion is to take place seven years later, with an abortion law making “it possible to make an appointment at a clinic, and for seventy-five dollars a safe, quick, painless abortion... all yours.”
Imani finds that abortion has “entered the age of assembly line” and also that those “assembly lines don’t stop because the product on them has a complaint”. Imani is told that she would be fine in a week or so.

“There was no way to explain abortion to a man” feels Imani. When she narrates that the “anesthesia failed”, her husband “Clarence paled”.

On the Remembrance Day, the temperature soaring to a hundred degrees by ten O’clock, “A dull ache started in her (Imani’s) uterus”.

Two years later, Clarence becomes furious, Imani being not merely frigid, but also being remote.

“She had known the moment she left the marriage, the exact second. But apparently that moment had left no perceptible mark”.

This short story though it does not speak of the oppression let loose on woman, deals with the oppressive conditions of the society and the psychological scar left on womanhood by unwanted pregnancy. If pregnancy becomes no more natural and fearful, legal recourse to unwanted pregnancy – abortion – becomes all the more painful, physically and emotionally, leaving a scar, and permanently damaging the psyche of the woman.

V. 3. Alice Walker’s novels:

Alice Walker has distinguished the chronicle of an African-American family and the tale concerned primarily with racial confrontation as the two major strains of African-American fiction. Her remarks suggest “the formal and political problems she tried to reconcile in her first novel, The Third Life of Grange Copeland (1970)”
(113-128) mentions Harold Hellenbrand and states, “Her words anticipate, too, the preoccupations of Meridian (1976) and especially The Color Purple (1982)” (113-128).

Walker’s The Third Life of Grange Copeland focusses on an African-American family of Copelands and makes a record of its history covering three generations – Grange, Brownfield and Ruth. Her next novel Meridian reveals her conviction that oral expression is basic to building both personal and communal identity and Walker’s The Color Purple reveals through “Celie’s letters to God and Nettie, … her growing self-awareness and confidence as a sexual and capable woman” (113-128) mentions Hellenbrand.

The Third Life reveals the conviction that even at one’s death one can preserve what he values in life. Walker seems to have introduced through the phenomenon of willingness to die, one can continue to live through someone else. This continues in Meridian with Meridian Hill’s only reason for self-sacrifice being the intention of preserving another life. The Color Purple at its heart reveals a “complex redemptive artistry that encompasses saving gestures of various types” (437-451) mentions Felipe Smith.

V. 3.1. Walker’s treatment of the South in her novels:

In her The Black Writer and the Southern Experience, Alice Walker exposes her response to the South. She has mentioned that she does not intend to “romanticize Southern black country life”, and has been quick enough to point out that she “hated” the South. She cannot put down lightly the “enormous richness and
beauty to draw from" the Southern experience. Alice Walker tries to avoid "the "blindness" created by her awareness of the injustices done to blacks in the South (and) she is able to draw "a great deal of positive material" from her outwardly "underprivileged" (In Search 20) background" (194-204) according to Robert James Butler. Alice Walker having such a response to the South's born of her personal experience, treats the oppressor-oppressed relationship in her novels with a new perspective.

V. 4. The Third Life of Grange Copeland:

The Third Life of Grange Copeland is obviously a novel telling the story of Copelands. It unfolds the history, the trials, deaths, defeats, oppressions and finally the hope of three generations – Grange, Brownfield and Ruth. While Grange's and Brownfield's lives represent oppression and injustice, Ruth remains a symbol of hope and life. In a way The Third Life may be considered as a novel which states unequivocally that hope and life still flourish in spite of oppressions. The statement of James Butler:

While Brownfield is a terrifying example of how the South can physically enslave and spiritually cripple black people, Ruth's story offers considerable hope because she is able to leave the South, rejecting the racist world which destroys Brownfields and, in so doing, move toward a larger, freer world which offers her fresh possibilities. (194-204)

is worth mentioning here.
Alice Walker’s *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* divided into eleven parts, running to forty-eight sections, commences with the impressions made during the childhood of Brownfield and ends with Brownfield being shot in a court of law by his father Grange, and Grange in turn shot in the woods by the pursuing police force.

Even at the beginning, the impressions made on Brownfield, reveal that such impressions are the result of the oppressive conditions imposed on them:

They told him (Brownfield) that his father worked for a Cracker and that the Cracker owned him... They told him that his mother wanted to leave his father and go North to Philadelphia... They said that his mother wanted him, Brownfield, to go to school, and that she was tired of his father and wanted to leave him anyway.

... He thought his mother was like their dog in some ways. She didn’t have a thing to say that did not in some way show her submission to his father.

These impressions made on the mind of a young Brownfield indicate the slave-like existence of Copelands. Being oppressed himself, Grange remains a heartless oppressor on his woman, treating her worse than a dog. Brownfield’s mother works “all day pulling baits for ready money”. Brownfield remains undernourished and “when he was four he was covered with sores... and pus ran from boils that burst under his armpits”.
Brownfield is conscious that “his father never looked at him or acknowledged him in any way”. He is afraid of his father’s silence and “Brownfield’s father had no smiles about him at all”. A particular experience on an occasion when Brownfield is admonished – “say ‘yessir’ to Mr. Shipley” – makes Brownfield smell for the first time “an odor of sweat, fear and something indefinite”. He tastes the total feeling of oppression, that his father might just be turned into insignificant dirt in the presence of that stranger.

Butler - Evans’ comments,

Brownfield’s narrative concentrates all that is negative about Southern culture: He is cruelly victimized by the extreme racism and poverty of the Georgia backwoods world in which he is born and raised... his is a case of blighted growth; he is a person who has been physically and emotionally withered by the nearly pathological environment which surrounds him. By the end of the novel, he is portrayed as “a human being... completely destroyed” (225) by the worst features of rural Southern life – ignorance, poverty, racism and violence. (194-204)

reveal the tragedy of Brownfield, mainly caused by the cruelties of racism, and oppression.

The life of Copelands is full of uncertainties, following “a kind of cycle that depended almost totally on Grange’s moods”. Then Grange abandons his family,
driving his wife to poison her young baby before committing suicide. Butler - Evans states that Grange "fails as a husband and a father". He mentions the following on Brownfield's failure:

After being abandoned by Grange and losing his mother shortly afterwards, Brownfield is frozen into a condition of Southern servitude. His efforts to establish a new life fail... because his loss of family and the destruction of self-esteem caused by a racist environment trap him in a kind of moral vacuum...

Literally cheated out of land and morally dispossessed of a human foundation for his life, Brownfield is ironically condemned to repeat his father's failures. (194-204)

One finds that the oppressed first life of Grange Copeland, leads to the oppressive conditions of Brownfield's life gradually converting him into another oppressor.

While referring to the life of oppression of Grange, Hellenbrand states:

Grange is propelled out of the South, and into self-awareness, by the oppressive circumstances of his first life. Silence characterizes Grange's oppression; punctuated by his own unintelligible mumblings, it also signifies his resignation. ... Grange's first life is not one in which words or talk compensate for the abuse that he suffers in the world of work. (113-128)
Hellenbrand states, "By implication, Grange is without a soul in his first life, since he is bereft of words and song. Without spoken and shared community he must either flee or die" (113-128), thereby indicating that oppression not only makes Grange a silent, dumb animal, but also forces on him the limited options of flight or death.

As mentioned earlier, Brownfield’s behaviour results from the oppressions he has undergone and in turn, converting him into a worse oppressor than Grange. Even at his mother’s funeral Brownfield can feel the shadows of oppression trying to overwhelm him. Though afraid to refuse the bait offered by Shipley, Brownfield reveals his contempt for Shipley, when he leaves the place. “The fear of Shipley that had tied his tongue disappeared as the urge to sample his new freedom grew. He would be his own boss”.

Brownfield marries Mem, and three years later is “in debt up to his hatbrim,” Mem being “big with their second child”. Soon Brownfield realizes that “his own life was becoming a repetition of his father’s”. His debts grow year by year depressing him and he starts accusing Mem. He is determined to treat Mem “like a nigger and a whore”.

His crushed pride and his battered ego, his rage and his anger and his frustration all combine in his ill-treatment of Mem. He feels that he cannot forgive his wife’s greater knowledge. He beats his wife regularly, “trying to pin the blame for his failure on her by imprinting it on her face”. The words of Hellenbrand,

Sadistically, he (Brownfield) wants her “to talk, but to talk like what she was, a hopeless nigger woman who got her ass beat
every Saturday night" (56). Mem comes to speak like a verbal cripple. With love beaten out of her language, she sounds "like a tongue broken and trying to mend itself from desperation (57)." (113-128)

present a sad and realistic picture of the plight of the oppressed woman.

Brownfield, an African-American himself, finds pleasure in telling Mem that she is not white. By doing so he reveals that he is very much colour conscious.

"Just remember you ain’t white", he said, even while hating with all his heart the women he wanted and did not want his wife to imitate. He liked to sling the perfection of white women at her because color was something she could not change and as his own colored skin annoyed him he meant for hers to humble her.

Brownfield’s oppression makes Mem loose her dignity as a human being, “she slogged along, ploddingly, like a cow herself, for the sake of the children. Her mildness became stupor; then her stupor became horror, desolation and, at last, hatred”.

Grange returns, rejoins Josie and marries her. Grange becomes very much attached to Ruth, his new-born grand daughter. He reveals his feeling of guilt for neglecting Brownfield by giving money and food to Brownfield’s family. Grange feels that the arrival of Ruth marks a new chapter: “Lawd knows the whole business is somethin’ of a miraculous event. Out of all kinds of shit comes something clean, soft
and sweet smellin’”. Grange’s wanderings and experiences at the North have made him more mellowed.

Brownfield’s ill-treatment of his wife worsens. Though Mem feels angry she remains powerless: “If I was a man, she thought, frowning later... if I was a man I’d give every man in sight and that I ever met up with a beating, maybe even chop up a few with my knife, they so pig-headed and mean” – Mem’s feelings resembling Big Boy’s fantasy of killing the whites.

Mem manages to get a decent job and makes arrangements to move into a better house. She feels, “We might be poor and black, but we ain’t dumb... At least I ain’t”. She feels that she need not “stand here and let this nigger spit in my face”. She shows her determination to work harder and support her children.

Only once in her entire life the oppressed Mem converts her anger against her oppressor into action, and that too after receiving terrible ill-treatment and beating. While Brownfield is asleep, totally drunk, Mem picks up the gun, nudges the drunken Brownfield awake and resorts to teaching him a really good lesson. She tells him in no uncertain terms her ten firm commandments, the last one being: “You ain’t never going to call me ugly or black or nigger or bitch again, ’cause you done seen just what this black ugly nigger bitch can do when she gits mad!”

Brownfield is outwitted and outpowered but he lays in wait for “the return of Mem’s weakness”. He knows that “she was not evil and he would profit from it”. He manages to get Mem and children get evicted from their rented accommodation.
Finally one night, Brownfield aims the gun “in his drunken accuracy” right into Mem’s face and blows off her head. In Hellenbrand’s words:

Only in murder – of his own wife – does Brownfield believe that he has achieved “the power of the mobile, self-determined word” (166) .... Brownfield, in other words cannot recognize what Grange learns: that his freedom depends on relation, not on isolated autonomy. (113-128)

Brownfield gets sentenced for the murder of Mem, but his imprisonment does not reform him. Brownfield still remains an oppressor and he wants to get hold of Ruth, just for the sake of removing her from the protection of Grange. Even while in prison, Brownfield continues “to plot evil”. Grange voluntarily takes up the responsibility of bringing up Ruth, as his redemptive act. He reveals his angry reaction of the oppressed by telling Ruth about the white oppressors:

“They stole you from Africa.”

...

“They brought you here in chains.”

...

“They beat you every day in slavery and didn’t feed you nothing but weeds.”

...

“They did nasty things to women.”

...
“They are evil.”

“They are blue-eyed devils.”

“They are your natural enemy.”

Grange feels, “Beside such faith his acts against injustice seemed not just puny and ineffectual and selfish but cowardly as well”.

Grange can also distinguish the difference between physical and psychological oppressions; he has realised that from being recognised as a ‘thing’, he has been transformed to a non-existent state in the north:

He was, perhaps, no longer regarded as merely a “thing”; what was even more cruel to him was that to the people he met and passed daily he was not even in existence. The South had made him miserable, with nerve endings raw from continual surveillance from contemptuous eyes, but they knew he was there… The North put him in solitary confinement where he had to manufacture his own hostile stares in order to see himself. For why were they pretending he was not there? Each day he had to say his name to himself over and over again to shut out the silence.

The oppressive North has converted Grange into “a good thief”, and “beyond a few beatings “on suspicion” (never for things he had done) by the police”, he has never been caught.
His dreadful experience of trying to save a pregnant white woman from drowning and her contempt to accept the helping hand of a “nigger”, makes him realise:

The death of the woman was simple murder,... and soul condemning; but in a strange way, a bizarre way, it liberated him... It was the taking of that white woman’s life – and the denying of the life of her child – the taking of her life, not the taking of her money, that forced him to want to try to live again. He believed that, against his will, he had stumbled on the necessary act that black men must commit to regain or to manufacture their manhood, their self-respect. They must kill their oppressors.

This long passage reveals the strong reactions infused into Grange – during his second life at the North – the angry reaction of the oppressed, caused by the white oppressor. Grange feels that a new religion of ‘hate’, will make them survive: “Teach them to hate, if you wants them to survive!”

He feels that hatred for their oppressors will unite them, and the oppressed have to be taught hatred, while they are young:

“Hatred for them will someday unite us”, ... “It will be the only thing that can do it. Deep in our hearts we hates them anyhow. ... If you teach it to them young, they won’t have to learn it in the school of the hard knock”.
This hatred, fighting with his oppressors and knocking them down also make Grange realize the futility of such actions, and also the truth that each oppressed man must have to free himself: “Soon he realized he could not fight all the whites he met... Each man would have to free himself, he thought, and the best way he could”. By this realization, Grange outgrows Ellison’s Ras, the Exhorter. Grange has realized the true and bitter lesson that ‘Freedom’ cannot be given, but has to be earned by the oppressed individual. To earn one’s freedom, one has to earn money and be free. “With his money... he bought a farm. ... He raised his own bread, fermented his own wine, cured his own meat. At last he was free”.

Grange infuses all this into Ruth, his grand-daughter. But they are troubled by Brownfield, just released from prison. Brownfield tries to lay claim on Ruth, and Grange tries in vain to articulate good sense in Brownfield:

“... All I’m saying, Brownfield”, said Grange, his voice sinking to a whisper, “is that one day I had to look back on my life and see where I went wrong... We guilty, Brownfield, and neither one of us is going to move a step in the right direction until we admit it”.

Grange also tries to make Brownfield understand the futility of their killing each other, for their oppressors, who mean nothing to the oppressed: “We keep killing ourselves for the peoples that don’t even mean nothing to us!” All these reactions of Grange Copeland are similar in part to those of Bigger Thomas of Native Son, and in part to those of Ras of Invisible Man.
When all his efforts to save Ruth from the clutches of an incorrigible Brownfield fail, Grange shoots Brownfield in the court of 'law'. He tells the judge: "I ain't running away... I'm going home, and the first one of you crackers that visit me is going to get the rest of what I got in this gun". He tells Ruth, "A man what'd do what I just did don't deserve to live. When you do something like that you give up your claim."

"Grange had not even left her (Ruth) the gun, knowing as she knew that she would live longer without it, at least in this battle". He does not preach violence to Ruth, but goes to the woods to be pursued and shot by the white police.

Butler – Evans has the following to say on the novel’s ending:

As the novel draws to its close, Ruth, with Grange’s help, achieves her independence from her father and Southern life in general. ... The novel ends on a painful note of ambivalence. Southern injustice erupts in violence which takes Grange’s life, yet his death frees Ruth for a new life of expanded possibilities... Walker, however, consciously avoids idealizing Grange’s Southern home. As the novel’s ending makes clear, it is a small oasis of human love surrounded by the same kind of Southern racism which has blighted the lives of scores of black people in the novel. Southern courts continue to mete out injustice, and Southern violence continues to take the lives of innocent people... (195-204)
Hellenbrand’s observations are also significant in this context:

While his first life is representative of black fathers and lovers forced by futility to desert, Grange returns to family in his final incarnation... he returns with worldliness and articulateness as well as love. He has outlasted criminality, racial hatred and of course his original despair and silence.

... this sequence suggests a painful lesson: not just that past cannot be escaped but, more relevantly, that white hegemony corners blacks into internecine conflict. The love story, the family chronicle, ... is distorted by the inexorable pressures of the white power. (113-128)

The novel also reveals another aspect of a relationship, where the oppressed realises a sense of freedom through acts of violence and killing as seen earlier in the case of Bigger Thomas, but giving the oppressed the ultimate realisation that they must accept responsibility for their actions, and they will have to help themselves to overcome their oppressors and ultimately the ugly oppression and injustice.

V. 5. Meridian and The Color Purple:

Meridian shows how Truman Held, a Northern African-American goes to the South and leaves – Meridian, a local girl – behind “physically, psychically, and emotionally violated” (437-451) to quote Smith. His exploitation of women continue further when he returns to the North to embark upon an artistic career built upon the representation of the African-American women of the South.
Meridian also reveals that the oppressor must owe the responsibility for his violation and oppression. To quote Smith again:

> In the end it is the very image which he exploits for profit, that of the Southern black earth mother, which “holds” Truman: “It was as the voluptuous black bodies, with breasts like melons and hair like thorns, reached out – creatures of his own creation – and silenced his tongue. They began to claim him”.

(Meridian, 170) (437-451)

Truman is haunted by thoughts of his aggressive exploitation and he surrounds himself with pictures of Meridian, with paintings and sculptures of the Southern African-American women. By being pricked by his conscience, by being haunted by his crime of his exploitation, Truman makes himself accountable and thereby owns responsibility to a certain extent for his exploitation. He cannot “just walk away” from his crimes.

Meridian is made rebellious by her oppressive conditions in particular and the oppression let loose on the African-American women in general. The college where she studies – Saxon College – remains a standing monument of oppression. Barbara Christian has mentioned that the main struggle in Meridian is the fight between a natural, life driven spirit and society’s deadly and oppressive strictures:

> ... though the concept of One Life motivates Meridian in her quest toward physical and spiritual health, the societal evils that subordinate one class to another, one race to another, one sex to
another, fragment and ultimately threaten life. The novel *Meridian*... is built on the tension between the African concept of animism, “that spirit that inhabits all life”, and the societal forces that inhibit the growth of the living toward their natural state of freedom. (91)

Saxon college authorities prove – by not allowing the students to have a funeral service for The Wild Child – that there is no chance of survival for the unrestrained independent female. Pifer states,

Saxon college’s official reaction to the students’ attempted funeral for The Wild Child confirms to Meridian and to the other students that the goal of this institution is the proper socialization of its young ladies, not the education of their minds. .... The fate of The Sojourner exemplifies the kind of destruction that can take place when this revolutionary anger has no effective outlet. The most beautiful and potentially subversive object on the campus is destroyed by frustrated student rioters who would avenge The Wild Child. (77-88)

Meridian’s upbringing by her mother makes her emotionally starched shut, since her mother has refused her any knowledge of sex, and Meridian’s initiation to sex becomes a violent affair when she gets molested in a local funeral home. This experience of initiation to sex through horror of violence makes Meridian a woman who cannot enjoy having sex with men. Pifer has mentioned that while everyone
thinks of Meridian as a “young wife and mother” and as a “perfect woman”, “she is in fact, nearly dead” (77-88).

By refusing motherhood, by saying “no”, Meridian “offends and loses her own mother, her family, and her community” (77-88) states Pifer, adding, “she (Meridian) stops living by others’ standards, learns to bloom for herself, as she must in order to survive, since her rebellious acts will alienate her from the rest of society” (77-88).

The discussion on the oppressor-oppressed relationship in Meridian may be concluded using the words of Karen F. Stein:

Exposing herself to the forces of violence and stepping forward to challenge injustice, she (Meridian) is close to death... In defining herself as an artist, Meridian determines her salvation. Her art, hard-won from personal struggle, will be life-giving, not death dealing.

... In order to live, Meridian rejects the temptations of conventional middle-class life, the conventional women’s roles of dutiful daughter, wife, mother, lover... In her refusal to accept such modelling, Meridian contrasts with earlier fictional women who ... willingly sacrifice themselves to their husbands’ quests for perfection... From her repeated encounters with death and deathliness, she gains the knowledge and strength to achieve a new birth of self. (130-142)
Meridian also reveals the exalted concept of self-sacrifice. To Meridian, the only reason for self-sacrifice, should be for preserving another life. "... she (Meridian) understood, finally, that the respect she owed her life was to continue, against whatever obstacles was to live it, and not to give up any particle of it without a fight to the death, preferably not her own". Thus one finds that oppression makes Meridian more mellowed and more sympathetic, though she acts rebellious initially. She realises that she is responsible for her rebirth, by embracing the art form and making herself reborn through her artistic expressions.

V. 5.1. The Color Purple

Alice Walker's The Color Purple, is another novel, which has elicited both a wide range of praise and censure. Philip M. Royster considers The Color Purple a "depiction of violent black men who physically and psychologically abuse their wives and children." (347-370) In the words of Charles L. Proudfit,

... over an extended period of time, (the novel) enables Celie – a depressed survivor-victim of parent loss, emotional and physical neglect, rape, incest, trauma, and spousal abuse – to resume her arrested development and continue developmental processes that were thwarted in infancy and adolescence. (12-37)

To be precise, The Color Purple is a novel that explores the exploitation of the oppressed woman, the exploitation, abuse and harrassment commencing from childhood, leading to traumatic experiences and leaving psychic scars in the victim.
In one of her essays, *Living By the Word*, Walker has remarked “there is no story more moving to me personally than one in which one woman saves the life of another, and save herself…”, a feat that “black women wish they were able to do all the time”. *The Color Purple* reveals the saving gestures of various types, the saving gesture offered by one oppressed victim to another, fellow oppressed.

Without this saving gesture, Celie’s life might have become a veritable hell, and it is this saving gesture extended by Celie – a victim of oppression herself – that make Celie serve as a maid and protector of her younger sister Nettie against the sexual advances of Alphonso.

Celie comes to learn that, when she was barely two years old, her father’s successful store and blacksmith shop were burned and destroyed; he and his two brothers were dragged from their homes and hanged by the jealous whites, and as her mother gave birth to Nettie, her husband’s mutilated and burned body was brought home, which in turn led to an emotional break down of Celie’s mother: “Although the widow’s body recovered, her mind was never the same”.

Celie also learns that a single catastrophic evening made her suffer several losses; she lost her father; she lost emotionally her mother, she lost the safety and warmth of a family environment; and she lost her place as an only child of the family. All these losses dumped all on a sudden on Celie make her life miserable right from the beginning, paving the way for her exploitation and oppression by every opportunistic, odd and sundry oppressor.
In Celie’s experience destructive patriarchal power is associated with God. James C. Hall mentions:

Celie’s path to selfhood involves the evaporation of patriarchal Christianity... Her husband... is also unnameable. This textual deletion signifies her “partner’s” absolute distance, his inability to comprehend her history and future. He perceives her as livestock, and denies her not only love but humanity. (89-98)

Celie’s husband not only ill-treats her, but he also makes advances on Nettie, Celie’s sister. For protecting Nettie, Celie must endure the indignities of her life.

On the other hand “Nettie’s experiences in colonial Africa, ... further unravels the ties between institutional Christianity and black oppression” (89-98) states Hall.

Alphonso’s rape of Celie, and his using her as a sexual replacement for his exhausted wife is, “a not uncommon situation in actual cases of father-daughter incest” (47-49) according to Herman. It is a kind of “soul murder”.

It is actually through the “female bonding” with Shug, that Celie is able to verbalise her feelings about Albert; to realise her own adult sexual orientation and gender identity. It is through this female-bonding “Celie discovers that she has a creative and unique talent... she establishes her own clothes business... and thereby achieves economic independence” (12-37) states Proudfit. The words of Proudfit are used to conclude this short discussion of The Color Purple:
Walker has given us in *The Color Purple* a brilliant psychological developmental novel (dedicated "To the spirit:/ without whose assistance/ Neither this book/ Nor I / Would have been / Written"; Walker has "listened with the third ear" – her own unconsciousness). Celie’s fictive narrative voice, that “speaks” to us though mute and that is never “heard” by those to whom she writes, transcends the limitations of the novel; as victim and survivor, Celie attests to the importance of “good-enough mothering” in the early years and to the healing power of human relationships. (12-37)

V. 6. A Summing up:

A study of the oppressor-oppressed relationship in select fiction of Alice Walker leads to certain conclusions. The oppressor-oppressed relationship results in injustice, inequality and oppression of women. The oppression of women takes the form of abuse, violence and rape resulting in traumatic experiences. The oppression of women may also lead to unwanted pregnancies and painful abortions, as revealed in the two short stories discussed in the earlier part. Violence leaves a psychic scar on the oppressed, which in turn leads to further violence and murder. The relationship also results in an identity crisis. The oppressed assuming the role of an oppressor becomes a hateful byproduct, as it happens in the case of Grange Copeland and Brownfield. But certain people like Grange Copeland who had once been oppressors on their women, redeem themselves, by transforming into a sustaining protector of the
weak, while people like Brownfield remain incorrigible and selfish. The oppression leads to rebellion on the part of Meridian. Meridian and Celie regain their self image, by their own effort, by realising their potential and by realising their creative artistic abilities. Thus, the study of the oppressor-oppressed relationship in the fiction of Alice Walker proves to be thought-provoking and fascinating.

In short, the study shows Alice Walker’s intention to champion as a writer the cause of the African-Americans, especially African-American women. It is a classic example of an intention assuming the shape of a determination. Walker’s own words stand testimony to her determination:

I am preoccupied with the spiritual survival, the survival whole, of my people. But beyond that, I am committed to the exploring the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties and the triumphs of black women.