Chapter II

Passive Submission

The world of Alice Walker's fiction is peopled with an amazing variety of men and women responding to the situations of life in a number of different ways. If on the one hand there are characters equipped with a high level of intelligence, acute sensitivity, broad vision of life aided by courage and confidence, there are, on the other hand, others who appear to be living at a low level of awareness and sensitivity, stumbling through the pains and pressures of life in a rather hopeless and helpless manner. They find it too much to face the challenges posed by the conditions of their existence and they tend to cope with their pressures by adopting the strategy of suffering silently and submitting passively to the forces of oppression.

This coping strategy of passive submission is a method of bearing the burden of life by becoming rather insensitive to its pains and sufferings in order to survive the hostilities without any significant protest and resistance. This response to the onslaughts is usually adopted by those who do not possess the sufficient awareness and adequate knowledge of the world they live in. These individuals are often deficient in their ability to think rationally and critically. Because
of a long history of oppression and degradation, they fail to develop a clear vision of what life ought to be. Walker observes that "man only truly lives by knowing" one who only stumbles blindly through life, according to her, "simply performs, coping the daily habits of others, but conceiving nothing of his creative possibilities as a man, and accepting someone else's superiority and his own misery."

They lack not only a clear vision of life, but also the power of will to act, necessary to improve their situation. Due to long sufferings, they tend to submit to it and accept it as something inevitable and unavoidable. Their resignation to the lot controlled by others, results in the perpetuation of sufferings and degradation. The passive submission of these men and women reduces them to mere objects. They are not the active participants in what happens in their life and they just submit to whatever is done to them. They do not seem to possess the ability of making choices. As a result they remain utterly deprived of a feeling of satisfaction that flows from a sense of achievement.

Since they neither think much nor act adequately to bring about a change in their life, there seems to be no significant growth in them. The lack of ideas and sufficient responses to face the challenges and the absence of hope and faith in themselves render them almost incapable of articulation.
People of this kind seem to lose even the desire to talk and are, therefore, found deficient in articulation.

Deficient in self-confidence and power of communication these characters often fail to develop adequate social relationships in which they "provide others with something, and expect to receive something back in return." In their case, there is not much of interaction and reciprocity because of their tendency to resign themselves to the situation. Thus, they tend to be reduced below the level of social beings as they neither seem to participate willingly and deliberately in their relationships nor do they cherish any hopes and expectations to get anything in return. They, in fact, appear to live in a kind of vacuum of social relationships. Their assumption of "total helplessness and feeling no sense of responsibility for events" reduces them to the level of social nullities. "Different though they may sometimes seem, they all push against the same barbed wired wall of racism, sexism, ignorance, and despair." Their animal-like existence marked by frustration makes them incapable of a higher form of action. Waldo Frank speaks of the lives of these men and women who adopt this strategy as "some form of life that has hardened but not grown and over which the world has passed. They lead stunted and sterile lives half conscious and inarticulate."
Though people adopting the strategy of passive submission may appear sometimes too simple and not-fully-developed human beings, they tend to become important and interesting in the works of Walker as they offer illuminating insights into the complexities of this approach with all its human, social and historical dimensions. Their life and attitudes help the reader to understand not only various forms and institutions of oppression but also reveal their consequences on the life of the individual and society. The way Walker treats this approach and the characters who adopt it enables one to appreciate her human sympathies with these silent sufferers on the one hand and her rejection of this strategy in favour of a more enlightened and affirmative involvement in life on the other. This seems to provide a clearer and more balanced perspective on Walker's code of values as an artist. The qualities that distinguish her heroic figures are thrown into broader relief by the limitations inherent in the approach of suffering without any resistance. Though a majority of these characters occupy a minor position in her works, they certainly contribute to the unravelling of her themes and also enable the reader to understand different stages in the development of her protagonists.

This strategy with all its different aspects appears crystalized in a number of situations. Significant among them are the oppressions of slavery, restrictive role of community, degrading
and dispossessing effects of the institutions of family, especially for women. A number of characters placed in these situations cope with the stresses by submitting to them without any significant resistance.

The response of suffering passively and silently is noticeable particularly when the black men and women find themselves pitted against the oppressive system of racism in the American society. The various forms of racist practices have been one of the degrading and crippling forces which the blacks have been confronting since the day they landed on American shores. Racism, manifesting itself through discrimination between whites and blacks, is rooted in the concept of racial superiority of the white. This history of how racism has victimized the black in different parts of the world reveals that whites sought to rule the black and turned them into slaves. Whites used it as a means to establish their colonial domination over the black. To achieve this colonial purpose, they used all kinds of methods to subjugate them to the control of the white, physically as well as psychologically. They subjected the black to the most barbarous, extremely cruel and inhuman atrocities. The whites employed all the coercive ways at their command to destroy their pride undermining their history and culture. Even in day to day life they became the target of contempt and condemnation from the white and were exposed to demeaning situations.
Most of these blacks found themselves helpless in the face of racist oppression and were unable to cope with it in any way other than by benumbing themselves to its pains and sufferings. They just became accustomed to lacerations of slavery and racial discrimination. Their powerlessness against the white bosses destroyed all their courage and strength and turned them into excessively submissive creatures. Though there are numerous examples of devastating and crippling affects of resultant subjugation, the response of plantation workers at Shipley's farm in the novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* stands out as an important example. All of these workers, through their behaviours and attitudes reveal the effects of economic oppression under the racist system. Their grinding poverty is a kind of calamity for these dirt poor and they have to depend for their bare survival upon the mercy of their white bosses who rule the system. They have no choice but to carry out the work under the orders of their bosses without any sense of joy and fulfilment.

Walker conveys this lack of real life with its vigour and joy in a very subtle and suggestive manner. "The cotton field too was generally silent" (*TLGC*:8). The silence is an eloquent expression of the painful suppression of life with its hope and joy. It is disturbed only when the "grown-ups talked softly, intermittently like the sporadic humming of wasps" (*TLGC*:8). If the silence signifies monotony and emptiness
in the life of these workers, the comparison of their sounds with the humming of wasps conveys forcefully the degradation of the status and value of their life to that of mere insects in the racist economic system.

A sense of servility has sunk so deep into their psyche that they cannot conduct themselves with confidence and self-respect in the presence of the white. This feeling of inferiority prevents those who work with Grange on the cotton field even from looking into the eyes of Shipley's truck driver: "...they looked at his shoes and at his pants legs or at his hands, never into his eyes, and their looks were a combination of small sly smiles and cowed, embarrassed desperation" (TLGC:9).

This void in their lives is so deep that they cannot experience any flicker of joy even at the sight of their own children. Brownfield recalls how Grange, his father, "never looked at him or acknowledged him in any way, except to lift his sack of cotton to the back of the truck when it arrived" (TLGC:9). This absence of communication is symptomatic of the deeper malaise of a kind of emotional atrophy afflicting the sharecroppers. They are rendered incapable of normal human feelings and responses, and they, go through the process of living in a rather mechanical manner. The way Grange sinks into an "unnaturally bland mask" and becomes like "a stone or a robot" (TLGC:9) at the sight of Shipley and his truck is
a telling illustration of the failure of the poor sharecroppers to face the pressures of racist conditions in a graceful manner. "A grim stillness" settles on the face of Grange at the sight of his master oppressor making him "an object, a cipher" (TLGC: 9) unable to move except in jerks if it moves, at all, speaks clearly of a state of complete breakdown of his nerves and his submission to an overwhelming external force of the racial and economic order.

Though it was the story of all the blacks, dispossessed of their human rights, dignity and equality, it created oppressive conditions for women in particular. These women had to face a system which sought to perpetuate violence not only to their bodies but also to their minds and souls treating them as no better than chattels. They were deprived of all opportunities—economic, social or cultural. It disabled them in a number of ways and was largely responsible for their miseries and sufferings. This oppression of the black women and the way some of them faced it by resigning themselves to their situation has been treated with critical insight by Walker in her fiction. These women who surrender to their conditions of oppression seem to lack faith in themselves and, therefore, do nothing to alter their conditions for the better. In the absence of vision and hope, they tend to bury away their natural impulse to live a human life of dignity and grace.
"How Did I Get Away with Killing One of the Biggest Lawyers in the State? It Was Easy" is a story about the murder of a white lawyer, Bubba, by a black girl who is seduced and raped by him when she is only fourteen. She surrenders to her rapist after some initial reluctance and resistance. Then she begins to participate in it for the sake of money and appreciation of her beauty. She even becomes an instrument in the hands of Bubba to consign her own mother to lunatic asylum. But she is shocked out of it all of a sudden when she realizes what she has done to her mother. This realization leads her to commit the murder of her victimizer. This growth in the character of the girl from a state of passive submission to that of revolt and decisive action has been presented by Walker by setting her up in contrast to her mother. The girl has been going to school, an opportunity unknown to her mother. This is probably the key to the difference between the patterns of their attitudes and behaviour in the face of oppressive conditions. Mother, illiterate and ignorant, fails to develop a suitable method to react to her victimization. She appears as a nervous and helpless woman which is expressive of anaemic nature of her response to life. This becomes evident from the whole pattern of her existence. She was first exploited sexually and then betrayed by a man who became the father of her daughter. She submits to this fate without any complaint.
or protest as she could hope nothing better. This hints at a deep-rooted feeling of helplessness in her personality rendering her incapable of attempting to do anything to bring about a change in her lot. The given becomes the unalterable for her and she continues to remain caught up in the mesh of exploitation and oppression. In the absence of any attempt to break this pattern of her life, she sinks deeper into misery and degradation. She fails utterly to develop a sense of self-worth resulting further in her submission of her body to a man who never loved her. She would go out at night or bring men home, but they never thought of marrying her. Most of them were men who had children somewhere else of their own. The only time when we find her reacting is when she learns about her daughter's affair with Bubba, the white man. But again her response and behaviour is symptomatic of the helplessness and frustration controlling the pattern of her whole being. She breaks out into hysteric, screams and beats her daughter almost to death with the cord from the electric iron: "She beat me till she couldn't raise her arm. And then she had one of her fits, just twitching and sweating and trying to claw herself into the floor" (p. 24). This hysteric outburst is not simply an expression of her anger and despair, it underlines a deeper malaise of helplessness in the face of racist exploitation. It is because of the lack of faith in her own strength which sends her
into a self-destroying and hysteric violence against her daughter. Weak and devoid of self-confidence, she lets loose venom of her frustration ironically on the victim and can think of doing nothing against the victimizer.

She appears to be more pathetic and helpless when we see her totally broken after she has been committed to the Carthage Insane Asylum. There in the asylum "they had given her shock treatments or something...God knows what else they gave her. But she was as vacant as an empty eye socket. She just sat sort of hunched over, and her hair was white" (p.25). The whole description of her appearance reveals how completely she has submitted herself to the overwhelming power of oppression in her world. Through her experience Walker gives her reader an idea of the immeasurable cruelty perpetrated on the black particularly the women in the racist system. But more importantly the writer depicts the consequences of passive resignation to this system. She conveys it by setting up a pattern of contrast between the ways the two women in the story face an almost similar situation. If the daughter ultimately wakes up and kills her victimizer, the mother only suffers silently and offers no resistance at all to her oppressor. She, it seems, has internalized her degradation and, therefore, can offer no resistance to her racist and sexual exploitation.

It is significant that Walker does not elevate the mother
in the story to the status of a protagonist even when she arouses in the reader pity and sympathy for her. It is the daughter who remains at the centre of the story and is in the lineage of Walker's female protagonist. This is an important indication of how Walker views different responses of her characters to the situations fraught with pressures and challenges of all kinds. Even when she gives a moving portrayal of the characters like the mother in the story, she does not seem to regard their responses of suffering without resistance as adequate and viable. Such a response, can in no way, deter the oppressor and, therefore, cannot alleviate the sufferings of the oppressed.

Walker's fiction is a relentless attack on the image of woman as a meek person and silent sufferer in a predominantly male centred society. She, in fact, seems to regard this submission of woman to male authority as the main cause of her fall over the centuries. Exploring the question of man-woman relationship like an archaeologist, she brings out how women in early times were free and happy living the life of their own in perfect harmony with nature. They were the embodiments of vitality, beauty, creativity and joy before man began to take control of their societies. She suggests that man gradually invented the institutions of marriage and family to pull woman down from her high pedestal of a goddess to the abyss of slavery to man. One of the factors which
Walker appears to underline throughout this excavation into the history of woman's loss of power, freedom and dignity is their failure to fight against the designs of men. It is this lack of resistance on their part that reduced them to the status of nothing more than a piece of property for men even in the African society where they were once worshipped. They became so helpless and totally dispossessed of their mind, body and soul that they could be bought and sold at will by their male masters. Their oppression by men killed in them the very spirit of life and they were thus accustomed to a life of inhuman sufferings and indignities. The pains of these dehumanizing conditions were too deep for most of them to bear without anaesthesizing their minds and hearts.

_The Temple of My Familiar_\(^8\) is a novel that recounts a number of incidents recalled by Lissie from her memories of lives in the past. Several of the incidents remembered by Lissie, deal with the practice of racism and the system of taking the native Africans as slaves and transporting them to America. She relates how in one of her lives she was sold into slavery when she was only thirteen. She tells that she had been sent by her mother to fetch okras from the okra field. There she found four men squatting at the patch. Sensing evil in these four men who looked and smelled evil, she "turned to run back home" but was caught and tossed over like a "sack of grain"(_TMF_:62). They
then went on to the hut and grabbed her sisters, brother and mother. Her mother pleaded and begged for mercy but these brutes had no ears. They were dragged and carried to their uncle's compound and he came out. Lissie's mother tried to prostrate herself before him which was the custom in her country, "but she was tied up in such a way she fell over on her side" (TMF:62).

They were then sold by Lissie's uncle into slavery just for some silver coins to buy a few tinklets for one of his child wives. The whole episode is a comment not only on the African system of family and the miserably poor status of women in their patriarchal set-up, but also reveals how it destroyed the life-spirit in women and forced them to the level of a non-thinking and non-feeling being. Women in such a family structure were treated as mere commodities which man could trade in freely at his will. They were deprived of every human right. They were alienated from their own self and had no freedom to think and act independently. Their womanhood was defined in this setup in terms of their submission to male authority. The mother of Lissie had internalized it so much that trying to fall prostrate before Lissie's uncle was her spontaneous gesture to please him. Moreover, she had no choice but to join the band of the slaves with her children as they were sold away to traders by the patriarch of the family.
Dumb and helpless, they are driven away like cattle in chains by their enslavers and are condemned to the pains and degradations of slavery. The way they have to go mechanically through the sufferings and indignities heaped upon them during the journey is another indication of how abjectly they have to surrender themselves to the forces of oppression and injustice. They are "forced to jog for almost fifteen days without stopping" until they come "to the big stone fort on the coast" (TMF: 62). They, as women, can do nothing to protect their womanly honour and dignity. Their bodies are subjected to a thorough inspection by their white masters." They looked at our ears, our genitals – you would not believe the thoroughness, or the pitiful protestations of the women" (TMF: 63). They make them hop up and down to test the strength in their legs. This completely destroys their spirits and the sense of self in them. Servile submission is the only way these women find themselves left with to cope with their oppression. Lissie's mother sinks into "a kind of walking slumber" and does all she is "told to do as if in a dream" (TMF: 63). The children also imitated their mother. Thus they all found themselves helpless in the face of slavery. Their spirits were broken and the very notion of freedom, human identity and dignity ceased to exist for them. Lissie relates further the examples of human helplessness and degradations, they were chained and packed
like sardines. Their heads were in each others laps, their feet bound and heads turned towards wall, presenting a sight of chained and helpless animals. "The first few weeks of the trip," in the words of Mannix and Cowley, "were the most traumatic, insane and many became so despondent that they gave up the will to live." This barbarous and extremely inhuman suffering so traumatised Lissie that she "regressed to babyhood, even to the thumb sucking stage" (TMF:68).

Women and girls were frequently raped while in chains by the white masters. Lissie was raped a number of times in the ship and she reminisces the second time, "I was violated, they chained me so that my arms and legs were spread out and my thumb was beyond my reach" (TMF:68).

These women tried to survive all the tortures and degradations themselves as much as possible. They were so much scared that they lost all hopes and even the will to retrieve their sense of human dignity and self worth. Unable to offer any resistance, they suffered silently and passively at the hands of their victimizer. The whole racist and sexist system was too much for their simple minds to comprehend and they succumbed to its pressures helplessly.

All of these incidents narrated by Lissie touch the hearts of Walker's readers by bringing home to them the unimaginable cruelties to women in the system of slavery. They present the history of slavery from the perspective of women.
But the novelist's purpose is not limited only to giving us a peep into the painful chapters of African history but she also offers a critique of how the victims of slave trade tried to cope with the most horrendous and traumatic experiences of their life when they were torn away from their land, people and even from themselves. Her treatment of these incidents evidences the profound humanitarian strain of sympathy with the sufferers in her writings and also speaks of her great courage as an artist in holding out her own African community to rigorous critical scrutiny in her works. Evincing the integrity of a novelist, she appears to be unsparing in her examination and indictment of all those African customs and institutions which have been used for centuries to stifle the individuals, particularly women, in a number of ways.

By placing her characters in situations where they have to face challenges from their own people to their identity and individuality, she shows that it is not only slavery and racial discrimination that acts as a coercive and oppressive force in the lives of these blacks, but the community also proves too overpowering to be comprehended and responded to with sufficient courage and strength. Like all other communities, the black community also tends to share some common values and aspirations which often appear in the form of traditions and customs. These customs and
traditions which are passed on from one generation to another tend to circumscribe and limit the areas of thought and activities of the individual. The community demands servile submission to these restrictive customs and traditions. Some of Walker's characters who do not have a sufficiently developed individuality, tend to succumb to these societal pressures and respond to them in a rather passive manner without any significant resistance.

One of these situations is the circumcision of women, the practice of cutting away the outer sexual organs of young girls, causing unimaginable physical and mental pain. This practice of genital mutilation is centuries old and is prevalent even in this age of reason, science and democracy. Walker's fictional eye focusses upon this taboo territory exposing the inhuman and sexist oppression of women through such practices.

Women who submit to the authority of the community and undergo the process of circumcision are "kept ignorant of its real dangers – the break-down of body and spirit and the spread of disease."¹⁰ Some of the women who undergo this initiation ceremony, unlike the conformists, do not find anything useful and positive in it. They undergo the operation simply because they as women have to obey the wishes of their patriarchal society in a kind of mechanical and mindless
manner. The example of the mother of Torabe's wife in the novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy* stands out as one of the illustrations of this type of behaviour in the face of such a brutal tradition. She has been presented by Walker as one of the minor characters in the novel and she has not been given even a name of her own. The reader knows her only as the mother of Torabe's wife. This anonymity speaks clearly of how women in her society are treated as sub-humans and are dispossessed of their identity as women and as individuals. The reader sees her only through the memories of other characters and is never able to explore the recesses of her mind. She exists in the novel only as a "shadow of the girl's father" (*PSJ*:138).

Her ineffectual and marginalized existence is the direct result of her passive submission to the traditions of her society. She appears to be completely devoid of understanding and strength to resist the sexist designs of male authority to keep the mind and body of women under men's control through the practices like that of circumcision.

Her own story of circumcision and that of her daughter speak clearly of the mutilation and enslavement of women at the hands of men. Like other women of her community, she too was cut open by her husband with a knife and she bled for a year. She cried, and tried to run away. But she
was never allowed to cross the territory and was everytime returned to her tribe. There was no possibility for her to escape into freedom from the tortures at the hands of her husband. Defeated and helpless she resigned herself abjectly to a life with the man "she despised" \((PSJ:138)\) and waited for his death. This feeling of helplessness determines not only her own life as a wife but also her role as a mother. Her daughter too was subjected to the mutilation by Torabe, her husband. She was "cut open with hunting knife on their wedding night and gave her no opportunity to heal" \((PSJ:138)\). She hated him and tried to run away to some place of safety. But her parents, slaves to the traditions of their community, only tried to send her back to her husband : "Her father instructed her mother to convince her of her duty. Because she was Torabe's wife, her place was with him" \((PSJ:138)\). But the girl "drowned herself, in water that didn't even reach her knees, rather than return" \((PSJ:138)\).

The whole episode exposes an utter failure of the mother to stand up against the sexist oppression of women both as a wife and as a mother. It is her inability to resist these tortures that reduces her to a nullity, a mere shadow of her husband. Again, it is because of her mindless obedience to her husband's instructions that she fails to empathise adequately with her daughter and does nothing to mitigate her suffering. On the contrary, she becomes an unwitting collaborator
Walker's treatment of Torabe's wife in the novel is a clear evidence of her determination as an artist to assail all forms of oppression. She is so clear and firm in her aims that she does not spare even her own community for its cruel and coercive traditions. She brings out the full horror of the practices like circumcision and the havoc it plays with the physical, mental and emotional life of women. The way it atrophies their feelings and renders them incapable of any rational thought and decisions about their own person is brought out by Walker time and again in her novels. Equally painful and disturbing is her depiction of the way the women collaborate with men in afflicting pains and terror on their daughters. The incident of Dura's death and the way it is responded to by the community of both men and women stand out for long in the memories of her readers. What comes as a shock, implying a strong indictment of the Olinkan society, is the way the painful death of Dura is just ignored by her people as if nothing has happened. This feelinglessness and mindless response to the death of Dura, due to excessive bleeding caused by circumcision, is something that disturbs deeply the mind of Tashi. She, as a sensitive girl, just cannot understand why suddenly it is "not acceptable to speak of her sister. Or to cry for her" (PSJ: 15). She could not believe that even women could be so insensitive that they could
not respond sympathetically to the agony and death of Dura: "How could I believe these were the same women I'd known all my life? The same women who'd known Dura? And whom Dura had known? She'd gone to buy matches or snuff for them nearly everyday. She'd carried their water jugs on her head" (PSJ: 15). This insensitivity of Olinkan women to the dreadful death of one of their own children due to circumcision contrasts sharply with the acute pain that pierces Tashi's heart. The novel shows that this callousness is, in fact, a result of the long oppression of women who were not even allowed to cry at the death of a child due to circumcision. They were told that tears would bring them bad luck.

Tashi, too, deeply hurt by the death of her sister and by the incredible apathy of the women of her community, cannot hold back her tears and has to leave her village with her mother for her farm. Her own mother also is one of these women who, overwhelmed with fears of the authority of the community, cannot even "speak" or "cry for her" (PSJ: 15). Her mother's life is a big vacuum wherein she survives by desensitizing herself to the pains of nightmarish situations like that of the death of her own child. Life is a kind of drudgery, a burden she carries on without any sense of joy or feeling of participation in it. Tashi's description of how she carries on her back the burden of groundnuts, "forcing her nearly double" (PSJ: 16) and making her legs
to quiver is not only a description of a farm worker, but, at a larger level, is emblematic of the situation of her life. So burdensome, joyless and full of nothingness is her existence that its "emptiness" is filled only by her "hard work" (PSJ:17). She suffers it without tears; "though like the rest of the women, when called upon to salute the power of the chief and his counselors she could let out a cry that assaulted the very heavens with its praising pain" (PSJ:17).

The whole episode of Dura's death and the response of her people to it evoke a mixed reaction in the hearts and minds of Walker's readers. They feel outraged by the cruelty done to an unsuspecting and uncomprehending girl like Dura. The cold and merciless male authority, presiding over the whole system which manipulates women to the interests of male hegemony, upsets the minds of her modern readers. Equally disturbing is the way the Olinkan women become instruments in the hands of their men to mutilate and torture their own daughters. Their utter submission to the traditions of their community such as circumcision shows them as figures of helplessness and hopelessness. This strategy of facing the sexist oppression by numbing themselves to its pains does not seem to promise any possibility of change in their lot. This shows that the rejection of this strategy of survival through passive submission to the oppressor and a call to fight for one's freedom and human dignity seem
to be the leit motif of all of Walker's works. The story of Celie is perhaps one of the most striking and memorable examples of how this submission only deepens the suffering and slavery. Her life, in fact, consists, broadly speaking, of two phases determined by her own response to the challenges she has to confront. In the first phase of her life she appears only as a helpless and passive victim. But in the second phase she is totally transformed and emerges as a courageous and self-reliant woman. The process of change in the personality begins with the advent of Shug Avery in her life. Before her meeting with Shug, she suffers silently and without any resistance to all kinds of oppression. Her response in this phase is characterised by ignorance and lack of self-confidence. She seems to be utterly helpless in the face of circumstances and resigns herself to them in a rather abject manner. Unable to see any way out of her miseries, she tends to accept them as something unalterable and tries to face them by turning herself into a kind of wood.

Walker presents Celie's story of oppression and degradation providing insights into the psyche of both, the oppressor and the oppressed. If she depicts the lust, vulgarity and brutality of black man who takes out his venom of frustration in the racist American society against women, she also throws light on how passive submission to male aggression only deep-
ens the crisis of survival for woman. This only feeds the
fire of black man's lust and reduces woman to a mere commodity
to be used the way he desires. Her silence and submission
in the face of different forms of male aggression thus only
tend to dispossess her completely of her human dignity and
freedom. Celie's attempts to cope insensately with the indignities
done to her both by her father and then by her husband only
throw her into deeper miseries until her sense of self-worth
is awakened by her meeting with Shug.

_The Color Purple_\textsuperscript{12} shows how black men take it as their
right to exercise full control over the body and mind of black
women. This is shown to be partly due to their own op-
pression by the white men and partly due to the role models
presented by their fathers and grandfathers. Similarly, life
of black women too has been dramatized in the context of
their experiential environment that largely conditions their
response to their perdicament. But strangely enough, this
aspect of Walker's art of characterization has not received
the attention of Walker's perceptive critics. As a result, _The
Color Purple_ has been described by critics like Trudier Harris
as a novel with the element of fantasy featuring a heroine
who reminds one of "all the heroines of fairy tales from
Cindrella to Snow White"\textsuperscript{13}. According to Trudier Harris,
Celie is "redeemed through suffering"\textsuperscript{14} and her transfor-
mation gives the novel only a fabulist mould. The descrip-
tion of the novel as a kind of fable with powerful element of fantasy in it is the result of critics' failure to appreciate Walker's critical attitude towards Celie's response of submission to her oppressor in the first phase of her life. A close look at the way Celie tries to survive like a slave reveals that the strategy of facing sufferings by negating self only whets the instruments of torture. Walker's attitude towards Celie's attempts to make herself numb to pains and indignities appears to be characterized by an element of ambivalence. She seems to present Celie's capacities to suffer and endure as one of the important qualities of black women exposed to unspeakable cruelties for centuries, but at the same time the writer's rejection of this response is also quite evident from the way she depicts its demeaning effects upon Celie's life. The more she submits, the more she is brutalized and dehumanized. It is only when Celie learns to resist and reshape herself that she emerges as a really heroic woman.

The very opening of the novel dramatizes a powerful conflict between Celie's basic and inner urge to define and preserve her identity as a woman on the one hand and her supine submission to authority and oppression on the other. This is evident from the epigraph to the novel which consists of an unattributed, pervasive threat against speech: "You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy" (CP:1). This menacing threat, seeking to suppress
the urge to articulate the self of Celie, compels her into silence and self-negation. She finds herself helpless against these external forces, resulting in the erosion of her identity as a human being. The second sentence of the novel reveals how Celie, who has "always been a good girl,"(CP:1) finds her sense of self-worth and her very existence in the present completely negated by the forces of oppression. The erosion of "I am"(CP:1) signifies clearly her failure to resist the external authority and to protect her integrity and wholeness. This marks the beginning of her loss of control over self leading to a state of complete submission.

Cifie reaches to adolescence in an atmosphere of ignorance, poverty and cruelty. Celie's mother proves physically and emotionally unfit for her burdens. The murder of her husband, Celie's father, by the white had left her distraught and completely broken. Alfonso exploits her miseries and helplessness, taking her as his wife only to satisfy his sexual appetite. Finding her inadequate for his inordinate and violent sexual desires, he turns to her daughter, Celie, who has to not only bear the burden of household chores but also to satisfy Alfonso's unfulfilled lust. She is raped and is forced to suffer it all silently: "Then he push his thing inside my pussy. When that hurt, I cry. He start to choke me, saying You better shut up and git used to it"(CP:1-2).

The violation of her body, mind and soul shatters completely
her sense of self and she is left devastated and helpless. She is repeatedly raped and impregnated twice. Even the children she bears are taken and sold away by Alfonso. She has to suffer not only as a victim of his sexual violence but is also battered by incessant showers of insults and contempt: "He act like he can't stand me no more. Say I'm evil an always upto no good"(CP:4).

She suffers all these indignities without any resistance and protest. This dispossession of self reduces her to a mere commodity that can be bought and sold at will. The way she is given away by Alfonso to Albert to serve as the latter's wife throws light on the sub-human level of existence she has been condemned to. She is married off by the time she is seventeen to Albert, a man who does not love her at all. He marries her only to raise his children from his first wife and to use her only as an object of his lust. The way Alfonso tries to convince Albert of the utility of Celie as a wife is a comment on the pathetic and lowly condition of Celie and her like: "She ugly...but she ain't no stranger to hard work. And she clean. And God done fixed her. You can do everything just like you want to and she ain't gonna make you feed it or clothe it"(CP:9). This clearly and loudly speaks of Celie's complete dispossession of self. She is valued only as a thing without any sense and sensitivity, something that can be used as he wants to without any burden of respon-
sibility towards her. According to Trudier Harris, "She has little value as a human being and beyond the sexual, none as a woman. She is like the one-eyed mule who is traded off to the buyer who believes that he has at least purchased sound flesh." 

Celie appears to be a picture of passivity in the face of oppression as a wife of Albert before she meets Shug Avery. Her story of denial and degradation becomes all the more poignant in the house of Albert. She finds herself condemned to unrelieved drudgery and violence which she seems to accept as something inescapable. The qualities she is valued for are those generally associated with the beasts of burden. Here, she has to work like a slave and look after his four difficult and rotten kids. She spent her first wedding day "running from the oldest boy... He pick up a rock and laid my head open" (CP:13). Blood ran all down between her breasts and all that she could do was to bandage her head best and cook dinner. She has to run all the day doing the house-hold chores and in the words of Mae G Henderson is, "overworked, beaten and reduced to virtual bondage." 

This grinding domestic work leaves her with no time for herself and she cannot even think of waging any battle against these stifling pressures of her circumstances. All sparks of life she still has are smothered by drudgery and violence and she becomes utterly a pathetic and passive sufferer. Nettie,
her sister, warns her not to let Albert and his children "run over" her: "You got to let them know who got the upper hand" (CP: 18). But she finds herself too weak and helpless to do anything except to suffer spinely. She does not know how to fight. All that she knows is how to "stay alive" (CP: 18). Instead of putting up any resistance against her dehumanizing and degrading conditions, Celie only gives into her fate and sinks "into a numb, unfeeling state" (CP: 18).

Her sexual life with her husband further reveals that she is not more than a passive receptacle for his lust: "Mr. ___ Clam on top of me, do his business, in ten minutes us both sleep" (CP: 69). The way Walker describes the loveless and joyless sex between Albert and Celie suggests the dehumanizing effects of it on both—the victim and the victimiser. Walker, in her fiction, lays bare how Celie's sexual life is turned into a kind of virtual punishment by her husband. Dry and mechanical sex thrust upon her callously by Albert becomes an act of violence done to her body, mind and soul, reducing her to a status of a slave or "pariah".

Celie, a victim of her husband's sexual frenzy and aggression, tries to survive by making herself numb to its pains. Unable to revolt and resist, she just yields and faces the physical and sexual onslaughts like a dead wood. When beaten like dog by Albert, she only makes herself insensate: "It all I
can do not to cry. I make myself wood. I say to myself. Celie, you a tree" (CP:23). This strategy of facing her pains by making herself inanimate creates within her emotionally hollow spaces. She ceases to react to pain and loses every vestige of human dignity. She accepts abjectly all that he does to her and cannot even look at him straight. She always calls him Mr.____ which clearly shows that she has deeply internalized the image of inferiority to her man.

Celie's whole behavioural pattern before her transformation under the influence of Shug is, thus, characterized by an utter lack of the power of will and courage. The possibility of resistance and rebellion against her exploitation and oppression seems to be rather alien to her. Because of the oppressive circumstances of her life, she has not been able to develop any sense of equality, freedom and human dignity as a woman. Her acceptance of her lowly status and perpetration of atrocities on her body and soul only throws her deeper into the abyss of sufferings and ignominy.

Walker's treatment of this phase in the life of Celie evinces that she is not uncritical of Celie's response of passive submission to the forces of her victimization. Her sympathies are clearly and certainly with Celie and she depicts her sufferings and pains in a powerful and moving manner. But Walker does not appear to endorse her supine submission as an answer to the forces of coercion and exploitation. Without resist-
ance to oppressions, she suggests, the principles of justice, freedom and equality remain elusive and distant ideals. The attitudes and actions motivated by the instinct of mere self-preservation reduce a human being only to the level of an animal. Mere survival, devoid of real human happiness and dignity, thus seems to have no place in Walker's vision of human life.

This becomes evident even more strikingly when she delineates characters like Daisy in *The Color Purple*. Though she is only a minor character in the novel, she serves the important purpose of depicting the writer's complete rejection of this sub-human level of existence. Daisy at no place in the novel seems to win the sympathies of Walker's readers. On the contrary she appears to be rather repugnant to them. This surely is indicative of the writer's disapproval of what Daisy stands for.

All that one learns about Daisy and her life is through Celie and Alfonso in the novel. This underlines the fact that she has no identity of her own and her existence is entirely dependent on others. She appears to be a woman without any will, strength and sense of dignity. She is a mere nullity, trying to survive by pandering to the lechery of men like Alfonso. She is so naive that she cannot see through Alfonso's machinations and falls an easy prey to his inordinate carnality. She is brought home by him as his wife when she is no
more than his daughter's age. It is clear from the relationship that their marriage is not a result of any feeling of genuine love and care between the two. It appears that Daisy is motivated into this marriage by her animal instinct of self-preservation. The very concepts of equality, freedom and dignity appear to be utterly unknown to her mind. This leads her to trade her body in the garb of marriage for the sake of her physical survival and comforts. She submits herself completely and passively to Alfonso's lewdness who is "on her all the time" (CP:5). This has a very distorting and warping effect on her life: "She walk round like she don't know what hit her" (CP:5). Even motherhood seems to bring her no sense of fulfilment as a woman. This strategy of self-preservation brings to Daisy no feeling of joy, fulfilment and self-worth.

The way Walker brings out the rather pathetic nature of Daisy's existence is sufficiently indicative of her disapproval of the narrow and inadequate response to the pressures of one's life. Walker appears to be specially critical here of Daisy's lack of a proper sense of honour and judgement. If her readers tend to abhor Alfonso's lechery and brutality, they equally feel repulsed by Daisy's servile submission to Alfonso's lust.

This failure of women like Daisy to live a life of their own with dignity and courage turns them to the level of slaves in bondage to their men. This master-slave relation-
ship appears to be utterly devoid of the elements of reciprocity and communication. They remain, thus, alien to a mutually enriching human contact with each other. Sex in the cases of these women tends to degenerate into a mere mechanical activity that has to be suffered compulsorily to survive in the world of male authority.

Walker, as a womanist, exposes this unwitting complicity of these weak women not only in their dispossession and degradation of their sexual life, but also goes further and underlines the consequences of their failures as mothers. In the works of black women writers like Toni Morrison and Walker, the role and place of black women as mothers had been treated in depth and detail providing a fine critique of this area of black woman's life. There is a considerable variety of mothers in their novels and short stories, giving their readers new insights into their pattern of attitudes and behaviour. If one comes across strong, self-reliant and courageous women like Eva, Sethe and Mem, the images of weak mothers like the mothers of Pecola, Josie, Celie and Sofia are also not uncommon in their works.

Again, Walker's criticism implicit in her treatment of the failure of these women to discharge their duties and responsibilities as mothers cannot go unnoticed by her perceptive readers. But Walker's critics, obsessively concerned as they are either with her feminist idealization of black women
or with finding fault with her depiction of black men, often tend to ignore the subtle disapproval inherent in her characterization of these excessively meek and submissive mothers. However, like any other major artist, Walker depicts them both with a sympathetic understanding of their situation and a critical insight into the limitations and inadequacies of their response to the demands of their motherhood.

What seems to come up for criticism in a number of mother figures in her fiction is their inability to guard the interests of their children and to prepare them as aware, courageous and self-reliant individuals to face the life ahead. Some of them are found to be deficient in their ability to cultivate a proper sense of self in their sons and daughters. It is their own lack of courage, self-confidence and awareness that comes in their way of discharging the vital responsibility of influencing and shaping the personality and attitudes of their children in a positive way. They, in fact, often present the model of a weak and unresisting docility to the powers of oppression, thus, exercising a negative influence on the formative minds of their young ones.

Walker brings out this failure of a black woman as a mother by placing her in very trying circumstances. She is often confronted with the situations of grinding poverty and is saddled with the enormous responsibility of bearing
and rearing a brood of children. Her miseries are compounded by an unsympathetic and irresponsible husband. She is often exposed to physical, moral and emotional exploitations and violence. The way she accustoms herself to these stifling circumstances of her life and stumbles through them with benumbed feelings and emotions render her incapable of providing emotional, moral and intellectual nourishment to her children, so necessary for their growth and happiness. Her failure to train them for the challenges of their real life costs them heavily and their daughters in particular become vulnerable to exploitation and oppression.

Celie's mother in *The Color Purple* not only becomes an object of exploitation and degradation herself because of the lack of her inner strength but is also, in some ways at least, partly responsible for the unspeakable sufferings of Celie. Her mother, instead of being a source of hope and an affirmative attitude, presents to Celie only an example of utter helplessness and defeat. Seeing her own mother as a mere object passively suffering exploitation and aggression, Celie cannot even think of any way of survival other than that of resigning herself to her victimizers. She enters the period of adolescence without any knowledge of what it can mean to a girl in a sexist black society. She has not been educated by her mother about the dangers she has to confront and the ways she must adopt to keep her honour
inviolate. For Celie, her mother is in fact almost non-existent as she can do nothing to protect her from sexual onslaughts of her husband on Celie. On the contrary, the meekness and passivity of Celie's mother add to Celie's problems and push her into a deeper crisis. It is Celie who is forced to substitute her mother as an object for Alfonso's lust. Shockingly enough, Celie's mother cannot even protest against her daughter's exploitation and forced pregnancy. She feels rather relieved as she no longer is harassed by Alfonso's demands: "My mama she fuss at me an look at me. She happy, cause he good to her now" (CP:2).

Walker's ability to invest situations and characters with deeper and more complex meaning and significance is quite evident from the way she has presented Celie's mother and her response to the conditions of her life. At first, the reader tends to sympathise with her for her oppression and exploitation. But as the reader goes ahead and examines her role and personality critically, this sympathy gets diluted. This is certainly because the writer herself has a complex attitude towards the way Celie's mother responds to the pressures of circumstances. Walker appears to feel tenderly for her sufferings but at the same time she is subtly critical of her lack of vision, nerves and a mother's sense of responsibility towards her daughter. Walker, in fact, appears to be superb in the art of presenting these helpless women, evoking a
variety of reactions from her readers. This imparts even to her simple-looking characters an element of profound human complexity. This aspect of her art of characterization is noticeable especially in her portrayal of those characters who are not articulate and sensitively responsive to the slings and arrows of their life. These characters may appear briefly in the pages of her novels but they leave a haunting impression on the minds of her readers. She, in this way, not only brings out the pains and pathos in the lives of such characters, she is also able to provide insights into the causes of the marginalization of their place in their society. Josie's mother in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* illustrates how women fade into ineffectual shadow-like figures when they surrender themselves to the control of their men. She appears as an embodiment of helplessness when her daughter suffers the ignominy of illegitimate pregnancy and is forced to lead the life of a fallen woman. Josie has been a victim of incest committed by her father. Both her mother and Josie are too terrified even to think about it and they both have to "bear the brunt of her shame"(*TLGC*:55) in silence. Her mother is a meek woman too frightened to argue with her husband though she rarely agrees with him. His cruelty and hypocrisy reign freely in the absence of any iota of resistance and protest from Josie and her mother. One feels horrified and repulsed when one reads how he
stands over Josie, lying under his feet with her bulging belly, and he commands all the others to "let'er be... I hear she can do tricks on her back like that" (*TLGC*:57). Walker's denunciation of Josie's father as "a shabby dias of power", (*TLGC*:55) ruthless and hypocritical is certainly strong and clear, but her suggestions that Josie's mother with her meakness has failed to deter his brutality too cannot be missed by Walker's readers.

Walker's treatment of this approach of self-negation and passive submission to the challenges of life thus reveals some of the improtant aspects of her mind and art. It enables the readers to appreciate Walker's deep understanding of the history, nature and dimensions of the human sufferings particularly that of the black. Her sympathy for the oppressed and her protest against the instruments of oppression emerge clearly from her depiction of the helpless victims of injustice. Her insights into the damage done to the inner life of the oppressed and exploited in a system of racism and sexism become crystalized through the characters beaten into a wood-like silence and numbness. But her sympathy for these helpless victims does not degenerate into mere sentimentality. The criticism of their failure to resist the machinery of oppression and their tendency to surrender mindlessly to their victimizer provides an ample proof of her ability to put this approach to life in a more balanced perspective. This imparts an element
of greater human complexity even to those of her characters who appear to be simple and unidimensional. The way she hints subtly at the limitations inherent in their strategy of suffering silently and passively serves to underline Walker's commitment to the principles of enlightened and active participation in life. Her fiction gains in depth and complexity through her treatment of this coping strategy of self-denial, particularly when viewed in juxtaposition with the attitudes of humanism, conformism and escape which form the subject of discussion in the following chapters.
NOTES


3 Robert A. Baron and Donn Byrne, p. 516.


6 Alice Walker, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (New York: Washington square, 1970). Citations to the text of the novel are also from the same edition, and the page numbers in all such cases have been given in parentheses immediately following the quotation. The novel has been abbre-
viated as \textit{TLGC} for such textual quotations.


\footnote{Alice Walker, \textit{The Temple of My Familiar} (New York: Washington Square, 1989). Citations to the text of the novel are also from the same edition, and the page numbers in all such cases have been given in parentheses immediately following the quotation. The novel has been abbreviated as \textit{TMF} for such textual quotations.}


\footnote{Alice Walker, "A Legacy of Betrayl," \textit{Ms}, Nov./Dec. 1993, p.55.}

\footnote{Alice Walker, \textit{Possessing the Secret of Joy} (New York: Washington Square, 1992). Citations to the text of the novel are also from the same edition, and the page numbers in all such cases have been given in parentheses immediately following the quotation. The novel has been abbreviated as \textit{PSJ} for such textual quotations.}

\footnote{Alice Walker, \textit{The Color Purple} (New York: Washington
Square, 1982). Citations to the text of the novel are also from the same edition, and the page numbers in all such cases have been given in parentheses immediately following the quotation. The novel has been abbreviated as CP for such textual quotations.


15ibid.