Chapter II

ALICE WALKER’S ART OF REDEMPTION

The writings of black American women aim at the transformation of a male-centered aesthetic and also of the hegemony of the masculine perspective. Earlier, writers like Du Bois have pointed out that the Negro, being both black and American, shoulders a double consciousness. But we have to notice that black women have to shoulder a third burden, being at once black, American and a female too. They have been victimized by the mountain of sexism not only from the white world but also the black male world. An integral aspect of black women’s activism is bringing to the forefront what has been eclipsed by the dominant modes. They draw attention to the fact that there is a humanity of black women. In their writings they depict a world that has been historically and systematically overshadowed by sexism.

White feminist movement is ridden with racism and black men have invested the term “feminism” with a stigma; black women often avoid calling themselves “feminist.” They prefer to be acclaimed as “womanists” – a term put forth by Alice Walker through her In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose (1983). She defines “womanish” as “referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous, or willful behavior” (1983, xi) and has explained womanist as a person
committed to the improvement of the welfare, the survival and wholeness of the entire community irrespective of sexual differences. Walker is an activist not only in the issues related to women, but is also involved in the civil rights, animal rights and anti-nuclear movement. A womanist narrative is one which constructs plot and character in such a way that it elucidates the moral superiority of women and inadequacy of a masculine perspective on the world. As a womanist, Walker has succeeded to expose most effectively and vividly the “twin afflictions” that beset black women, the sexism and racism that historically and presently restrict their lives. For the purpose, Walker develops her own literary forms making use of the creative legacy left to her by her ancestry. For instance, she makes use of the concept of quilting, the folk language etc. The heritage provides not only a source of her forms but its essence is very important for Walker: that spirituality provides the basis of her art. Walker asserts the relevance and importance of exploring the politics and social forces to dig into the essential spirituality of individual persons. Her works are thus based on her belief in the human potential and desire for change.

Walker’s parents were share croppers. She grew up witnessing the terrible oppression of the blacks by the whites in the South and its deteriorating effects on black families. Thus she grew up under the influence of this passive violent racist system of the South. This system has had a persuasive influence on her first novel *The Third Life of*
Grange Copeland (1968). During her childhood, she herself was her companion and she spent her time in reading. This was because of a feeling of ostracization due to an accident that occurred at the age of eight. Her brother shot her in the right eye with a BB gun. Her fear of losing the eye sight of her other eye too caused her to notice relationships. This experience has had an indelible influence on her writings. She focuses sharply on relationships between people and also between man and nature. She was particularly attuned to the relationships between social forces and personal development too. Years later, during her research on female genital mutilation, Walker viewed this wound caused in her childhood as a “patriarchal wound” because for her this wound caused by her brother is symptomatic as she was convinced that her brother had intended to shoot at her if not specifically her eye. She, thus, draws a parallel to other physical and psychological injuries inflicted on women because of their gender.

Community plays a major role in black life and Alice Walker was also part and parcel of this community life though she had a feeling of being an outcast. This sense of community life instilled in her life by her teachers in spite of the racist Southern system helped her to survive the loneliness that she experienced. Education received utmost concern and was a primary concern for the community in which Walker grew up. The parents were convinced that education would provide their children with
better futures. For them, education was the way out of poverty. The insistence on education, the efforts of the community towards providing education, especially in Walker’s case where they raised seventy five dollars to help Walker attend Spelman college at Atlanta – these contributed towards shaping Walker as a writer. This also instilled in her a sense of love of the people of her parents’ and grand parents’ generation. Apart from that they also instilled in her a consciousness of the creative potentials of black women through the stories they passed on, the gardens they grew and the quilts they made.

From the childhood itself, Walker witnessed the communal activities of black people to accomplish goals necessary for their survival and development. They had a collective sense of responsibility and also mutual love. In one of her essays she remembers that growing up in the South, a black might be afraid of whites but not of blacks. This is the outcome of the belief that they are a community with a functional history and culture which is the reason for the persistence of struggle, characteristic of black Southern tradition. And this sense of community is inherited as a natural right by the black Southern writer. In In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens, she writes:

No one could wish for a more advantageous heritage than that bequeathed to the black writer in the South: a compassion for the earth, a trust in humanity beyond our
knowledge of evil and an abiding love of justice. We inherit a great responsibility as well, for we must give voice to centuries not only of silent bitterness and hate but also of neighborly kindness and sustaining love. (1983, 21)

Her belief in the relationship between personal and social change, her awareness that struggle and spirituality are primary characteristics of black Southern folk tradition and her sense of that unknown thing in her ancestors that yearns to be articulated are not solely intellectual concepts for Alice Walker. They are part of her own personal history. Walker observes that her sense of herself as a socially conscious writer has given her a complex double vision of her experience. This split vision has enabled her to celebrate certain aspects of Southern life and also to criticize the severe racism which has been an integral part of Southern culture. She views the South through the wide lens of her characters. In an interview Alice Walker succinctly stated her position and is very specific about her task:

I am preoccupied with the spiritual survival, the “whole” of my people. But beyond that, I am committed to exploring the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties, and the triumphs of black women. . . . For me, black women are the most fascinating creations in the world.

Next to them, I place the old people – male and female
– who persist in their beauty in spite of everything. How do they do this, knowing what they do? Having lived what they had lived? It is a mystery, and so it lures me into their lives.

(1983, 250-251)

One of the legacies that Walker inherited from her mother’s and grand mother’s generation is the consciousness of the artistic abilities of black women. Aware of black women as a particularly muted group, she has addressed herself in much of her work to the problem of the black woman as a creator. She describes those “. . . grandmothers and mothers of ours . . . not Saints, but Artists; driven to a numb and bleeding madness by the springs of creativity in them for which there was no release” (1983, 233). Walker wonders how the creativity of the black woman was kept alive through centuries, when for most of the years black people have been in America it was a punishable crime for a black person to read or write, and the freedom to expand or develop their mental faculties and talents with action did not exist. She turns to her mother for the answer.

Just as the community had played an influential role in shaping the artist in Alice Walker, the influence of her mother was also an equally important determining factor. She felt the urgency to pass on these stories and herstories her mother narrated to her. For this what the black woman artist must do is to create a history for herself by first re-possessing the
past. From these sources which are an authentic discourse she has to fashion her own experiences in her own language. Walker’s writings are, thus, illustrations of what her mother and others like her might have created if they had the opportunity to express themselves. Though these women did not have access to free creative expressions, they did find means to keep their creativity alive through centuries in spite of hostile situations:

And so our mothers and grandmothers have, more often than not anonymously, handed on the creative spark, the seed of the flower they themselves never hoped to see: . . . no song or poem will bear my mothers name. Yet so many of the stories that I write, that we all write, are my mother’s stories.

(1983, 240)

Walker affirms that the vibrant creative spirit of contemporary black women has been inherited from their mothers and grandmothers. She believes that the gift of art is a legacy, which her ancestry has left to her. She even believes that this legacy must have been brought from Africa.

And perhaps in Africa, over two hundred years ago, there was just a mother, perhaps she painted vivid and daring decorations in oranges and yellows and greens on the walls of her hut; perhaps she sang . . . sweetly over the compounds
of her village, perhaps she wove the most stunning mats or told the most ingenious stories of all the village storytellers. Perhaps she was herself a poet – though only her daughter’s name is signed to the poems that we know. (1983, 243)

In *A Room of One’s Own* Virginia Woolf says: “We think back through our mothers if we are women” (1977, 72-73). Walker uses this model as a pattern to understand Afro-American women’s tradition. *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* is, thus, a discussion of how it is possible to pass on the creative spark to the next generation when literacy itself was a crime for the blacks. Walker constructs a creative matrilineage, which is held together by gardening metaphor and activity:

I notice that it is only when my mother is working in her flowers that she is radiant, almost to the point of being invisible – except as Creator: hand and eye... Her face, as she prepares the Art that is her gift, is a legacy of respect she leaves to me, for all that illuminates and cherishes life. (1983, 241)

Cross generational connection is, therefore, a curious channel for Walker and the silent sense of passing down wisdom, without consciously knowing it yourself leads her into a discussion of more nebulous forms of knowing which permeates all of her works. Although their society denied them the access to most of the means of creation and permitted only a
few cultivated souls to produce art, they used quilting, gardening, cooking and sewing to create a world of their own in the image of their personal concepts of beauty. This has given Walker an insight into the lives of black women and also into the essential nature of art as a human process of illuminating and cherishing life.

As a black woman, a feeling of completeness in oneself was instilled in Walker at an early age itself by her mother and her aunts who were independent people who equaled men in all their activities and were equally fine women too. They cherished and developed a sense of completeness and this contributed towards the development of a self-assurance, which Walker later needed to be a prominent and influential black woman writer in America. From them she learned that one’s sexuality did not affect one’s work.

The black women of American society were never given the status equal to that given to women in general: they did not qualify the characteristics designated by the term “Woman.” So they had to do everything, and, therefore, they are recognized that they could do everything a man could do. This attitude is reflected in her novel *Meridian* (1976) where in she speculates what black women will choose to do when given choice to make their own decision. Moreover, Walker’s college life gave her a realization about the social role of black writers, i.e., to cater to the needs of her people and her community.
At the heart of Walker’s definition of the writer’s social role, is a cultivated awareness of the reciprocal saving potential of art which according to her is a means of keeping alive the connection between ancestral spirits and their living descendents. This multiple preservation of artist, subject and communal spirit describes the very core of Walker’s artistic strategy. Southern black writers have a heritage of love and hate. But they also have abundant richness and beauty to draw from. The most advantageous heritage bequeathed to a Southern black writer is that of compassion for the earth, a trust in humanity beyond their knowledge of evil and abiding love of justice. And what a Southern black writer inherits as a natural gift is a sense of community and thus they also have an inherent and inevitable sense of responsibility – to give voice to centuries of not only silent bitterness and hate, but also of neighborly kindness and sustaining love. The visionary heritage and the rich repository of folklores inherited by the black writers need to be preserved and recreated in individual ways:

We must cherish our old men. We must revere their wisdom, appreciate their insight, love the humanity of their words. They may not all have been heroes of the kind we think of today, but generally it takes but a single reading of their work to know that they were all men of sensitivity and soul.

(1983, 133)
This sensitivity and soul is a heritage that the young black artists are provided with, a vision that can kindle their spirit. Walker herself had been influenced by writers like Zora Neale Hurston, Virginia Wolf and Phillis Wheatley whose insights have been used as a means of illuminating the creativity of black women.

Afro-American writers participate in a literary tradition which is distinctive for both its lucid criticism of modern life and its special ability to recover human value and thus make important affirmations which give black American literature a unique vitality and resonance. The group of writers Walker identifies herself with is Afro-American writers, especially women, and women writers of other cultures too – Afro-American writers like Jean Toomer and Zora Neale Hurston, the South African writer Doris Lessing, white American writer Kate Chopin etc. Walker has made a very enthusiastic attempt to retrieve those black women writers who have remained in the oblivion.

Walker is one of the first contemporary black women writers who argued that sexism was not only a problematic of white women, but was also an important question for black women. She insisted that sexism existed in black community too. But Walker’s point was considered as heresy because at the time focus was mainly on racism. Through her works Walker reveals not only the nature of racism but also the interconnectedness of sexism and racism and how they are modes of
oppression that restricts the lives of black community as a whole. In her works we can often find that there is an interrelation between the lives of black women, the values of entire society and essential spiritual questions that come up in every human society.

Alice Walker has made it her deliberation in life and her works to analyze the status of black women and also to reclaim the culture and tradition that they had lost in the course of enslavement. Through her stories and the folklores and other creative faculties expressed and passed on to her by her ancestors, she attempts to re-create the identity that had been marred, and blackened out by the white forces of supremacy. Walker thus implores black women to fearlessly pull out of themselves and look at and identify with their lives the living creativity some of their great-grandmothers were not allowed to know. She stresses some of them because it is a known fact that the majority of their great-grandmothers knew even without “knowing” it, the reality of their spirituality even if they didn’t recognize it beyond what happened in the singing at church and they never had any intention of giving it up.

Walker’s works are characterized by specific recurrent motifs. The most iterated and obvious is Walker’s attention to the creativity of black women, i.e., black woman as creator, and to show that her attempt to be whole relates to the health of her community. This theme makes her works increasingly black women-centered as she proceeds from one
work to another. Another motif that is seen to recur in her works is her insistence on probing the relationship between struggle and change. This encompasses the pain of black people's lives which results in growth and consequent changes in their lives because of the nature of the struggle that must be borne. This struggle to change is presented admirably through three generations of one family in Walker's first novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* and this struggle to change takes on overt societal dimensions in *Meridian*, her second novel. In her poetry, fiction and essays, this theme has been characteristically presented as a spiritual legacy of black people in the South. Though these elements characterize Walker's works, what makes her voice distinct and peculiar is her willingness to challenge the fashionable belief of the day and to re-examine it in the light of her own experiences and of dearly won principles which she has previously challenged and absorbed. Afro-Americans have more often than not romanticized Africa as their motherland. Walker also celebrates Africa as her motherland because she has sent her characters to Africa in search of their identity and culture. She has refused to idealize Africa though she has recognized the traces of their ethnic culture from Africa: in *The Color Purple* (1982) she sends Nettie to Africa. Her first volume of poetry *Once*, published in 1968 deals with her visit to and her experiences in Africa, suicide, the Civil Rights Movement, and love. They reveal one result of the loss of her eye:
an intense awareness of vision, of the importance both of seeing things accurately and of seeing the beauty of things in the world. The sharply contrasting images in the Africa poems in *Once* make this double emphasis on beauty and accuracy particularly clear. The poems celebrate the beauty of Africa, but do not idealize it. For instance pairing “Red orchids-glorious” with the “deadly spinning Cobra” celebrates both beauty and danger. Other poems contrast idealizations of Africa with the reality of sickness, ignorance and ugliness that lies beneath the superficial beauty. In her poem “Karamojans” from *Once* Walker demystified Africa.

A tall man
Without clothes
Beautiful
Like a Statue
Up close
His eyes
Are running
Sores. (1978, 20)

She challenged the idealistic view of Africa as an image, a beautiful artifact to be used by Afro-Americans in their pursuit of racial pride. The poet boldly stated what she sees. She does not flinch from what she sees. She neither romanticizes nor inflates it. The first four lines quoted above
acknowledge that Walker also, like any Afro-American writer, is aware of the ideal image of Africa. It is only on a closer observation ("Up Close") that this ideal image is shattered. Thus in those lines, a tension is built up between appearance and reality, mystification and the real. Though Walker demystifies and de-idealizes the African image, this does not mean that Walker rejects Africa as a source of their racial and ethnic heritage and pride. Her later fiction proves it.

In *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, Walker talks about three types of black women: the physically and psychologically abused black women; the exceptional black woman torn by "contrary instincts," who, in order to fulfill her creativity, is forced to repress the sources from which it comes; and the new black woman who can freely recreate herself out of the legacy of her maternal ancestors. In each of her fictional works, Walker presents glimpses of all of these types, although one phase of the cycle is intensely focused on. For instance, her characterization of Mem and Margaret Copeland in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* as physically and psychologically abused black women led her to the characterization of Ruth Copeland as a black woman who may be able to re-create herself as a whole. Walker, thus, insists that an understanding of the "herstory" of black women and the lives they are actually living is critical to growth and transformation of a strong female black identity. Thus all her works in one way or the other strengthens the
need of a black woman to establish her identity and also she reinforces the ethnic cultural background from which they have emerged as an Afro-American community.

While having a detour of Walker’s fiction we find that she portrays a congregation of black women of the South. They are plain women, leading a plain life. They hold up their ancestral tradition of growing gardens. Their life is a story of endless struggle, which finally transforms them into hard women. But they are harmless because they are mostly innocent. They are usually church-going or church-been women. But some times in their confused state they intermix Voodoo and Christianity. Their lives are synonymous of tragedies in one way or the other and it is often very personal, very real and extraordinarily bleak and black. Their world is fashioned by time and condition and they keep repaying their dues in this small isolated world. All the women of Walker cannot be flocked together into the same mould – as women succumbing to suppression. But all of them are punched by racism, sexism, ignorance and despair. They often are forced to stoop to a level lower than themselves, frequently, that of animals. Thus they become frustrated and operate on a level consistent with their reduced state. They are noosed by their execrable circumstance and this entrapment is the result of their sense of powerlessness against the structure of the dominant society as well as the fact that they have little understanding of that structure. Thus
in their lives they enact a plot which is a construction of the dominant white society including both male and female. Moreover, they also have to appease and dance to the tunes of black men too.

In 1970 came Walker's first fictional venture under the title *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*. Most of Walker's earlier works are an intense examination of those ideas advocated by the most evident Afro-American spokes persons in the arena. At the height of cultural nationalism, in 1970, the substance of most black literary activity was focused on the rebellious urban black in confrontation with white society and it was at this time that her first novel was published. The novel traces the history of the Copeland family through three generations. Walker demonstrates the relationship between the racist share cropping system and the violence that the man, woman, and children of that family inflict on each other. The characters are Southern peasants rather than Northern lumpen, reminding us that much of Afro-American population is still under the yoke of a feudal share cropping system. The novel is written more from the angle of the tentative survival of a black family rather than from an overt confrontation between black and white. The title suggests that the novel revolves around Grange Copeland, the good-for-nothing ruffian who turns over a new leaf. But actually the novel is about the pain and suffering of the female characters – Margaret, Miz Mamie Lou Banks, Josie and Mem – that dominate the system even after the curtain
The Third Life of Grange Copeland is situated in the South, specifically at rural Georgia. Walker’s response to the South is ambivalent. She does not try to romanticize Southern black country life. In fact she hated the South generally while growing up in Georgia. But she emphasizes that the Southern black writers have enormous richness and beauty to draw from. Walker remembers that the larger white world is composed of evil greedy men who paid her share cropper father just three hundred dollars for a year of labor while he had to work to death. At the same time Walker also remembers the sense of community, which enabled blacks to cope with and even transcend the hardships of a racist society. Thus this ambivalent prospective is, for her, a rich and complex mode of vision, a way of seeing her Southern background which prevents her from either naively romanticizing the South or reducing it to an oversimplified vision of despair and resentment. She is thus able to draw great deal of positive material from her outwardly underprivileged background.

The novel captures how the fabric of the American South affects the black family. Walker herself has described it as a novel that has a chronological structure and devoted to rigorous realism. From the title one is tempted to assume that Grange is the primary focus of the novel. But actually he is only a vehicle through which the broader racial
experience is narrated and is then challenged by previously subordinate narratives that focus specifically on the experiences of black women. In addition to inscribing the narratives of Grange and Brownfield, the novel commits itself to the stories of Mem, Margaret, Josie and also communities of anonymous women. Though the personal histories of Grange and Brownfield seem to be the dominant narratives, the women’s stories also serve significant textual and ideological functions. Through symbolically using Grange and Brownfield, Walker advances the argument that the culture of poverty, with its racial underpinnings, is essentially dehumanizing. Because the Copeland men are thwarted by society in their attempt for control of their lives, they vent their frustrations by inflicting violence on their wives. And because the Copeland women too are thwarted in their desire to be “women” in the society, one finally kills herself and the other is killed by her husband when she tries to take care of the family. In each case, the children are not so much a source of the mother’s strength as they are victims. The mothers then are not always respected in black society nor are they always victorious.

Black women have always been directed into feelings of guilt about responsibility for the emasculation of the black male. Guilt, as demonstrated in Walker’s women, breeds weakness that cripples. They understand that despite the troubles their men see, men are actually able
to get along together very well. The beauty of their strength is this ability
to enjoy and maintain camaraderie. The black women not only digest the
hurt and pain, they also feel it their duty to become a repository of the
black man’s rage. This theme is paramount and is openly woven into the
fabric of *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*. Black men, by the same
token, understanding this weakness and, hence, vulnerability, use black
women as their “punching bag.” They vent their hurt and frustrations on
their women because they are easier to knock out than are the dominant
powers. This feature is treated with all ardency in the character of
Brownfield. The struggle the major characters wage against racism is
located in and sometimes veiled by a network of family and community.
The impact of racism is felt primarily through the characters’ mistaken
definitions of themselves as men and women. Grange Copeland first
hates himself because he is powerless as opposed to powerful, the
definition of maleness for him. His reaction is to prove his power by
inflicting violence on the women around him. His brief sojourn in the
North where he feels invisible, which is a step below powerlessness,
causes him to hate whites as his oppressors. For Walker, this does not
precipitate meaningful struggle. It is only when he learns to love himself,
through his commitment to his grand-daughter, Ruth, that Grange
Copeland is able to confront the white racist system. In the process, he
has to destroy his son, the fruit of his initial self-hatred.
Brownfield, son of Margaret and Grange, is so named because when he was born his mother only saw brown fields stretching out in front of her. But more than symbolizing the barren fields, he is the cancer of black male-female relationship. He is parasitic and for the duration of his life, he consumes all the women in his life, including his daughters, and placed the fear of God in them. The focus on Brownfield in the earlier chapters, allows the reader to sympathize with him. The primary victim of racism and economic exploitation is the child, Brownfield; this procedure is followed as Brownfield assumes the role that Grange had played before fleeing the South. The physical description of Brownfield becomes the embodiment of the oppressive conditions under which the sharecroppers lived. Disease, illness and dehumanization underscore these destructive conditions:

He had once been a handsome man, slender and tall with narrow beautiful hands. From trying to see in kerosene lamplight his once clear eyes were now red-veined and yellow with a permanent squint. From running after white folks’ cows, he never landed much to his own, when he had any, and he’d developed severe athlete’s foot that caused him to limp when the weather was hot or wet. From working in fields and with cows in inclement weather he developed a serious bronchitis aggravated by skin problems. (117-18)
But his plight does not justify his treatment of Mem, his wife. When Brownfield met Mem for the first time, he had found her perfect. Even three years later, he could still look back on their wedding day as the pinnacle of his achievement in extricating himself from evil and the devil and aligning himself with love. But as the years passed by and saw his children grow into slavery, he became depressed. He found that his own life was becoming a repetition of his father, Grange's.

Grange, who represents the oldest generation of the Copelands, finds himself trapped in a sharecropper system in which the bills of the sharecropper are always higher than the pay for his crops. This is a very evident enactment of slavery. Feeling frustrated reduced by the whites to "[a] mask . . . tight and still" (17), grows jealous of his wife and becomes impotent to change his conditions. He ignores Brownfield, his son, and wife and regularly visits Josie, the prostitute who helps him feel like a man during the weekends. As his frustration increases he only shrugs: "After each shrug he was more silent than before, as if each of these shrugs cut him off from one more topic of conversation" (17). Finally he abandons his wife Margaret and his son goes to the North in search of an identity. This is the first life of Grange Copeland. Though the focus is on Grange, there is an equally significant alternative narrative centered in the oppression of the black woman. The reader experiences Margaret only through the eyes of Brownfield in a narration that is then mediated
Margaret’s oppressive situation is revealed early in the novel when she agrees with Grange during a family dispute. Brownfield’s response is as follows:

His mother agreed with his father whenever possible. And though he was only ten, Brownfield wondered about this. She didn’t have a thing to say that did not in some way show her submission to his father. (5-6)

Margaret’s story is largely contained within the dominant narrative frame. Her suffering is represented as part of the larger spiritual annihilation that is characteristic of the sharecropping system and her story is a disturbing presence embedded within the dominant narrative. Margaret was unable to make choices about her life and was unaware that possibilities for change existed. She did not have the ability to articulate her needs nor the comforting shoulders of women friends with whom she could confide and strategize. She was alone and lonely. When Grange “. . . shaved, bathed, put on clean overalls and a shirt and took the wagon into town” (15) on Saturday afternoon, Margaret was baffled about her own existence. So she too “washed and straightened her hair . . . dressed up and sat, all shining and pretty, in the open door, hoping anxiously for visitors who never came” (15). This made her son get a feeling that “his mother was like a dog in some ways” (6). Grange’s quarrelsome,
impatient and indifferent attitude towards her and his final abandonment made her destruction quick in coming. She went into the woods and died, “... in a lonely sort of way ... as if she had spent the last moment on her knees” (29). Through Brownfield’s remarks we can clearly trace the change in Margaret’s personality:

... she had grown restless about her own life, a life that was predictably unexciting as last year’s cotton field. Somewhere along the line she had changed. Slowly, imperceptibly. ... It seemed to Brownfield that one day she was as he had always known her; kind, submissive, smelling faintly of milk; and the next day she was a wild woman looking for frivolous things, her heart’s good times in the transient embraces of strangers. (26)

Brownfield held his father responsible for this change because it was him that she followed at first. In the beginning they were happy together. But the unattractive and colorless life, “the creaking floorboards of their unpainted house” (27) caused depression which “always gave way to fighting, as if fighting preserved some part of the feeling of being alive. It was confusing to realize but not hard to know that they loved each other” (27). The cares and compelling pressures of life snatched away the happy moments of their life as in every black family, thus creating discordance in the family life. Of Grange’s treatment of her, she stated before
she died: “You’d think he’d be satisfied, me feeding him and her fucking him” (22).

What was largely suggested in the Margaret-Grange marriage is Presented in graphic detail in the description of the union between Brownfield and Mem. After his mother’s suicide Brownfield wanders into the juke joint run by Josie who had been his father’s lover. He was unaware of this fact and joins Josie and her daughter Lorene for the time being. Both of them competed for his attention and sex and fought over him. He attempted to accommodate both of them at the same time. At Josie’s place Brownfield came across Mem, her niece. Though Mem had been educated by Josie, she had always been considered a burden by her. Her union with Brownfield through her marriage only marked the beginning of a life typical and fateful of all black women. Her suffering is carried to the zillionth degree. She had an opportunity to observe Brownfield’s action with Josie and Lorene, and she knew that he was ignorant, no-good and strangely fascinated by her college learning. After marriage Brownfield returns to sharecropping ignoring his previous conviction that if he once started, he would never escape the inevitable frustration and degradation of sharecropping. This results in the hatred towards his wife whom he had once adored and also in the total destruction of his family life.

Brownfield often blamed Mem for his failures and inability to
produce a crop at the end of a farming season. He beat her and did not fear her as he did the white men whose power choked him and refused him his manhood and who gave him dried potatoes and sickly hogs at the end of the year. So he lets loose his frustrations on his wife. His sole mission now is to pull her down beneath him so his foot could rest easy on her neck: “Why don’t you talk like the rest of us poor niggers? . . . Why do you always have to be so damn proper? Whether I says ‘is’ or ‘ain’t’ ain’t no damn humping off your butt” (81). Brownfield’s indebtedness as a sharecropper, which crippled him from being a dutiful husband, crushed his pride and battered his ego. This made him drag Mem away from her profession of school teaching and send her to white households as a domestic to bring her down to his level. His anger and frustration at himself, his life and his world made him ill-treat her. “His rage and his anger and his frustration ruled” (79) and this made him blame her for everything. But Mem “. . . accepted all his burdens along with her own and dealt with them from her own greater heart and greater knowledge” (79). He had always begrudged her greater knowledge because it made him feel that it gave her more power. Brownfield beat his once lovely wife regularly because this made him feel good at least for the time being. Mem took his punches and fell to her knees. She stopped talking “proper,” grew ugly, burnt her books, and gave birth to her babies in cold, damp rooms alone because, more often than not,
Brownfield was too evil and drunk to go for the midwife.

Mem’s weakness is representative of a steady stream of suffering throughout Walker’s fiction. She carries the burden of guilt and it is a heavy load on her back. Once she took advantage of his drunken state. She tried to overturn her weakness, placed the shotgun to his head and reminded him:

I put myself to the trouble of having all these babies for you.

... To think I let you drag me around from one corncrib to another just cause I didn’t want to hurt your feelings. ...

And just think of how many times I done get my head beat by you so you could feel a little bit like a man. ... And just think how much like an old no-count dog you done treated me for nine years. (135-36)

In the beginning, when Brownfield met Mem he had always thought of her as of “another mother. ... Someone to be loved and spoken to softly, someone never to frighten with his rough, coarse ways (66). He had found good many qualities in her which he did not have and this attracted him to her. But within a few years, these self-same virtues turned against her. It appeared on the surface at the beginning that Mem would not be victimized. After all she was educated and had an identity. She was a school teacher. Brownfield, who had every chance of changing for the better was pulverized by the smothering sharecropping system.
Brownfield becomes disillusioned because he was unable to provide Mem with the smallest things she wanted from life. He could find no way of escape and, moreover, he doubted that Mem would gain superiority in the family. This kindled jealousy in him. He wanted to destroy the personality of Mem:

The tender woman he married he set out to destroy. And before he destroyed her he was determined to change her. And change her he did. He was her Pygmalion in reverse. The first thing he started on was her speech. They had begun their marriage with her correcting him, but after a very short while this began to wear on him. He could not stand to be belittled at home after coming from a job that required him to respond to all orders from a stooped position. (80-81)

Mem emerges not as a specific woman but as a repository of various traits and virtues. The narrator stresses Mem’s formal education, her physical attractiveness and her assertive approach to life. Although these things differentiate her from the other women in the novel and help to provide a background for her in which her goodness stands in contrast to Brownfield’s evil, Mem’s personal history is not revealed. Mem’s life, as depicted in the text, is one of omissions and gaps. For instance in the midst of all the verbal and physical abuse that Mem suffers at the hands of Brownfield, his reaction is more fully delineated than hers. This is
evident in the scene where Brownfield ridicules and condemns Mem because of her language:

In company he embarrassed her. When she opened her mouth to speak he turned with a bow to their friends, who thankfully spoke a language a man could understand, and said, “Hark, mah lady speaks, lets us dumb niggers listen!” Mem would turn ashen with shame, and tried to keep her mouth closed thereafter. But silence was not what Brownfield was after, either. He wanted her to talk, but to talk like what she was, a hopeless nigger woman who got her ass beat every Saturday night. He wanted her to talk like a woman who deserved him. (81)

It was not difficult for Mem to change into the woman Brownfield wanted her to be because she had lived and grown up in such a culture. She had seen women being merely instruments in the hands of men. Her aunt Josie and her cousin, Lorene, are exploited sexually and living with them, Mem had also been mentally abused by them, because they felt Mem to be a burden. Thus,

For a woman like Mem, who had so barely escaped the ‘culture of poverty,’ a slip back into that culture was the easiest thing in the world. First to please her husband, and then because she honestly could not recall her nouns and
verbs, her plurals and singulars, Mem began speaking once more in her old dialect. . . . Everything about her he changed, not to suit him, for she had suited when they were married. He changed her to something he did not want, could not want, and that made it easier for him to treat her in the way he felt she deserved. He had never had sympathy for ugly women. A fellow with an ugly wife can ignore her, he reasoned. It helped when he had to beat her too. (82-83)

Mem was trapped for her life. Her plight was to suffer silently without retaliation or expression of rage. She had no right to defend. She had to endure the punches of her man in order to keep up his identity. And if at all she wants to abandon her husband, there’s no choice unless he leaves her. She is left to fend for herself unless another black woman comes up to her help. But in the case of Mem, there is nobody to help her:

She wanted to leave him, but there was no place to go. She had no one but Josie and Josie despised her. She wrote to her father, whom she had never seen and he never bothered to answer the letter. From a plump woman she became skinny. To Brownfield she didn’t look like a woman at all. Even her wonderful breasts dried up and shrank; hair fell out and the only good thing he could say for her was that she kept
herself clean. He berated her for her cleanliness, but because it was small thing, and because at times she did seem to have so little, he did not hit for it. (83-84)

The first three sentences sum up the isolation and despair that Mem feels. Mem is thoroughly and routinely beaten up, dehumanized and made ugly. Finally in a moment of rebellion, she threatens to kill Brownfield. She decides to set herself free, not intending to submit to the wishes of Brownfield to ruin her. She gets a new job in the town, arranges to move into a better house and attempts to provide better for her children. Brownfield is taken along with her based on ten conditions to which he is forced to agree. But once again the weakening comes through her pregnancy and Brownfield was bent upon snatching the occasion to bring her back to her lowness and he succeeded. All Mem’s dreams of leading a happy and peaceful life in a good house are shattered. Brownfield is fired from his job and Mem takes care of the needs of the family. And finally in a state of drunkenness, he shoots Mem for trying to be independent of him and for trying to be successful than he is. Not only Mem, but her three girls also suffer physical violence and mental abuse from Brownfield. The eldest Daphne suffers from nervousness and the smaller ones Ornette and Ruth are also afraid of Brownfield. Their mother was shot right before their eyes. Mem’s disability or her refusal to disallow Brownfield to enter her life, her succumbing to his continued
ruthless actions, her stooping to self pity, were all routed toward a bitter end. At the end of a workday, tired and worn, she walked right into the barrel of her husband’s shot gun. She died the way she had lived – a hard life and a hard death. The man who killed her considered her to be no more than the animal and insect slurs; he had so often hissed at her. She lay “. . . faceless among scattering gravel in a pool of blood. . . . On Mem’s right foot the shoe lay almost off and a flat packet of newspaper stuck halfway out” (172). Her husband turned, cursed and walked on inside the house. Hence the narrative shifts its perspective from treating Grange and Brownfield as victims, to the women and the children as the most victimized. Thus Walker’s first novel though apparently deals with the dehumanization and suppression of black men, the novel significantly deals with the plight of black women who try to create an identity of their in the face of oppression and opposition from all corners.

Josie’s narrative is significantly more fleshed out than that of Mem or Margaret. She is a composite of contradictions. She is both independent and dependent. The way she conducts her life shows that she exercises complete freedom in her life, and all the same she is also eager to abandon that freedom. She is kind yet vindictive and petty, and she is both celebrated and despised. The significant development in the narrative of Josie is the attempt to create a personal history. The contexts through which Josie can be understood paves way for a more fully
developed character in Josie. The physical and mental abuse she endures at the hands of her father and the men who exploit her sexually are graphically represented. Josie is represented as a potentially rebellious woman and this suggests the archetypal Blues woman. Even her diversion to prostitution can be considered as her rebellion against the norms of the society. As a prostitute and the infamous owner of the Dew Drop Inn, Josie is the embodiment of rebellion:

As it was she was born into a world peopled by her grandfather’s male friends, all of whom frequented the little shack on Poontang Street where “fat Josie” (she grew larger after the baby) did her job with a gusto that denied shame, and demanded her money with an authority that squelched all pity. And from these old men, her father’s friends, Josie obtained the wherewithal to dress herself well, and to eat well, and to own the Dew Drop Inn. When they became too old to “cut the mustard” any more she treated them with jolly cruelty and a sadistic kind of concern. She often did a strip tease in the center of their eagerly constructed semi-circle, bumping and grinding, moaning to herself, charging them the last pennies of their meager old-age savings to watch her, but daring them to touch. (57-58)

This passage marks a significant turning away from the dominant focus
into a woman’s individual history outside the context of the Grange – Brownfield discourse. The themes of woman as both victim and victor and of woman as rebel are inserted into the narrative. Josie’s rebelliousness is the result of her exploited youth and she tries to secure fast a space for herself in the society.

In the third generation represented in the novel through Ruth, Grange’s grand daughter, we witness the emergence of a stronger generation of women. She is the promise for the future. Circumstances have eased somewhat in the South by the time she is born, and as a teenager she is aware of the Civil Rights Movement. In spite of her father’s attempts to ruin her life, Ruth manages to escape slavery to whites or to her father, with the help of Grange, her grandfather. Grange is determined to provide her with a future free from emotional slavery to which Brownfield is bent upon subjecting her to. With her probing mind and overall intelligence, Grange wants to prepare her for a Herculean task, some magnificent and deadly struggle and some harsh and probing reality. Thus Walker’s first novel provides an array of how women are crushed and almost nullified in the face of racial oppression, how the double burden of racial and sexual oppression erases their chances for existence.

The second novel by Walker, Meridian, moves away from the ambiguous characterization of women found in The Third Life of Grange
Copeland. It heralds the rise of the feminine. Racial history in general is marginalized because apart from the fact that Meridian is a Civil Rights worker, the novel is more an articulation of a nascent feminist consciousness. The various issues explored in the narrative are the celebration of the female as the “Other” within the context of a new mythology; the destruction of traditional social and moral values, especially those governing women’s sexuality and motherhood; and the problems that are central to the black–white feminism. Each of these themes can be viewed as a manifestation of an implicit feminist consciousness.

The leading character of the novel, Meridian, has been implicitly conditioned by her community’s patriarchal institutions to repress her individuality and also not to speak out inappropriately. But when she discovers that she cannot conform to authorized notions of appropriate speech like patriotic school speeches and the like, her only rebellious recourse is her silence. And because of her refusal to participate in the authorized discourse she fails to fit in within the social groups like the church congregation, the elite college she attends and even the cadre of would-be violent revolutionaries. So she determines to fight her battle by herself through personal struggle and Civil Rights activism. Thus we find a process of personal transformation in Meridian and Walker posits this struggle for personal transformation as an alternative to the political
movement of the 1960’s, particularly those that merely reproduced existing power structures. Karen Stein’s comment on the novel in this perspective is thus:

... the novel points out that the Civil Rights Movement often reflected the oppressiveness of patriarchal capitalism. Activists merely turned political rhetoric to their own ends while continuing to repress spontaneous individuality. To overcome this destructiveness, Walker reaches for a new definition of revolution. Her hope for a just society inheres not merely in political change, but in personal transformation. (Lynn, 1992, 77)

Meridian lives on her own, separated from her family and the cadre that has rejected her. Alone she performs spontaneous and symbolic acts of rebellion, such as carrying a drowned black child’s corpse to the mayor’s office to protest the town official’s neglect of drainage ditches in black neighborhoods. She accomplishes more than the would-be revolutionaries and her achievement is the result of her attempt to learn to respect life through her confrontation of her self. Meridian, who struggles with questions that other characters gloss over, completes this personal transformation. Her personal confrontations with her personal history, family history and racial history shape the way she chooses to live. Meridian’s struggle for personal transformation echoes June Jordan’s
definition of her duties as a feminist:

I must undertake to love myself and to respect myself as though my very life depends upon self-love and self-respect . . . and so . . . I am entering my soul into a struggle that will most certainly transform the experience of all the peoples of the earth, as no other movement can, . . . because the movement into self-love, self-respect, and self-determination is . . . now galvanizing . . . the unarguable majority of human beings everywhere. (Hernton, 1987, 58)

Walker has employed various discursive elements of which the political and the black nationalistic ones remain prominent. The political content of the novel creates a narrative situation which allows Walker to utilize various dominant and sub-dominant discourses of the 1970’s, including that of the Civil Rights Movement, Black Nationalism and feminism. In her examination of the novels by black women writers published in the 1970’s, Madhu Dubey argues that “[t]he internal gaps and contradictions of Black Nationalist discourse, especially visible in its construction of black feminist definition of womanhood” (Collins, 2000, 161). In Meridian Walker not only exposes the internal contradictions of Black Nationalist discourse but other discourses as well which construct black female subjectivity, including white feminist discourse.
In Meridian Walker transcends the boundaries of female gender to embrace more universal concerns about individual autonomy, self-reliance and self-realization. Meridian undergoes an effort to find her identity, her own moral center and develop a completeness of being. This struggle for identity is formidable because she lives in a society that domesticates conformity, that censures individual expression, especially for women. But in spite of that, she flourishes and evolves into a prototype for psychic wholeness and individual autonomy. Meridian fights against patriarchal norms which constrains the space for women. She breaks away from the shackles of social and moral codes imposed on women, and in her rebellion she demystifies and deconstructs the notions of motherhood. Moreover, her silent but active response to the politics of patriarchy can be witnessed in the opening chapters itself. In the first chapter, Walker crystallizes the oppression inherent in Southern segregation practices, as grown white men rush to prevent a group of black children from seeing what everyone acknowledge to be a worthless freak show, a ludicrous carnival attraction. Meridian challenges the Southern town’s separate but equal racial tradition by leading a group of school children to the circus wagon featuring the mummy woman Marilene O’Shay, on a day not authorized by the local government. While defying the tradition of separate-but-equal race relations, Meridian, in her active social role, concurrently challenges traditional
and synthetic images of women. She is in sharp contradiction to the 
images presented of the mummy woman which are, as Walker suggests, 
images of all women. The mummy woman is an emblem of the narrowly 
prescribed position of women in America. The Marquee of the circus 
wagon flashes the caption “Obedient Daughter,” “Devoted Wife” and 
“Adoring Mother.” Marilene was expected to deny her own identity and 
serve others. Her husband, Henry O’Shay, believed that he created a new 
identity for the woman he married and demanded obedience and 
devotion, terms equivalent to psychic death. The banal descriptions of 
Marilene on the wagon become descriptions that imprison other women 
in Meridian’s world, and the racial ambiguity signified by Marilene’s 
skin coloring signifies cross-cultural oppression of women. Meridian 
rejects the model of Marilene, as she must reject the other models of life-
in-death that both traditional society and the social revolutionaries seek to 
foist on women. She refuses to become the dutiful daughter, devoted wife 
or adoring mother.

Another narrative embedded within the main discourse is the 
episode of Wild Child, an abandoned child impregnated and thus 
removed from the moral values governing the lives of young women 
attending Saxon College. Her antisocial behavior marks her as the 
antithesis of society’s norms. Thus she becomes a symbol of rebellion for 
the Saxon girls who were trapped within the campus’s ornate fence. They
were always treated as thirteen year old girls and the goal of the institution is the proper socialization of its young ladies, not the education of their lives. In the due process, the girls subdue their urge to rebel as they are on their way to ladyhood. But in the event of Wild Child’s death, they take to riots and all their inherent protest against the plasticity of the disciplinary codes become evident.

The narrative on the Sojourner tree recalls the storytelling of a mythological Louvinie whose art proved fatal to one of her young wards and resulted in her having her tongue cut out. She buried the tongue under the Sojourner, the magnolia which she had planted. According to slaves’ folk beliefs, Louvinie transferred her capacity for powerful speech onto the Sojourner. Louvinie and the conjured image of Sojourner Truth serve as positive examples of women who use their tongues as weapons in the struggle for liberation. The Sojourner is the only complex and meaningful centering point on the otherwise artificial campus of Saxon. Generations of students have handed down stories and folk practices, like songs and May dances, concerning the Sojourner. Of these stories, the story of Louvinie has always received the pivotal focus. The narrative thus focuses on the historical relationship of the girls of Saxon College to the Sojourner tree, and thus the mythological significance of the tree is enhanced.

These episodes, though they digress from the larger struggles of
the Civil Rights Movement, deliberately place the personal histories of women in the foreground. These cluster of narratives all focus on problems of women’s empowerment, or more accurately, disempowerment. These narratives dignify the emergence of feminist themes in Walker’s fiction. The feminist discourse of Meridian unfolds through the insertion of myth and folklore in narratives that signify their differences from the framing text, with its emphasis on racial oppression and blind spots to black women’s oppressed condition. The symbolic representations of disempowerment exemplified by the Marilene O’Shay, Wild Child and Sojourner tree episodes invoke folklore.

The deconstruction of motherhood, central to feminist ideology, is pursued more directly here. It involves the defamiliarization of ordinary situations of women’s oppression. A demystification of the black matriarchy myth is carried out and it is resonant with the critique of ideology of motherhood that generally characterizes non-fictional and fictional feminist discourse. That myth is revealed through the fusion of Meridian’s narrative with that of her mother, Mrs. Hill, whose case is that of abstraction. Though she was a woman who “had known the freedom of thinking out the possibilities of life” (48), her experiences point to the destructive nature of marriage and motherhood. She was a school teacher before marriage and had earned both money and respect and she had enjoyed living as a single woman, but she could not reach euphoria
which she believed others attained through marriage. She enjoyed married life until the arrival of her children:

She could never forgive her community, her family, his family, the whole world, for not warning her against children. For a year she had seen some increase in her happiness: she enjoyed joining her body to her husband’s in sex, and enjoyed having someone with whom to share the minute occurrences of her day. But in her first pregnancy she became distracted from who she was. As divided in her mind as her body was divided, between what part was herself and what part was not. Her frail independence gave way to the pressures of motherhood and she learned – much to her horror and amazement – that she was not even allowed to be resentful, that she was “caught.” That her personal life was over. There was no one she could cry out to and say “It’s not fair!” And in understanding this, she understood a look she saw in the other women’s eyes. The mysterious inner life that she had imagined gave them a secret joy was simply a full knowledge of the fact that they were dead, living just enough for their children. They too had found no one to whom to shout “It’s not fair!” (50-51)

Consequently she withdrew into abstraction. She is transformed into a
tragic woman whose life is marked by despair and paralysis. The broader implications of Mrs. Hill’s state, its relations to the plight of “other women,” place the situation within the general discourse of feminism. Having constructed Mrs. Hill as a victim of her acceptance of the role of black matriarch, a position reinforced by Christianity and general social practice, the novel shifts its focus to Meridian’s rejection of motherhood. Meridian is not able to accept her child. She wanted him out of her life. Finally she decides to abandon her son in order to attend college and her mother views her as a “monster” for doing so. Thus the text can be viewed as a historical examination of Black women’s changing views on motherhood. Mrs. Hill embodies the traditional position, largely self-effacing and destructive and Meridian represents the emergence of a feminist dialectic.

Thus we find that the two early novels of Walker mark a point of intersection and a struggle between two discourses: racist and economic oppression and the victimization of black women. In *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, the women’s stories are contained within a narrative of strategies of survival necessary in a social milieu of racial and economic oppression. *Meridian* focuses more intensely on women’s issues. And the full articulation of a distinct feminist position unfolds in *The Color Purple*.

Deborah E. McDowell in her essay “The Self in Bloom: Alice
Walker’s *Meridian* states that in *Meridian* Walker transcends the boundaries of the female gender to embrace more universal concerns about individual autonomy, self-reliance and self-realization. She contends that *Meridian* is in the tradition of the bildungsroman which “chronicles the series of initiatory experiences which Meridian, the title character, undergoes in an effort to find her identity, or her own moral center, and develop a completeness of being” (262). Meridian’s struggle is a formidable one since she lives in a society that domesticates conformity and censures individual expression for women. Despite this fact, Meridian evolves into a prototype for psychic wholeness and individual autonomy. While at Saxon many incidents, primarily the incident of refusal to perform Wild Child’s funeral rites at the Saxon chapel makes Meridian increasingly aware that her growing individuality cannot be nourished in a convention bound climate. Thus she ardently begins to search for an opposing set of values which could provide relief from the strictures of the Anglo-Saxon value system. Meridian cultivates a self restricting herself to gross necessities of life. This necessitated her repudiation of many of the acclaimed values and institutions of the Western tradition. This leaves her in an alienated stance. Thus she meets with the need to develop an alternate value system outside the sterility and meaninglessness of the Western orbit. She finds this alternative system psychically repatriating to the most viable aspects of the black
The transformation occurring in Meridian’s self is convergent with the transformations occurring within the black cultural ethos which has been extirpated to a great extent under the pulverizing dominant white tradition. Meridian’s development of her self has necessitated her to reject many of the most cherished values and institutions of the Western tradition. She is left with the existential alienation that is the mark of the twentieth century individual, in spite of her deepened commitment to the racial struggle. Thus she has to find a means to overcome the sterility and meaninglessness of the Western system. This alternative value system, she discovers, is the viable aspect of the black cultural heritage. Thus in order that the process of her self-development through the creation of an identity meets with success, it is necessary that she has to go backward in order to move forward. And this backward is the South. It is noteworthy that the backup for much of the novel is coastal Georgia where the aspects of Africanisms, particularly the oral, religious and musical traditions, are significant. Despite its history of racism and oppression, the South is regenerative because it is the cradle of the black man’s experience in the New World and it is South that has continued to shape black man’s experience in the U.S.

It is in the South that Meridian rediscovers the powers of the black past. She accepts it and is imbued by it. She draws strength from its vital cultural heritage.
tradi\ntions, most notably the symbiotic musical and religious traditions. While crusading among older black people, she “... was constantly wanting to know about the songs: ‘Where did such and such a one come from?’ or ‘How many years do you think black people have been singing this?’ (39). Concomitant with the rediscovery of the black musical tradition is her rediscovery of its counterpart – the black church which is in the words of Franklin Frazier, “... the most important cultural institution created by Negroes” (1989, 70). It is important to note however that the church which Meridian finally accepts is not her mother’s church, not the church of the white Christian tradition with its futuristic eschatology, not the church that severed the black man’s attention from the exigencies of the “here and now” and riveted it to the putative rewards of the hereafter. It is rather the restored church of her slave ancestors that Meridian ultimately embraces – the church rooted in the soil of protest against oppression, the church of “communal spirit, togetherness, righteous convergence” (198).

The musical and religious traditions converge in one of the final chapters “Camara.” The chapter renders a certain completion to Meridian’s characterization. The chapter begins by likening Meridian to a camera as she watches a group of church goers assemble for Sunday service, and it ends with her re-union with kindred black souls in a communal purpose. While she wanders into a black church shortly after
Martin Luther King’s assassination, she notices a number of changes which trigger her re-examination of the functions of the black church in the social and political struggle. What strike her at first are the church’s physical changes. It was

... not like the ones 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 cathedrals did, but settled firmly on the ground. (93)

That the church is settled firmly on the ground suggests its temporal concerns. Its outer transformations mirror its internal changes. A man is called on to pray. But he renders only a short prayer and it is significant to note that he does not kneel. “He said he would not pray any longer because there was a lot of work for the community to do” (195). Meridian notes that even the songs and music have undergone change. Meridian notices that the music seems to be death-defying one. It reminds her of Margaret Walker’s lines “Let the martial songs be written . . . . let the dirges disappear” (195).

Even the sermons have changed from unintelligible ones she knew as a child. The minister spoke in a voice that reminds one of Martin Luther King. His sermon is no more religious. He gives political thrust to his sermon. He forbade the young men in the audience to participate in the Vietnam War and advised the young women “to stop looking for
husbands and try to get something useful in their heads. . . . God was not mentioned except as a reference” (195-96). For anybody looking from the outside, the most evident transformation is the picture on the stained glass window. The picture of the traditional pale Christ with stray lamb can no more be seen. Instead, there is the picture of a tall, broad shouldered black man with a guitar in one hand and a blood dripping sword in the other – “B.B. With a Sword.” The reference is to B.B. King, the famous blues singer. This picture is used here by the author like other black writers, as a symbol of an enduring cultural tradition and as an exemplification of unity and community.

The essential feeling of oneness and community evoked by the picture of “B.B. King with a Sword” kindles in Meridian too a perception of oneness with black humanity. She discovers that her identity is inextricably tied to her black people. She reassessed her commitment to the racial struggle once again. Throughout the novel we find that Meridian could not bring herself to kill for the struggle. But now she begins to contemplate the power of the sword. Even though she vacillates in the belief that she herself can kill, she thinks,

... perhaps it will be my part to walk behind the real revolutionaries – those who know they must spill blood in order to help the poor and the black and therefore go right ahead – and when they stop to wash off the blood and find
their throats too choked with the smell of murdered flesh to sing, I will come forward and sing from memory songs they will need once more to hear. For it is the song of the people, transformed by the experience of each generation, that holds them together, and if any part of it is lost the people suffer and are without soul. If I can do that, my role will not have been a useless one after all. (201)

we can observe that Meridian has struck upon an identity textured not on Western tradition but from the artifacts of her own black cultural heritage. Her connection to that heritage enables her to prevail in comparison to all of the other characters in the novel. At the end of the novel we find Meridian’s Saxon friend Annie Marion’s gift of a photograph of a gigantic tree stump with a tiny branch growing out of one side. Annie Marion has written “who could be happier than you that The Sojourner did not die?” (217). The Sojourner was the tree, a symbol of both the black oral and musical traditions, planted during slavery on a plantation which later on become Saxon College, the tree is destroyed by a group of rioting students. Metaphorically speaking, Meridian is that branch from The Sojourner and the clarion testimony that although systematic attempts have been made at its destruction, it is not dead. It is a testimony to the fact that black culture, in spite of hostilities, cannot be wiped or rooted out. On this black cultural heritage and ethnic
background is every black man’s identity edified. Black experience is buoyed by this linkage and revival of black ethnicity.

The Color Purple which came in 1982 is a further development in the womanist process Walker is evolving. While her first novel depicts victimization of black woman, her second one Meridian portrays the development of a self-illuminated, identified black woman. Through Meridian to The color Purple we witness the evolution of emerging and self-conscious black women who awake from a dormant servile subordinate status as a black female, daughter, wife and mother to the status of an independent, self-sufficient, emergent women attaining the completeness of being. Walker is engaged in the deconstruction of patriarchal order both thematically and formally, as Barbara Christian has opined. (1984, 468-469). Thematically we have the articulation of womanism, the primacy of the female in moral and social systems. We also have the revaluation of the female body as the site of self-awareness and self-esteem. Thus, in The Color Purple, a crucial moment in Celie’s transformation comes when she perceives the beauty of her genitalia. In terms of form, womanism manifests itself in what Christian calls “process narratives,” stories which do not seek closure, but rather reveal an ongoing creativity. In these structural terms The Color Purple is problematic, since its reuniting of mature characters in fairy tale fashion is in the tradition of closed texts. Other pieces by Walker, especially You
Can't Keep a Good Woman Down, do display both the womanist theme and process structure.

The Color Purple has won the prestigious Pulitzer Prize and also the American Book Award for fiction. The form of the novel itself shows it to be a woman oriented one. It is written in epistolary form and it is effective because it has been a convention used mostly by women. Josephine Donovan has described it as a

. . . semiprivate genre, used primarily by women because of their inferior education and because of the fact that such writings were not expected to be published . . . and whose writing style was a means of describing domestic life, and was more informal, artless. (1980, 212-13)

Hardly literate, sexually abused and too young, Celie's only means of giving vent to her pains was her letters to God. Her letters are the source of information about herself and also about others. They reflect her silent suffering and internal conflict. They reveal the impact of oppression on her spirit as a woman and also traces the development of her growing internal strength and her final victory sexually, socially and economically. The Color Purple can thus be looked upon as the celebration of the triumph of a woman’s struggle against racism, sexism culminating in the discovery of her self leading to the wholeness of her being.
Like Walker’s earlier two novels, this work also spans generations of one poor rural Southern black family, interweaving the flow of history with the personal and the image of quilting central to its concept and form.

Dear God,

Me and sophie work on the quilt. Got it frame up on the porch. Shug Avery donates her old yellow dress for scrap, and I work in a piece every chance I get. It a nice pattern call Sister’s Choice. (63)

The name of the pattern shows the need of sisterhood they must share with each other in order to liberate themselves. We find that the relationship between the characters while beginning in jealousy and violence finally becomes a mutually supportive one. The relationship between Celie and Shug is the most important instance of the growing bond between women in the novel. Shug, a strong and independent woman with a career of her own as a blues singer, teaches the weaker and dependent Celie a number of things: to stand up for herself before Mr. ___, to see that she is beautiful and of worth in herself, and also incidentally to experience the joys of sex. With Shug’s encouragement, Celie is finally able to defy Mr.____ and her growth in herself begins then. Celie discovers the artist in herself and becomes an artist of sorts just like Shug. She discover and develops an ability to design and make
pants, initially for women but ultimately for both sexes. Thus Celie becomes an instance of those women Walker described in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*. Earlier black women were essentially artists but their gifts were so stifled and opportunities so limited that they are never heard of by the outside world. Walker adores quilt makers and especially her mother who made a garden wherever she went to live. These women find an outlet for their creativity whenever and wherever they could. Similarly, Celie too, when freed from the oppressiveness of her earlier environment, develops a way to express her personality in art.

*The Color Purple*, according to Bernard Bell, is

. . . more concerned with politics of sex and self than with the politics of class and race. . . . Its unrelenting, severe attacks on male hegemony, especially the violent abuse of black women by black men, is offered as a revolutionary leap forward into a new social order based on sexual egalitarianism. (1987, 263)

Walker herself has addressed this novel as a historical one. She says that “history starts not with the taking of lands, or the births, battles and deaths of Great Men, but with one woman asking another for her underwear” (1983, 356). This work articulates the complexities of the black women’s struggles in America and throws light on their indomitable and unbeatable will power which capacitates them to
develop an identifiable individuality defying the constraints of an androcentric and white dominant society. Thus we find all the women here, inspite of their shabby, humiliated and disparaged condition, refuse to remain servile to men. In Walker’s texts we witness the dominant hegemony of culture being challenged while renovating the hidden realities of Black American women in terms of their pluralistic ways of existence. In her fictive discourse we find female relationship symbolized as metaphors for revival and rejuvenation of ones self-consciousness and identity. She presents the continuity of the existential experience of black women and Walker’s texts are relentless endeavors to link the past experiences, i.e., of their foremothers, to the black women’s experience in a changing world.

*The Color Purple* begins in an atmosphere of abject despair, but moves towards an end of triumph for the women of the novel. The novel finally culminates in intense joy. To trace this transformation we need to examine four aspects of the novel: the relationship between men and women, among women themselves, between people and nature, and finally between people and God. In the beginning alienation and separation are evident in all these relationships but, by the end we find unique integration of all these elements. Out of these what is of interest is the coming together of all the women surmounting their jealousy and alienation. The novel opens with a horrifying account of Celie’s sexual
abuse by her presumed father. This provides us with an unpleasant commentary on the adrocentric culture, which condemns women to silenced subordinate state. The threat from Celie’s stepfather which is the opening statement of the novel gives us a clear picture of the state of women throughout the novel. “You better not never tell anybody but God. It’d kill your mammy” (1). Celie is even deprived of her right to speak of herself or to share her feelings with anyone except God.

Celie expresses all her thoughts, fears, emotions, her impressions of others, her aspirations and her pains, through her letters to God at first and later on to her sister Nettie. These letters enable her to survive the spiritual, emotional and physical abuse she suffers at the hands of her father. Moreover, Celie’s attitude about her own self, the worthiness she feels for herself and her perception of God emerges in these letters. We get a clear picture of Celie’s life, her experiences and all the more provides a sketch of the life around her. All the people around her are presented through her letters. We get a clear insight into the lives of both the men and women, especially moribund existence of women and their later resurrection through the portrayal in her letters. Moreover, for Celie, these letters are the instruments of communication with God through which she confirms her very existence, a means to assert that she is still alive.

The language employed by Walker throughout the novel, is the
language of Celie, the Afro-American folk speech, a retention of one of the hailed ethnic elements of Afro-American culture. And in the development of the novel, this folk-speech is an essential part of the personality of Celie. The crudeness and the style of Celie’s language reflect her traumatized state, and a depressed mental and emotional state of mind. In her *Living by the Word*, Alice Walker has written about Celie:

She has not accepted an alien description of who she is; neither has she accepted completely an alien tongue to tell us about it. Her being is affirmed by the language in which she is revealed, and like everything about her it is characteristic, hard-won and enthusiastic. (1988, 64)

About the language adopted for Celie, Walker is very realistic. Here we witness also the black and Southern oral tradition, another aspect of Afro-American ethnic background. Quoting Walker’s words:

For Celie’s speech pattern in *The Color Purple*, Celie’s words reveal not only an intelligence that transforms illiterate speech into something that is, at times, very beautiful – as well as effective in conveying her sense of her world – her speech also reveals what has been done to her by a racist and sexist system, and her intelligent blossoming as a human being despite her oppression demonstrates why
her oppressors persist even today in trying to keep her down. For if and when Celie rises to her rightful, earned place in society, across the planet, the world will be a different place. (Sandi, 1991, 133)

In the words of Trudier Harris, “The actual language of the letters, which are written in Celie’s folk speech without any attempt at editorializing on Walker’s part, is similarly reaffirming, something essential to her personality” (1986, 16).

The distressing and horrifying account of Celie’s sexual abuse presented on the opening page of the novel reveals an androcentric culture which relegates women to an obsequious horrific state. She is not in a position to share her trauma with other members of her family. Celie is denied benefit of education. She has been raped repeatedly twice and impregnated by her stepfather whom she had thought was her real father. Thus she suffers from an overpowering sense of incest. Her self-confidence is shattered. She herself is the victim, yet feels defiled and corrupt. She interprets herself from the viewpoint of male supremacy and is not able to overcome her feelings of guilt. She hates herself and has no desire to get to know her body, which had been a constant source of exploitation. On the first page itself the cancellation of the words “I am,” is a testimony to the extent women have been conditioned to blame themselves for the atrocities committed on them. Quoting the words of
Adrienne Rich:

But fear and hatred of our bodies often crippled our brains. Some of the most brilliant women of our time are still trying to think from somewhere outside their female bodies – hence they are still merely reproducing old forms of intellection. (1976, 248)

Celie is benumbed by the sexual violence committed by her step-father and accepts her worthlessness as a statement of fact. He creates an impression in her mind that she is bad and ugly. He stresses this fact more than once in the novel. He says “She ugly. . . . But she aint no stranger to hard work. . . . You can do everything just like you want to and she aint gonna make you feed it or clothe it . . . she ugly. Don’t even look like she kin to Nettie” (9). Celie is constantly reminded of her ugliness, which makes her feel inferior and downtrodden. Even Shug Avery, the person she admires the most states: “You sure is ugly” (48). She tries to ignore herself, and her body which has been subjected to repeated sexual and physical assaults. In the words of Daniel Ross:

To confront the body is to confront not only an individual’s abuse but also the abuse of women’s bodies throughout history; as the external symbol of women’s enslavement, this abuse represents for woman a reminder of her degradation and her consignment to an inferior status. (1988,
After her mother’s death, Celie’s stepfather marries another woman. Once his lust over Celie is fulfilled he marries her off to a degenerate excuse for a man who is also a widower with three children. Celie’s stepfather gives a very bad picture of Celie to Mr. Albert. The way he introduces Celie to Mr. Albert is quiet revealing. “You can do everything just like you want to and she ain’t gonna make you feed it or clothe it". It quite clearly reveals her living standards. After marriage, Mr. Albert whom she addresses only as Mr. treats her with contempt and brutality. She is abused as a slave and whore. She is ill-treated by her husband and stepchildren. Albert beats Celie as and when he likes. She describes her experience thus:

He beat me like he beat the children. Cept he don’t never hardly beat them. He say, Celie, git the belt. The children be outside the room peeking through the cracks. It all I can do not to cry. I make myself wood. I make myself wood. I say to myself Celie, you a tree." 

Celie transforms herself into something like a non-living thing when her husband beats her. She depersonalizes herself from the state of human to a non-human. She gets alienated from her real self as an organic whole. The fact that Celie transforms herself into a tree in moments of extreme physical stress reveals a black woman’s proximity to the passive and
suffering agony of nature. Despite deplorable conditions she passes through, Celie never raises her voice in protest. Albert’s sister advises her to fight back, but she is frightened that she might lose her shelter and life. Kate advises: “You got to fight them, Celie, . . . I can’t do it for you. You got to fight them for yourself” (22). Celie is in a state of lethargy because her primary concern is to remain alive. Thus she questions the validity of fighting and reveals her strategy of life: “I don’t say nothing. I think about Nettie, dead. She fight, she run away. What good it do? I don’t fight, I stay where I’m told. But I am alive” (22). Celie tolerates her life with stoic patience and prefers to live in a shell she makes for herself by meekly surrendering to the dictates of patriarchy. Though Celie is ignorant and illiterate and we might feel that she has retracted into a numb, unfeeling state, drastically curtailing her emotions, Celie has always had her doubts and wants to analyze the reasons of her suffering.

Celia attains a new perspective in life through her acquaintance with Sofia, her step daughter-in-law. Her relationship with Sofia reveals for her what changed autonomous self-hood can bring about in a woman’s life. Sofia Butler, wife of Harp, the step-son of Celie demonstrates to Celie how to live with one’s husband as a self-respecting person. Sofia is strong physically and psychologically and she is a constant reminder to Celie of what Celie has always lacked in her life. In spite of her initial jealousy towards Sofia, Celie is able to overcome it
and strike a bond of sisterhood with her. Celie finds satisfaction in Sofia’s resistance and the victories of Sofia project and satisfy Celie’s suppressed desires for love and equality in all relationships. Though Sofia is a strong character, she too like Celie, is equally victimized. While it is Celie’s diffidence which aggravates her sufferings, for Sofia, it is zeal towards life. Harpo, her husband, wants her to recede from an independent woman into the traditional framework of wifehood after marriage. Sofia attempts to overcome this gender discrimination by abandoning her husband, but she is unable to confront the racial discrimination, which is a more dominant, devouring and devastating evil force for an individual. Sofia represents the black woman who wants to fight for her self-dignity as an individual both black and female. Sofia promptly retaliates against the sexual and racial exploitation and though her struggle does not always meet with success, it provides an opportunity for her to display her fortitude and ability to transcend her racist and sexist circumstances. The activities of Sofia bear a great influence on Celie’s perspectives. Sofia, though unknowingly, convinces Celie that the black women suffer not because of any faults of their own, not because of their sex and race and the lack of will to fight.

It is under the spell of Sofia that Celie begins to comprehend her own situation. Sofia serves as a catalyst in the process. Celie is unaware of her inner talents and potentials. She always needs the intervention
of someone to keep on reminding her of her personal value. Shug is the first person who has very evidently expressed her love for Celie, and thus through her, Celie is able to love herself. It is Shug Avery, the blues singer and the lover of her husband Mr. Albert, who shows how one can be independent, by showing her ability to ensure her own well being. Under the guidance of Shug, Celie discovers the loveliness of her own body and the beauty of lovemaking.

Though initially, Shug too had partaken of teasing Celie about her ugliness, in due course of recovering from her illness under the nursing of Celie, she develops an affinity and kinship towards Celie. Her deep rooted love for Celie results in an ongoing physical relationship as well as a powerful emotional affiliation. Their relationship has some lesbian strains too. Shug reveals to Celie, the mysteries of her body and sexual experience. She indirectly awakens Celie’s desire for identity and also provokes her uncared for feminine desires. She teaches Celie to love herself and also those around her. Celie begins to admire her body. Celie probes her body and this knowledge helps her gain confidence and a sense of selfhood. Shug and Celie develop a lesbian relationship. Celie’s lesbianism is significant politically because it subverts masculine cultural narratives of femininity.

In *The Color Purple* lesbianism is not a taboo. Walker considers the subject of incest and black lesbianism as a natural phenomenon. In
response to the hostility towards black lesbian literature, Walker concludes:

We are all lesbians. For surely it is better to be thought a lesbian and to say and write your life exactly as you experience it, . . . for our autonomous existence makes them a menace to human life. (1983, 250-251)

Black feminist struggle has located and reinterpreted the significance of female bonding and female eroticism as positive issues within black feminist existence. Lesbianism is a significant aspect of ‘womanist’ theory and here, in this novel, it is represented within the female erotic bonding between Celie and Shug. Through lesbian relationship, Walker emphasizes the importance of female friendship in black community and the importance of sisterhood. For Celie, lesbianism is a means to understand her own sexuality denied to her by the patriarchal system. Amply nourished by this experience, it enables her to have better faith in herself as a person and admit her desires freely. Celie gradually walks into a new experience of life through her bonding with Sofia and Shug.

It is in the sense of sexual and emotional bonding between black women against all patriarchal tyrannies, that we find womanism permeating through The Color Purple. The theme and content of the novel is also thoroughly womanistic. It repudiates strategically the bourgeois morality, and replaces conventional marriage and
heterosexuality with sexual and loving relationship between women. The strong bond of love can be experienced not only in the intense mutual longing that Celie and Nettie give full vent to in their letters, but also in one’s readiness to sacrifice anything for the other. We witness this when Celie offers herself sexually to her stepfather in order to mitigate his heinous sexual advances towards Nettie her younger sister. Mutual longing and solitude are not limited just to the two sisters, but almost all the other black women in the novel show similar persistent tendency to fall into a bond of mutual sympathy, love and admiration. As an integral part of her womanisation strategy, Walker puts this womanistic proclivity in the context of sexism, racism and classism. She focuses on it as the outcome of and as conscious as well as unconscious defence against the various types of oppression the black women have undergone.

Another example of empathy and sacrifice to the point of accepting rape is that of Squeak, who endures rape by the warden of the prison to get Sofia out of it. In its non-sexual aspect, this sense of sisterhood, affection and solidarity, is evident in the attitude of economic cooperation that exists among the black women. An instance can be quoted:

Me and Sofia work on the quilt. Got it frame up on the porch. Shug Avery donate her old yellow dress for scrap, and I work in a piece every chance I get. It a nice pattern call Sister’s choice. If the quilt turn perfect, maybe I give
it to her, if not perfect, may be I keep. (61)

This element form of economic co-operation among the women gradually grows into black lesbian capitalism, represented by Celie’s “Folks Pants Unlimited.”

Quilting decodes female bonding, sisterhood and togetherness. Walker’s employment of the art of quilting reflects her regard and love for black cultural heritage. The metaphor of quilting represents for Walker the creative legacy that Afro-Americans have inherited from their maternal ancestors. Walker comments on the quilt that hangs in the Smithsonian Institution as the work of “an anonymous Black woman from Alabama,” and continues that the woman was “one of our grandmothers – an artist who left her mark in the only materials she could afford, and in the only medium her position in society allowed her to use” (Baker, 1985, 706). For Alice Walker, the metaphor of quilting represents the creative legacy that Afro-Americans have inherited from their maternal ancestors. She feels that this functional work of art made of bits of worthless rags reflects the work of a person of powerful imagination and deep spiritual feeling:

Weaving shaping, sculpting or quilting in order to create a kaleidoscopic and momentary array is tantamount to providing an improvisational response to chaos. . . . It constitutes survival strategy and motion in the face of
dispersal. A patchwork quilt, laboriously and affectionately crafted from bits of worn overalls, shredded uniforms, tattered petticoats, and outgrown dresses stands as a signal instance of a patterned wholeness in the African diaspora.

(Baker, 1985, 706)

With regard to the tenets referring to the sexual facet of womanism in the novel, Celie’s relationship with Shug is significant. Celie’s attraction to and relationship with Shug is overtly sexual whereas she is drawn to the other women by emotion. Regarding her feeling for other men, Celie feels sexually dead to Albert, or to any other man while, on the other hand, even a glance towards Shug makes her feel like a man, and she finds it sexually exciting to run her eyes over her body. As an integral part of the womanist strategy, Walker establishes a casual relation between the black women’s lesbian bonding and the sexism, racism and classism of American society. Lesbianism is essentially subversive of the patriarchal social order, as it involves the assertion of female subjectivity. Lesbianism is a significant aspect of womanist theory. Celie begins to learn her experience of her personal world and the larger world outside, through Shug’s interpretation of female existence as part of woman’s existence.

Shug’s love for Celie is deep-rooted. It results in the development of physical relationship as well as a powerful emotional affiliation
between the two. Shug persuades Celie to recognize and celebrate her existence. She loves Shug in a way that radiates all elements of God’s world he has given to Celie. Once Shug inspires the feeling in Celie that she has a personal identity, she undergoes a transformation along with a sexual enlightenment. Shug indirectly provokes Celie’s unconscious desire for identity. She awakens Celie’s unknown and uncared for feminine desires. She teaches Celie to love herself and to admire her body. She reveals to Celie the mysteries of the body and sexual experience. She asks Cellie to explore her body and discover for herself that she is pretty and beautiful. This enables her to have a desire for her body and she begins to take pride in her body. She is able to find out her own sexuality and enriched by this experience, she is able to have a better feeling of herself as a person. Shug thus opens up an entirely new realm of hope and assurance for a better life. Celie is transformed into a new individual, with a new perspective towards herself and to life. Nettie, Kate and Sofia advise Celie to fight back for survival and to have a better life, but it is Shug who creates the right environment for Celie to grow out of her shell and declare her individual freedom and independence.

Shug gradually shifts Celie up in all walks of her life and retrieves her life for her. When Celie discovers that Mr. _____ had retained and kept away her sister Nettie’s letters from Africa, Celie boils with rage that she wants to kill Mr. ____. But Shug provides her with proper moral
counsel: “Don’t kill, she say. Nettie be coming home before long. Don’t make her have to look at you like us look at Sofia” (150). She channels Celie’s anger into a proper and purposeful direction. She educes Celie’s in-built talent. Her aggressiveness is sublimated in the development of her own form of art of sewing. This incident brings a complete extrication of herself from Mr. ____. She gains strength nourished by her pent up rage. She adopts a traditionally feminine form of art to complete her separation from the masculine world. Sewing links Celie to woman’s primordial power that pre-dates patriarchy.

The inborn talent of Celie which had remained concealed and unexploited all her life is tapped out by Shug. She discovers and develops Celie’s ability to make pants. She is the catalyst of transformation in Celie’s life. She invites Celie to Memphis to live with her. Her aim is to teach Celie economic autonomy. Shug treats Celie as her compeer. She does not let Celie serve her or work for her: “You not my maid. I didn’t bring you to Memphis to be that. I brought you here to love you and help you to get on your feet” (218). Shug transforms Celie into a new being and supports her endeavors to build up a new identity within the feminine domain. Shug often goes off with her lover for weeks to break off Celie’s dependence on her. Celie is left on her own in a world free of the dictates of her husband. This enables her to recognize that she can be economically independent. Celie gradually liberates herself from the
suffocating grips of her husband’s imposition and pressure on her.

The physical and psychological development of Celie becomes complete only when she discovers Nettie’s letters and learns that she is still alive. The first letter from Nettie which Celie discovers very late, tells: “You’ve got to fight and get away from Albert. He ain’t no good” (131). This instills in Celie the strength to fight for herself. Nettie’s letters provide her with a lot of information about her family history and also of her past. She informs Celie that her two children, Adam and Olivia, were taken away by Alfonso, their stepfather and handed over to Samuel and Corrine for adoption and Celie also comes to know that Alfonso whom she had assumed to be her father is not her true father. She also learns that she does not have to obey Albert if that means losing her own self. This is an awakening for her which she has not had earlier.

Nettie’s letters are a powerful connecting metaphor for the reconstruction of the black feminist literary tradition. And Celie’s discovery of these letters marks a radical turning point in the novel. Nettie’s letters affirm for Celie that it is time for her to think about her liberating herself from the clutches of patriarchy and enter a realm of feminist identity and also enter into the process of creation of a space for herself.

Nettie’s letters from Africa serve as records in preserving the history of the Afro-Americans. Alice Walker, through these letters, intends to reveal to the reader the long historical links the black Americans have
with their African cousins. Walker points out that sexism is as prevalent in Africa as it is in America. Nettie’s letters explore the gender oppressions on the African continent and reveal the universal oppression of black women and shows that it is trans-cultural. Moreover, Nettie also understands the past glory of Africa. By providing the glorious history of the black race, Nettie reveals the history of the power of the black race. Time and again Nettie writes about the black people of Africa and their social customs, religion and culture.

Though Walker traces the roots of the Afro-Americans to Africa, she demystifies the concept of African heredity, while exploring the feminist consciousness within the novel. Nettie’s letter with its focus on ethnicity breaks the stereotype image of Africa as a kind of Utopia. Nettie observes the sexist cultural practice of clitoreodectomy. Through her letters she exposes the subjugated conditions of the African women. She writes: “Among the Olinkas, the husband has life and death power over the wife. If he accuses one of his wives of witchcraft or infidelity, she can be killed” (153). This picture of the sexist oppression of African women interlinks black women’s oppression to other third world women. Thus the fact that black women’s oppression is trans-cultural is emphasized.

Nettie’s commentary on Olinka people’s discrimination against their women, consistently with Walker’s womanist design, suggest the
fact that gender oppression is not limited to the Afro-American community in the American South, but pervades the entire world of black men and women. This juxtaposition reinforces the sense of gender oppression in the novel. For the Olinkas the role of a girl in life is limited to that of a breeding machine, just as is the case of Afro-Americans. At the most a girl can be the mother of her husband’s children. Their concept of what a woman should be is this, as Nettie writes: “When I asked a mother why she thought this, she said: a girl is nothing to herself; only to her husband can she become something. What can she become? I asked why, she said, the mother of his children” (162). This is their creed regarding women. This is the plight of the Afro-American women too. In observing certain social customs too there is a striking similarity between the Africans and Afro-Americans which show that they belong to common social ancestorhood too. Quoting from the letter of Nettie:

There is a way that the men speak to women that reminds me too much of Pa. They listen just long enough to issue instructions. They don’t even look at women when women are speaking. They look at the ground and bend their heads towards the ground. The women also do not “look in a man’s face” as they say to “look in a man’s face” is a brazen thing to do. They look instead at his feet or his knees. And what can I say to this? Again it is our own behavior around
It is to resist these multi-centered oppressions that women in the novel find refuge in lesbian relationships. It serves as an oasis of relief from all types of oppressions and provides pasture which facilitates their psychological growth by imbuing them with self-esteem, self-identity and strength. This also enables them to hold their hands and present a united front in defense of their self and liberty. Lesbianism is a significant aspect of ‘womanist’ theory. Lesbian relationship is a mirror, a looking glass, for black women to recognize and validate an identity they had been unaware of. Celie, here, is able to have cognizance of both her personal world and the larger world outside through Shug’s interpretation of female existence as part of woman’s existence. Celie is liberated from her oppression through her transformation, resulting in feminist consciousness within her.

Shug Avery, though not the central character, plays a very significant role within the novel’s ideological structure. She is encoded as the embodiment of feminist existential freedom. She is a blues singer. She rejects the traditional life of domesticity and prefers the life of sexual freedom. Though Shug is portrayed as an opposite of Celie, she is actually the vehicle of female consciousness and empowerment within Celie. For Shug, singing is a mode to defy the patriarchal order. She has a very clear sense of selfhood and leaves no space for anybody to interfere
in her perceptions of self, life and religion. Quoting the words of Mae Henderson about Shug:

Unlike Celie, who derives her sense of self from the dominant white and male theology, Shug is a self-invented character whose sense of self is not male inscribed. Her theology allows a divine, self-authorized sense of self. (1985, 16)

Her theology of life she passes on to Celie and this provides Celie with the zeal to kindle her awareness of herself and her surrounding and to have new perceptions. She helps Celie to liberate herself from the notion of white and male God and offers her a genderless God. This allows Celie to have a pantheistic view of God and also a more personalized view of God. Thus Shug is the driving force behind Celie’s transformation for an abused, degraded, ignorant, defiled and dependent woman to an independent, creative and a successful business woman.

The title of the novel *The Color Purple* is very significant from womanist perspective. Womanism is an empowered form of feminism just as purple is a bold and empowered version of lavender. The color purple can also be regarded as a multifaceted erotic symbol. It could be a sign of the indomitable female spirit and an encoding of the joyous vitality of the female spirit. As Elliot Butler-Evans has said, purple is a “polysemus sign” (1989, 169), encoding heterogeneous multifarious
implications of the “womanist” ideology. In Narrative Strategies, Evans establishes the connection between Walker’s statement “Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender” (1983, xii) and the encoding of the color “purple” in the novel. Walker herself emphasizes multiple meanings within the word ‘purple.’ The accepted argument that ‘purple’ is the sign of the gay and lesbian may be interpreted as the sign of womanist ideology in general and the color symbolizes the indomitable female spirit.

Within the form and content of the novel too we can discern traces of womanism. Written in an epistolary form it is suggestive of lesbian sexuality. Within the framework of lesbian-feminism, the letter means the female body, and correspondence between two women is suggestive of lesbianism. The observation of Wendy Wall is thus:

“Letters become the surrogate body far Celie, an inanimate form that serves a dual purpose; it fends off pain by siphoning off her feelings of degradation as well as allowing her to express and thus feel the intensity of her emotions. Her self-division is imposed upon her by her external circumstances; yet by displacing a part of herself onto this second body, she keeps intact that division. She compartmentalizes a suppressed ‘self’ through her letters. The letters become the tenuous skin of her body, framing her
internal thoughts in a realm separate from her outward action. (Gates and Appiah, 1993, 262)

Regarding Nettie’s letters, Wall’s observation is that Albert intercepts them because he fails to seduce Lee, and that he rapes her language because he fails to rape her body (Gates and Appiah, 1993, 264). Terry Eagleton identifies letters with illicit intercourse. “The letter comes to signify female sexuality, that folded, secret place which is always open to violent intrusion” (1982, 54).

Matrilineage is a significant aspect and theme of Walker’s feminist dialectic. And this theme has indomitably become the form and content of the novel too. Walker expresses the significance of this theme in her famous essay “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens” and in another essay on her foremother Zora Neale Hurston. Walker takes pride in acknowledging Hurston as her foremother. Walker believes that she is able to write because Hurston’s texts of black legend and female liberation enable her to “re-vision” her perspective through her own writing. Since Walker is very much aware and concerned about the singularity of black women writer in white male-dominated literature of America, Walker looks upon Hurston as her god-mother. The matrilineal heritage is a different experience and different history for black women. The black woman’s endeavors to seek out her motherhood originate from her lost history of slavery. Walker makes use of the idealism of matriliny
to counteract the psychic deformity which is the result of conscious anger.

She recreates the tradition of mother culture to erase the history of black women’s oppression and subjugation because of the double jeopardy – the victimization of race and gender. In *The Color Purple* Walker elaborates this theme of motherhood and sisterhood. She emphasizes on the positivity of women’s bonding, women loving each other both sexually and spiritually and their economic independence. The theme of matriliny is manifested in the novel also through its specific form – the epistolary form. Through it Walker attempts a new mode of representation to make the black women’s voice speak. Celie’s sense of self-awareness comes out through her act of writing. In Celie’s written voice Walker revises Hurston’s interpretation of the free indirect discourse as a written voice, as an oral hieroglyphic. Walker claims literary ancestry or motherhood not only for them, but also for structure. The specific epistolary form of the novel reconstructs images and representations associated with women’s oppression. Thus Walker has been able to establish a distinct feminist consciousness within the dominant discourse of patriarchal hegemony.

The novel is written in black folk English. Walker maintains the black vernacular which is rooted in the historical tradition of black folk community in order to establish the unhesitant regurgitation to the
ancestral compliance. The standard of English is displaced and the space is filled through a distinctive alternate language of the black community. The dialect is both naturalistic and symbolic. It is naturalistic because it is the ethnic traditional language of the blacks. Celie’s linguistic process reflects her struggle to construct a self and thus it becomes symbolic. From the beginning till the end which witnesses a leap forward in all aspects of Celie’s experience, she is seen to retain her black vernacular, while Nettie her sister undergoes a change in her language and ethnic values when she moves off to Africa as a missionary along with a missionary couple. The more she gets educated through books and through the missionary couple, the more she moves away from her ethnic values. By incorporating Nettie’s letters into Celie’s text, Walker illuminates the contrast between Celie’s spare suggestiveness and Nettie’s stilted verbosity. Thus the repressed and rigid linguistic codes to which Nettie has conformed becomes the touchstone against which the expressive flexibility of the black vernacular is measured. The position of Standard English as the dominant discourse mode is challenged. Nettie’s linguistic perfection becomes mere dreary correctness against Celie’s privileged vitality appropriated by the flexibility of her language. Nettie becomes imaginatively dilapidated and her language bleached white and her ethnicity virtually erased. Though Nettie apparently seems to be an independent self, she is actually always the other woman who lacks an
identity of her own. What she becomes is merely a helot in the hands of her oppressors. She is cast in the preposterous role of a black missionary who attempts to impose the ideology of her oppressors as a culturally self-sufficient people. On the contrary Celie, who is almost illiterate, refuses to enter the linguistic structures of white patriarchy. In her opinion “only a fool would want you to talk in a way that feel peculiar to your mind” (223). So Celie retains a discourse that is potentially subversive. Celie’s struggle is to construct a self through the media of language, by identifying with the black vernacular rather than modulating herself to the linguistic dictates of the white patriarchy. She tries to break free from the network of class, racial, sexual and gender ideologies to which she is subjected. By letting the submerged and silenced voice of Celie to find expression in her own language, Walker has provided us with an opportunity to have a closer view of black American women. Walker has also glorified the lasting beauty and magic of the oral tradition.

Another traditional element employed by Walker to establish an ancestorhood which can be traced back to their African heritage and ancestry is the use of “blues.” Shug Avery who takes the role of the godmother or rather that of the fairy mother is a blues singer. She is ubiquitous throughout giving strength to the weak, voice to the voiceless and power to the powerless. She even uplifts women by rendering them
economically independent. Perceiving Shug in the context of West African beliefs, as they are expressed in the blues of Bessie Smith, who is one of the most famous blues performer, will bring to light Celie’s transformation from a passive victim to a powerful, confident, entrepreneur. Celie’s life undergoes metamorphosis under the spell of Shug through a “blues conversion” advocated by Bessie Smith in her song “Preachin’ the Blues.” Shug also promises her followers a new relationship between the individual and the world, one based on an understanding of the holiness of all living things and the spiritual power of the spoken word.

The theology of Shug is based on African beliefs, and relating Shug Avery to Bessie Smith in this context, both can be considered children or followers of Legba, a West African spirit closely associated with musicians, who opens the door to the spiritual world and provides opportunities for the social and psychological growth of the individual. When we have a closer look at African American music, it is easy to identify the African features which still survive in it. But the attempts to trace the influence of African beliefs is not an easy task. Many of the blues songs can be understood fully in the context of West African philosophy which views the cosmos as an intricate network of spiritual and physical forces in which intelligent beings or “Muntu,” exert their power over lower forms of life through “nommo.”
The term “blues” has been traced back to the seventeenth century England, where malevolent spirits were called “blue devils.” These “blue devils” provided the closest available analog in English for the West African concept of “orishas” which are less predictable and may bring good or bad fortune depending on the circumstances. Having lost link to the old names of “orishas,” African Americans adopted the English word “blues” to invoke the source of all their afflictions. The blues is a supernatural force that can take on human characteristics and possess its victims just like a West African Orisha. Secular singers like that of blues and jazz frequently trespassed in spiritual areas that orthodox Christians held to be sacrosanct. Since the white man’s religion confined the spiritual power of music to the churches and regarded secular music as dangerous and often sinful, the spiritual power of African-derived secular music was condemned as the work of the devil.

As a blues singer, Shug Avery transcends the limits which separate the sacred and the profane by bringing the spiritual power of music to her ostensibly secular performance. Through the sheer force of her personality she transforms the life of Celie, the novel’s protagonist, bringing about a “blues conversion” which is a profound transformation of the individual. Unlike a Christian conversion, which begins a new relationship between the individual and God, the “blues conversion” begins a new accord between the individual and the world. This notion of
spiritual power as a force that can be harnessed to bring about improvement in the lives of individuals is akin to the African concepts of “nommo” and “magara,” the life force. The concept of Shug’s “blues conversion” reads thus:

My first step from the old white man was trees. Then air. Then birds. Then other people. But one day when I was sitting quiet and feeling like a motherless child, which I was, it came to me: that feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all. I knew that if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed. And I laughed and I cried and I run all around the house. I knew just what it was. In fact, when it happen, you can’t miss it. It sort of like you know what, she says, grinning and rubbing high upon my thigh. (203)

The final statement of this speech of Shug’s broke in as a shock on Celie. Shug’s comparison of spiritual awakening with sexual arousal surprises Celie. Shug has her own theology and creed regarding faith in god. She says that though she had never paid heed to what people thought about her, she had always had concern for what God would think. She says “... it isn’t easy, trying to do without God. Even if you know he ain’t there, trying to do without him is a strain” (200). But her conception of god is quiet different from the accepted notions which Celie follows. This concept of Celie’s is rewritten by Shug. Celie’s vision of God as “... big
and old and tall and gray bearded and white” (201) is deconstructed. Shug teaches her to think of God in a new way, as a force that all people carry inside them, but few recognize. She contents:

God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God. But only them that search for it inside find it. . . . I believe God is everything. . . . Everything that is or ever was or ever will be. And when you can feel that, and be happy to feel that, you’ve found it. (202-203)

This sort of introspection is usually prompted by “trouble” and “sorrow” – the blues – which force the individual to seek new answers to the problems of living in the world. Here Celie has the blues as she recognizes the brutality of Mr. ___ towards her. Thus Shug accomplishes a blues conversion by displacing and reinstating Celie’s concept of God from a stern white man who demands sacrifice and devotion to an all-encompassing “It” who strives to please people by creating beauty for them to enjoy.

Shug, the blues singer’s religion includes many ways of praising God that more conversational theologians consider sinful, but all ideas are in line with her basic idea that God wants people to appreciate the good things of the world, sexual pleasure, music and dancing, the wonders of nature, and “the color purple in a field” (203). She extends the realm of the sacred to encompass all the creation. This links Celie to a
new spirituality free from the domination of an angry, white male God. As part of blues conversion, Shug introduces Celie to the power of the spoken word. She persuades Celie to speak out her inner turmoil caused by the abuse she was subjected to in the hands of her “Pa” and Mr. ____ , and then she demonstrates the benefits of speaking up by demanding that Mr. ____ stop beating Celie. The spoken voice induces in her a self-confidence which enables her to defend herself against patriarchal dominance. Mr. Albert tries to stop Celie when she decides to leave with Shug. He reaches over to slap her, but she jabs her case knife in his hand.

Walker describes Celie as a woman who has gone into a trance to align herself with the powers of nature, which take the form of a “dust devil” (214) arising suddenly on the porch to prevent Mr. ____ from striking her. Shug comes in as an intermediary. She recognizes that Celie is possessed and understands that her words carry supernatural force. She warns Mr. ____ to stop provoking Celie, and then she helps Celie to “come to [her] self” (214).

Shug also enables Celie to discover her links to African heritage by discovering her sister, Nettie’s letters from Africa which Mr. ____ had kept hidden from her. Nettie went to Africa as a missionary to the fictional “Olinka” people; Though Nettie’s letter detracts from the general unity of the novel because of its stiffened and correct style in contrast to the naturalistic one of Celie’s, they provide an insight into the
cross link between the African culture and the Afro-American culture of the South. When viewed from the context of the African traditions that Shug passes on to Celie, the letters assume greater importance. Shug enter Celie’s life as her personal “Legba” and presides over all the major transitions in her life. And just as the “orishas” sometimes instruct their devotees by punishing them, Shug accomplishes the final phase of Celie’s metamorphosis, by withdrawing her love. Celie successfully emerges as a strong, self-reliant woman, surviving her battle with the blues: “If she come, I be happy. If she don’t, I be content. And then I figure this the lesson I was suppose to learn” (290). Another person who was equally moved by Shug’s influence was Mary Agnes, wife of Harpo. She was called Squeak and once she discovers her inborn power she refuses to be called Squeak. Shortly after Shug’s arrival, she transforms from a quiet submissive woman as she begins to sing under the encouragement of Shug. She began by singing Shug’s songs, but once she has acquired enough mastery over Afro-American musical traditions, she begins creating her own songs to express her experiences. By becoming a daughter of “Legba,” Mary Agnes has reclaimed the right to define an identity of her own and utilize her own power.

From the beginning right to the end we witness an indelible mark cast by Shug in all aspects of Celie’s life and that of Mary Agnes too. She sweeps through the novel like a force of nature
encouraging both Celie and Mary Agnes to assert themselves, overcoming the patriarchal oppression possessing their lives. Like a West-African “orisha” she is capricious as she is powerful, and she often chastises her devotees. She teaches them the profound lessons of the blues. She expresses the African religious concepts in an Afro-American idiom which is a synthesis of such diverse influences as the blues and the sermon, the work songs, the folk tales, and the spiritual, keeping alive the vital connections between the past, the present and the future.

Thus in *The Color Purple* we can trace the development of the helpless, ignorant, subverted Celie to an independent, strong, industrious woman. Apart from Celie, we find all the women drawing strength from each other in order to build up a world of their own, overcoming and crumbling down the tyranny of the phallic power. All the characters are gathered from their scattered status and all the characters are eventually united as they finally wend their ways from England and Africa and Memphis to a home that is now appropriately feminized. Arriving at this final blissful juncture has involved around thirty years of time and a lot of making and unmaking of bonds. The victim mothers remain part of the story till the end and continues to bear their signatures. But finally they have been vindicated. In the beginning, Celie’s remark about her mother’s death is that “his story kilt her” (6). But we find that by the end his story (history) has been deconstructed and the text becomes herstory
- the story of female love, female work, female song, and most importantly female bonding. But it does not exclude males at all. They are also amply accommodated, redeemed and celebrated.

The analysis done in this chapter, thus proves that Walker undoubtedly annunciates the cruciality of retrieving and establishing the ethnic background of Afro-Americans in order to reclaim their lost identity before the dominant white hegemonic culture. This enables them to distinguish themselves from the subversive forces and construct an identity – both communal and individual – rooted in their ancestral culture and heritage. The alacrity with which Walker has done this job is noteworthy. Walker’s novels establish and celebrate not only the ethnic heritage in order to convoke the Afro-Americans from the margin culture to a prominent and conspicuous one and she revalidates the concept of African culture as their ancestral culture by the incorporation of elements of folk culture, oral tradition in particular, into written texts. Walker also constructs “herstory” deconstructing “history” in order to create space and voice for the black downtrodden women. She makes her women opt for kinesis over stasis which culminates in their deliverance from the jeopardy from all corners. All the same, they also recognize their self developing a self-esteem which helps them to understand the world around them and to stand up against all odds. This is achieved by the sense of sisterhood among the women folk which is one of the major
tenets of African heritage too. Walker has strategically challenged the suspended state of black women as victims of the dominant hegemony of culture. She revives and renovates the hidden realities of black American women in terms of their pluralistic ways of existence. The fictive discourse Walker has adopted is to continue the speech of her foremothers in her own and through this she endeavors to link the experiences in a changing world. She thus creates a stupendous feminist herstory rather than history which is indelibly the discourse of black women. So we can firmly assert that Walker is infallibly and unrelentingly an ambassador of black women’s redemption all the while maintaining a passion for ancestorhood and ethnic heritage.