Chapter IV
Conformism

Walker's fiction is firmly rooted in the realities of life located in one's social and cultural milieu. This posits the important and interesting question of the relationship between individuals and their environment. Walker deals with this question in her fiction with a remarkable understanding of the complexities of the issues involved. She depicts how men and women acquire beliefs, desires and expectations from their environment. At the same time, she also portrays a number of characters who reveal a remarkable degree of ability to resist the controlling hands of their conditions and display the qualities of freedom of mind, judgement and action. This generates a powerful drama of conflict between the individuals trying to hold on to an essence of self and the forces that would seek to stereotype them, force them to conform, or dehumanize them. Walker's treatment of characters who fail to preserve their self and tend to live their life in accordance with these forces shows not only her profound knowledge of the realities of the life of the black, past and present, but also her deep insight into the attitudes and behaviour of these people.

A critical analysis of these characters reveals that their tendency of thinking and behaving in conformity with external
forces is, in fact, a strategy adopted to face various kinds of pressures in life. These men and women tend to behave in the way that they are expected to behave or the way everyone else behaves. This response of conformity is characterised by "agreement on some trait, attitude, or behaviour, based on common group membership."¹ This is often "in accord with the expectations of a social group, expressing acquiescence to the norms of that group."² Conformity occurs when "individuals change their behaviour in order to adhere to existing social norms—widely accepted rules indicating how people should behave in certain situations or under specific circumstances."³

Conformists look to the spoken or unspoken rules of thought and behaviour to conduct their life in the face of stress and challenge. They derive their ideas and strength for actions from such external sources as religious beliefs, social customs and traditions, theories and concepts. Their understanding of life, attitudes and actions are, thus, largely dependent on their borrowed ideas and concepts. Their submission to external authority reduces the possibility of dissonance as they feel convinced that they are submitting to a noble ideal and for a good cause or to become a member of desired society or fraternity.

The individuals who alter their behaviour to meet the expectations of others are often found to be low in self-
confidence and esteem. Crowne and Liverant observe that "conformers tend to have low expectations of success in judgemental tasks." They are also not intellectually gifted persons as often "intelligence and conformity are negatively related."

Their tendency to submit their behaviour and perceptions to external control deprives them of their freedom to think, decide and act independently as self-reliant individuals. Since they depend for their strength and confidence upon sources outside themselves, they exercise little freedom of choice and are, therefore, often found to be deficient in their sense of responsibility.

People with this approach are different from those who submit to oppressions in a rather passive manner. Whereas the former have some source, even if outside themselves to depend on for their thoughts and actions, the latter have no theory, philosophy, customs or traditions to derive their strength from. The conformers rationalize their tendencies to conform to external authority and, therefore, they feel better adjusted in their prescribed roles. But those who survive by benumbing themselves to cruelties in their lives are deficient even in the ability to rationalize their response to their environment and experience no sense of consonance with it. Though conformity to some external locus of control is also a kind of escape from the sense of responsibility for one's actions,
the conformers differ from the category of escapists discussed in the earlier chapter. If they are motivated by their desire for affiliation and integration with their society, the escapists respond to the pressures in their lives by running away from their social responsibilities. The escapists have a source of strength neither outside nor within themselves and, therefore, reveal a pattern of disintegration and degeneration in their lives. The sense of certainty and purpose which the conformers feel by their adherence to some code of values and behaviour is almost alien to the escapists.

Like most of the black novelists, Walker has also dramatized in great depth and detail the effects of racism and sexism on the struggle of her characters, women in particular, towards the realisation of their self. She has depicted how various institutions and traditions, concepts and beliefs tend to gain control of the life of individuals, rendering them incapable of independent and rational thoughts and actions. Her fiction also provides illuminating insights into the subtle workings of the minds of such conformers and lays bare the strengths and weaknesses of their response to the pressures of their situations. Her integrity as an artist emerges clearly when she reveals how forces within her community coerce individuals into the mould of behaviour prescribed for them. The way she treats the men and women who depend upon
some external authority for strength and guidance suggests her complete rejection of the strategy of conformism as an answer to the challenges in one's life.

Walker's fiction is a call for resistance against all those forces of authority—ideas, traditions and institutions—which seek to deny freedom to the individuals and dispossess them of their right to live a life of their own with dignity and wholeness. This has been done so strongly and candidly that it has provoked the wrath of some of her critics, particularly black males, for her treatment of some of the customs and practices prevalent in African society. One of the targets of her incessant critical exposure has been the taboo territory of female circumcision being practised in a number of African communities even in this age of reason and democracy. She appears as a crusader against this inhuman practice and uses all her means as an artist to attack this custom with a view to freeing human society from this scourge. This is evident from the way she lays bare the horrors of this brutal sexist practice in her fiction, prose writings and in a documentary which she prepared in collaboration with London-based Indian film maker, Pratibha Parmar. This film, *Warrior Marks*, shown in the United States, created a great stir in American society, especially in the Afro-American community. Drawing attention to the magnitude of this problem, she estimates in her book, entitled *Warrior Marks: Female*
Genital Mutilation and the Sexual Blinding of Women that "one hundred million women in African, Asian and Middle-Eastern countries have been genitally mutilated causing unimaginable physical pain and suffering." Walker has been in the front line of those writers, journalists and women organizations who have led a campaign for the last two decades against this practice. In her novel, Possessing the Secret of Joy, she has dealt with this theme in depth and detail providing flashes of insights into the causes of the prevalence of this custom as well as its consequences on the life of its victims like Tashi.

The story of the novel revolves round the character of Tashi, caught up in the cross-currents of her Olinkan traditions on the one hand, and the influences of Western culture on the other. She is an African woman who comes under the influence of Christianity and falls in love with Adam, the adopted son of a black American missionary. Their love is passionate and they defy even the strongest taboo of her community against love making in the fields. But neither the influence of the missionaries nor her love for Adam can liberate her mind from the hold, the customs and traditions of her Olinkan community have on her mind and soul. She, as a girl, can neither understand the sexist politics behind these traditions constructed by men nor can she visualise the consequences of their practice on the content and quality
of the life of a woman like herself. This leads her to submit her freedom of mind as a girl to the authority of her patriarchal community and is drawn to live her life in strict conformity with the norms of her Olinkan culture.

Tashi seems to find in her society an effective way of responding to pressures besetting the political and cultural life of her people. They are faced with the all important question of the very survival of their identity as a distinct race. Tashi's conformity to her culture seems to hold out a solution even to the problems she faces as an Olinkan girl. She as an uncircumcised maiden has to face the jeers and sneers of her own friends as her uncircumcised vagina is "thought of as a monstrosity" (PSJ: 121).

Her desire to be liked and to be right impels her to follow the instructions sent by the leader of the community from prison. He is particularly strong in his assertions: "We must return to the purity of our own culture and traditions. That we must not neglect our ancient customs" (PSJ: 117). The Olinkan "thought him a god" (PSJ: 117) and they "believed everything he said " (PSJ: 118). They thought that "he knew best...about everything" (PSJ: 118). He bore Olinka tribal markings on his face and he was obviously proud of it. It was, therefore, difficult for Tashi and her people to hear objections of missionaries who had made a big campaign against the Olinkan tradition of scarring their faces. He was
also very particular in his emphasis on the Olinkan tradition of female initiation into womanhood through circumcision: "From prison Our Leader said we must keep ourselves clean and pure as we had been since time immemorial—by cutting out unclean parts of our bodies" (PSJ:121). Everyone of the Olinkan "knew that if a woman was not circumcised her unclean parts would grow so long they'd soon touch her thighs; she'd become masculine and arouse herself. No man could enter her because her own erection would be in his way" (PSJ:121). Tashi, too, like everyone else in the community believed it "even though no one had ever seen it...And yet the elders, particularly, acted as if everyone had witnessed this evil, and not nearly a long enough time ago" (PSJ:121). Tashi had experienced the pleasure of love-making, but even then she gave it up in order "to be accepted as a real woman by the Olinkan people; to stop the jeering" (PSJ:122). Otherwise she feared she would be "considered a potential traitor," and would not be trusted "besides, Our Leader, our Jesus Christ, said we must keep all our old ways and that no Olinka man—in this he echoed the great liberator Kenyatta—would even think of marrying a woman who was not circumcised" (PSJ:122).

Tashi's ignorance of the consequences of circumcision, the naive credence she gives to the myths about the elongated vagina of uncircumcised woman and her urge for being
accepted by her community lead her to volunteer herself for clitoridectomy. The aura of sacredness surrounding the ritual of this female initiation influences her with a kind of religious fervour to undergo this painful operation. She is carried away by her keenness to show loyalty to her Olinkan leader who was leading a struggle for political freedom and cultural survival of his people in the face of cultural invasion of the Western world backed by its power of technology, industry and material wealth.

Walker clearly brings out that it is Tashi's keenness to preserve her Olinkan identity as well as her fears of her culture being destroyed by the white that motivate her to get herself circumcised. She becomes so much obsessed with it that neither the influence of Christian missionaries nor the love of Adam and the friendship of Olivia can dissuade her from submitting her body to the knife of tsunga, the circumciser. In fact, when Olivia pleads with her not to get herself genitally mutilated, Tashi fails to control her feelings of indignation and accuses Olivia and her family of being "the white people's wedge" (PSJ:22). She spits with contempt and snubs Olivia and the missionaries of trying to convert Olinkans. She exudes the feeling of cultural pride which makes her insensitive to the feelings of even her best friend and well wisher, Olivia. She hurts Olivia's heart when she looks at her and her people with pity and scorn: "You
don't even know what you've lost! And the nerve of you, to bring us a God someone else chose for you! He is the same as those two stupid braids you wear, and that long hot dress with its stupid high collar!" (PSJ:23).

As a sign of loyalty to her culture, she takes off her "gingham Mother Hubbard" (PSJ:22) and what is left of her dress now rides negligently about her loins. She does not have a rifle or a spear, but she has found a long stick with this she jabs at the ground near Olivia's feet. Tashi, then declares, "all I care about now is the struggle for our people" (PSJ:22). Imbued with a feeling of glory in her Olinkan identity, she mounted the donkey, dug her heels into its flanks and trotted out of the encampment like a heroine with a stick in her hand. Thus, Tashi went to tsunga wanting "the operation because she recognized it as the only remaining definitive stamp of Olinkan tradition" (PSJ:64). She felt that the operation would join her to the women warriors of her community "whom she envisioned as strong, invincible. Completely woman. Completely African. Completely Olinka" (PSJ:64). Tashi, in this way, tries to find an answer to the crisis of identity she has to confront as an individual as well as an Olinkan woman. She seeks it by conforming to the tradition of her community. She submits her body for female initiation and tsunga performs the painful operation. Her clitoris is excised and only a very tiny aper-
ture is left by tsunga "after fastening together the raw sides of Tashi's vagina with a couple of thorns and inserting a straw so that in healing, the traumatized flesh might not grow together, shutting the opening completely" (PSJ:65).

Tashi, in this way, subordinates herself to the will of community embodied in its traditions. Like millions of Olinkan girls, she undergoes genital mutilation done, as Walker tells, with "shards of unwashed glass, tin-can tops, rusty razors and dull knives of traditional circumcisers" (PSJ:284). This was performed with all the sacredness of a ritual, the accomplishment of which is celebrated by women by preparing special foods and cleaning house, by washing, oiling and perfuming the body of the circumcised. The attraction of affirming her Olinkan identity is so overwhelming for Tashi that she not only fails to exercise her faculty of reasoning and the independence of her mind, but also sacrifices the claims of her body for a natural life of fulfilment and wholeness.

Walker's main purpose in this novel, however, does not seem to be limited only to a description of the practice of female circumcision. Her main concern, it appears, is to expose fully the terrible consequences of this ritual on the physical and psychic life of its victims. She brings out with great courage and candour how this operation cripples women, bodily and emotionally, rendering them incapable of leading a normal human life. She reveals clearly the limitations
inherent in conformism as a strategy of response to the problems encountered by her characters, both as individuals and as members of their community. It is evident from the novel that blind commitment to any external authority, be it an idea, tradition, ritual or instruction, creates more problems than it seems to solve. It may offer a temporary solution to some of the problems at a particular juncture, but it may lead one deeper into a serious state of crisis. The way Walker underlines the anti-human elements in the forces demanding conformity makes it amply clear that Walker has no patience with anything that impedes the individual's quest for wholeness. Walker alerts her reader to the dangers implicit in the attitude of conformism by dramatizing powerfully the consequences Tashi has to suffer for her uncritical acceptance of the tradition of female circumcision. The writer's intentions to attack this inhuman practice becomes obvious when she describes the appalling affects of genital mutilation on the life and personality of Tashi. Before the operation, she was a girl full of vitality, love and life. She exuded cheerfulness and a feeling of peace, both with her self and her friends, Adam and Olivia. Her easy and playful manner underlined the confidence and self-assurance with which she seemed poised to take of life. But when one meets her in the Mbele camp after the operation, she looks utterly broken and devastated.

Adam, on his return from England, tears across the country
to find Tashi in the Mbele camp, lying on a mat in the most unhygienic conditions. He does not know whether to laugh or cry at her sight. Tashi also feels the same. Her eyes do see Adam "but they do not register his being" (*PSJ*:45). She has to battle with the flies "eager to eat at the feast"(*PSJ*:45) provided by her wounds. After the operation, Tashi presents sharp contrast to her former self. It is painful to see how passive Tashi has become: "No longer cheerful or impish. Her movements, which had always been graceful, and quick with the liveliness of her personality, now became merely graceful. Slow. Studied" (*PSJ*:66). Her cheerful smiles no longer played freely on her face and "that her soul had been dealt a mortal blow was plain to anyone who dared look into her eyes" (*PSJ*:66). Her "own proud walk had become a shuffle" (*PSJ*:65). Circumcision gives her untold pains, physical and mental. Her entire physiological system as a woman was disturbed and "it now took a quarter of an hour for her to pee. Her menstrual periods lasted ten days. She was incapacitated by cramps nearly half the month" (*PSJ*:65). She suffered cramps because the aperture left by tsunga after sewing her vagina is so narrow that residual flow "could not find its way out..."(*PSJ*:65). There was the odor, too, of soured blood which no amount of scrubbing could ever wash off. She appears totally broken and battered by this experience. Her cheerful spirit, her self-possession and self-
assurance seem to desert her for ever.

Walker, through this depiction of havoc done to Tashi's body and mind, underlines in no uncertain terms the hazards all Olinkan women run through their conformity to the tradition of circumcision. The uncritical acceptance of what the elders of the community lay down for these women dooms them to pains and miseries for the rest of their life. They are made to internalize the belief that a woman can enjoy real pleasure when she subjects her body to the experiences of pains. An Olinkan woman is conditioned to associate her pleasures with pain which she is destined to receive each time her vagina is sewn. In fact, this pain becomes for her synonymous with love making and, thus, an integral and inescapable part of her existence.

Walker's treatment of the attitude of conformity as a response to the crisis of identity underlines in unmistakable terms the dangers inherent in it. She shows that genital mutilation not only renders a woman incapable of normal human life, but it also becomes too painful for its victims to endure. Crude methods and primitive tools such as "unwashed, unsterilized sharp stones, tin tops, bits of glass, rusty razors and gringy knives used by the tsunga" (PSJ: 251) can infect and kill the innocent little girls and women. The incident of Dura's death, presented so poignantly in the novel, serves as an illustration of the ritual of circumcision as an instru-
ment of torture and destruction.

The reader learns about the incident of Dura's death mainly through the memories of Tashi, who recalls vividly how Dura, her sister had "bled and bled and bled and then there was death" (PSJ:83). She remembers the day she "had crept, hidden in the elephant grass, to the isolated hut from which came howls of pain and terror" (PSJ:75). She saw a row of dazed girls of Dura's age lying underneath a tree on the bare ground near the hut. Dura, however, was not among them and Tashi "knew instinctively that it was Dura being held down and tortured inside the hut" (PSJ:75). These "inhuman shrieks that rent the air" (PSJ:75) chilled Tashi's heart. Suddenly, the shrieks stopped and there was silence. And then came tsunga carrying something insignificant and unclean between her toes which she flung in the direction of a waiting hen. The bird gobbled down the tiny object in one quick movement of beak and neck. The practice of female initiation thus results in "Dura's murder" (PSJ:83).

What makes the nightmare of Dura's shrieks and death more ghastly and inhuman is the way it is just buried away into silence even by women of her village. Tashi could not believe that these were the same women whom she had known all her life, the same women who had known Dura and whom Dura had known. Dura had often gone to buy matches or snuff for them nearly everyday. She had carried their water
jugs on her head but even then these women were tight-lipped about her death. Like Tashi, the reader, too, feels intrigued and disturbed by the silence of women. In fact, this is what the writer is probably seeking to do in order to expose the repressive nature of the taboos imposed by the elders of the Olinkan community. Nobody talks about Dura's death, nobody can even jerk a tear because it might bring bad luck to the community.

This compliance with the prescribed rules of behaviour tends to reduce these women to the level of dumb driven cattle. They can neither feel and think independently nor can they act in accordance with their natural human impulses. The way they have to stifle their grief and act as if nothing has happened only indicates their slave-like position in their own society governed by traditions and taboos. This subservience to external authority may give them some sense of identity and a feeling of freedom from the responsibility of the consequences of their actions, but it certainly perpetuates the tyranny of traditions.

The novel, thus, underlines how conformity to the practice of genital mutilation inflicts pain and death on its innocent victims. Walker's disapproval of the attitude of acceptance of this cruel practice is further evident when she depicts its crippling consequences on the psychic life of the circumcised women. She forcefully brings out how it under-
mines the rights of women for a natural life of wholeness and fulfilment. The writer provides insights into the damage done to the psyche of the woman when she is forced to pass through the traumatic experiences of circumcision. She shows that the operation not only scraps away some of the most valuable parts of the body of a woman but also leaves a permanent scar on her psyche. The pain of circumcision traumatizes her so acutely that she is hardly ever able to come out of it in the rest of her life. It goes so deep into her psyche that she tends to associate her sexual experiences with this pain. As her vagina is sewn so tightly and the passage left is so narrow that every act of love making means fresh pains to her. This makes it impossible for a woman to lead a normal and natural life. She can no longer experience the moments of consummation in love and, thus, the demands of her body and soul remain unfulfilled. This results in the repression of her natural sexual urges and energies, throwing her health and personality out of gears. This repression of her natural self causes tensions, sickness and problems of maladjustment. Again, it is through the experiences of Tashi that Walker depicts all of these consequences on the psychological life of the victims of circumcision.

The disruptive effects on Tashi's psyche begin to surface soon after the operation when Adam, her lover, brings
her home. Even as Adam marries her, she protests that "in America, he would grow ashamed of her because of the scars on her face" (PSJ:66). Though nobody speaks of the hidden scars between her thin legs and of the smell, her embarrassment at it is so complete that she takes to "spending half the month completely hidden from human contact, virtually buried" (PSJ:67). Her embarrassment and her tendency to avoid human company indicate the beginning of her feelings of alienation from the very springs of life, health and happiness. Her consciousness of being an odd figure in a society of normal human individuals haunts her so acutely that she begins to sink into a state of mental tension and depression.

The trauma that Tashi carries in her psyche turns her into a nervous wreck. She suffers frequent fits of melancholy and depression. Her grip on life becomes so tenuous that she tries desperately to get some hold on it. The way she clutches her pillow shaking with fear at night, indicates very clearly how her life has been turned into a terror by the excision of her vulva. It has completely dispossessed her of her right to fulfilment as a woman. The possibility of sexual pleasure, the satisfaction that flows from procreation, and the feeling of self-worth and love as a whole woman become painfully alien to Tashi. The frustration of her sexual instinct is evident when she dreams of a tower, a tall tower
"It is cool at first, and as you descend lower and lower to where I'm kept, it becomes dank and cold, as well. It's dark. There is an endless repetitive sound that is like the faint scratch of a baby's fingernails on paper. And there are millions of things moving about me in the dark. I can not see them. And they've broken my wings! I see them lying crossed in a corner like discarded oars. Oh, and they're forcing something in one end of me, and from the other they are busy pulling something out" (*PSJ*:27).

The passage is a revealing account of how clitoridectomy has knocked her out of the rhythms of natural life. The description of the inside of tower as cold is suggestive of the loss of her ability and capacity to experience the warmth and pleasures of sex. The "endless repetitive sound that is like the faint scratch of baby's fingernails on paper" (*PSJ*:26) indicates that her natural urge and energy, seeking expression in motherhood, have been stifled, causing dislocation and disharmony in her life. This alienation from her natural self fills her with weird feelings of guilt and fear. The acceptance of genital circumcision is an act that amounts to a violation of the very principle of life the consequences of which she cannot escape. The life-force symbolized by millions of things moving around her in the dark seems to take a revenge on her for divorcing herself from a woman's natural course of fulfilment. This tends to devitalize her and she feels like a bird whose wings have been broken. Her genital mutilation renders her absolutely passive and she ceases to be
a participant in life and its joys. She loses her sense of self-worth and even begins to have feeling of self-disdain: "I am long and fat and the color of tobacco spit. Gross! And I can not move" (PSJ:27).

The damage done to her psychic life by her conformity to the tradition of circumcision is further evident when one sees her suffering from loss of self-control and balance of mind. She becomes peevish and irritable, loses control over her rational self and indulges in abnormal behaviour. She speaks about "the strange compulsion" she sometimes experiences "of wanting to mutilate herself" (PSJ:51). One morning, Adam, much to his horror, wakes to find the foot of their bed red with blood. Completely "unaware" and "feeling nothing," she had hurt and smeared herself with blood (PSJ:51). Circumcision and the resultant frustration unsettle her mind so much that she cannot respond to any situation of stress in a graceful and balanced manner. Her behaviour in the face of pressures is characterised by fits of depression and violence. For example, when she learns about Lisette's pregnancy by Adam, her husband, she flies into rage that subsides "into a year long deterioration and rancorous depression" (PSJ:127). She feels upset so deeply that she tries to kill herself and speaks of even murdering Benny, their retarded son—a legacy of the brutal practice of genital mutilation. She is in such a depressed and unbalanced state of mind that she loses
self-control completely and runs to assault Pierre when he comes to see his father in America. The moment he gets out of taxi, she, like a "dark spectre," moves to the steps of her house, "picks up a large jagged stone, grey as grief" and strikes "him just above the teeth" (PSJ: 145). She had begun to collect stones "the day she had learnt of Pierre's birth" (PSJ: 145). She throws these stones incessantly at Pierre as if, "like Kali," she has "a dozen of arms" (PSJ: 145).

It is clear from the analysis of her behaviour that Tashi's psychological compulsions to indulge in violence against herself and others are rooted in her circumcision as well as her repressed grief over the death of her sister, Dura. This emerges further particularly when Tashi is under the treatment of Mzee, a "doctor of the soul" (PSJ: 49). The doctor subjects her to psycho-drama and shows her grainy black and white films. It is during the screening of these films that something peculiar happens to her. The doctor explains a scene screening several small children being prepared for adulthood. The film then shows "a large fighting cock" walking freely and "crowing mightily" (PSJ: 73). The scene fills Tashi with such an overwhelming fear that she faints: "It was exactly as if I had been hit over the head. Except there was no pain" (PSJ: 73). As a compulsive act of catharsis, Tashi begins to paint what becomes "a rather extended series of ever larger and more fearsome fighting cocks" (PSJ: 73).
Then one day she draws a foot "sweating and shivering" (*PSJ*: 73). She feels "terribly sick" (*PSJ*: 73) as she paints the foot and the cock which grow larger and larger in size. Then suddenly one day, she realizes that the foot she painted was the foot of a woman, the foot of tsunga. This lifts the lid off her brain and she clearly remembers the death of her sister, Dura. She now vividly recalls how tsunga after circumcising Dura came out of the hut holding the circumcised flesh between her toes and throwing it to waiting cocks. The mystery surrounding Dura's fate suddenly disappears and Tashi realizes that it was not death but a murder. The causes of disorder in Tashi's physical and psychic life also become clear to the reader with this incident.

It was her repressed grief over the death of her sister, Dura, and the trauma of her own circumcision which have combined to throw her off the hinges. Thus, the writer suggests that Tashi's fits of depression, rage and violence are the results of this repressed pain deeply embedded in her psyche. Her acts of violence aimed both at self and at others are a direct consequence of the violence she has herself suffered in the form of her sister's death and her own genital mutilation.

Walker's treatment of circumcision and its devastating effects on every aspect of Tashi's life leaves the reader in no doubt about her intentions to expose the inhuman
nature of this practice. The way she relates the continuance of this tradition to the social and cultural causes imparts an element of realism to her handling of this theme. Her fiction gains in human depth and complexity when she deals with the tendency of some of the individuals like Tashi to conform to the pattern of thought and behaviour treated as sacred in their socio-cultural milieu. It also underlines Walker's critical attitude towards her own African culture. As an enlightened woman championing the cause of human freedom, equality and dignity, regardless of race, colour and gender, Walker holds the customs and traditions of her community to a rigorous critical scrutiny and denounces them strongly wherever they seem to undermine these basic human values. This, however, does not mean that she has no love for her people and their culture. On the contrary, she only exposes all that is unnatural and anti-human in the customs of her people. In this, she seems to be motivated by her commitment to the democratic principles of human freedom, dignity and a life of wholeness.

Walker's sympathies with her people appear very clearly in a number of ways in her fiction. The very fact that she delivers a scathing attack on all that weakens and destroys her people and their culture is a sure evidence of the deep love she cherishes for them. She feels deeply disturbed at the sight of poverty, hunger and disease afflicting the people
who once used to be an embodiment of strength and stamina. Her feeling of agony is obvious when she describes the sick and destitute. She ascribes the spread of AIDS in the Africans to such practices as clitoridectomy which seem to destroy "their country's future doctors, dentists, carpenters and engineers. Their country's fathers and mothers. Teachers. Dancers, singers, rebels, hellraisers, poets." (PSJ:250-51). What seems to disturb Walker the most is the ignorance and incomprehension of the causes responsible for their doom. Tashi appears to express the sentiments of her creator when she feels angered by the "animal-like ignorance and acceptance" (PSJ:250) of her countrymen waiting for death. She, scornfully calls it "the assigned role of the African: to suffer, to die, and not know why" (PSJ:250).

Walker appears to regret deeply the loss of power and prosperity which her people once possessed proudly. They owned hectares and hectares of land but now they own nothing. They have been "reduced to the position of beggars—except that there was no one near enough to beg from, in the desert" (PSJ:22) they were in. But her love for her people and their culture is not sentimental and irrational. Her fiction, in fact, provides a critical insight into the strength as well as weaknesses of the cultural practices prevalent in African community. The way she tries to demolish the myth that a woman is basically lascivious and her genital parts are
unclean bears a testimony to her complete rejection of all that is irrational and baseless in the beliefs of her people. She suggests that uncritical acceptance of such beliefs and traditions has done a terrible damage to the life of the Africans and has even thrown a challenge for their survival. The spread of AIDS due to the genital mutilation seems to jeopardize the very existence of these people.

Like a major artist, Walker goes deeper and tries to bring out some of the factors responsible for the creation and prevalence of such myths. She suggests that it is man's desire to weaken and cripple woman in order to be in full possession and control of her life that he created the traditions like that of female initiation. Her angry rejection of this irrational male strategy to enslave and degrade woman is evident when we hear even a woman like tsunga, the circumciser, coming out against it frankly and strongly. Tsunga is a professional circumciser and she has been doing this assigned role only as a matter of compliance to the traditions constructed by men in her community. Though she performs operations, she questions the validity and justice of the practice. She sounds very indignant when she asks: "Did Our Leader not keep his penis? Is there evidence that even one testicle was removed? The man had eleven children by three different wives. I think this means the fellow's private parts were intact" (PSJ:244). She sneers at women for being "too cow-
ardly to look behind a smiling face. A man smiles and tells them they will look beautiful weeping, and they send for the knife" (*PSJ*:244). She sounds indeed very bitter when she accuses women of accepting the man-made myth that women get pleasure from the pain men inflict by breaking into their body. "The bitches are used to it," she says (*PSJ*:245). This practice has, thus, been invented by man to have control over women and to assure himself of his manliness: "It is only because a woman is made into a woman that a man becomes a man" (*PSJ*:246). This tendency of man to control woman, Walker suggests, is an evidence of his selfishness as well as his lack of tolerance and respect for the individual identity of a woman. At the same time, her criticism of women, too, is also quite clear when she brings out their naivete in conforming to such traditions and practices as dispossess them completely of their right to a life of wholeness and fulfilment as women. She, in this way, underlines the limitations inherent in an attitude of conformity to the patterns of behaviour and thought laid down by an external authority. The way she depicts the subtle workings of such outside authorities, demanding conformity to serve their own vested interests, is another example of Walker's deep distrust of these forces. She views them as inimical to the basic human values of freedom and dignity.

Walker's fiction is a plea against subservience to any
authority outside one's self and underlines the necessity of resisting all those forces which seek to impair one's attempts to realize one's humanity. Reasoned resistance is all the more necessary in order to cure one's society of various kinds of ills such as oppression and exploitation based on racism and sexism. Walker, in fact, suggests clearly that uncritical acceptance of beliefs, ideas and traditions created and propagated subtly by forces with vested interests only serves to perpetuate the ills like discrimination and oppression in various forms. When ideas and customs constructed cleverly to legitimize the dominance of one over the other are internalized by the victim, the possibility of establishing a just social order becomes bleaker and remoter. This only serves to maintain status quo and to perpetuate inequality and injustice.

Walker's fiction is motivated mainly by her intentions to expose and attack oppression and injustice in human society. She appears to be unsparing in her attacks on all those forces which seek to enslave men and women not only physically but also mentally and psychologically. Even the sacred institutions like Christianity have been exposed and scathingly criticised for serving as instruments of perpetuating discrimination and oppression in various forms. By demanding conformity to its precepts, Christianity has tended to deny freedom of thought and action on the part of the individual. Historically, it has been used to establish the supremacy of the
white over the black and thus to justify the lowly position and status of the black as slaves. It has also served as an instrument in the hands of patriarchy to reinforce male hegemony and the status of women as inferior to that of men.

Though one comes across Walker's criticism of Christianity as an institution sporting and reinforcing discrimination and oppression in almost all of her novels, her treatment of the life and attitudes of Mrs. Hill in *Meridian* reveals it clearly and pointedly. She shows that Christianity, like any other religion, seeks to impose its own code of thought and behaviour on its followers and, thus, tends to deny them freedom of mind and action. This does not allow the individuals to respond to the issues in their environment in an independent and dynamic manner. Conformity to the precepts and code of behaviour prescribed by religion may seem to provide a source of strength and guidance to its followers but very often it serves as a subtle instrument of perpetuating status quo by manipulating the response of the naive and innocent believers to the situations of their exploitation and oppression in various forms.

Mrs. Hill, the mother of *Meridian*, is a classic example of how the attitude of conformity to the code of one's society and religion destroys one's individuality, reducing one to a mere cog in the machine. Meridian, who emerges as a strong woman capable of rational thought and action, views
her mother as a "willing know-nothing, a woman of ignorance" \((M:30)\). She cannot accept her mother's blind adherence to traditions even in their most sacrosanct form. Her mother has a tendency to depend on Christianity for answers to every problem she faces. She, in fact, shifts every responsibility to God for her well-being, implying a loss of confidence in her own abilities to understand things critically and struggle for a better, happier and more fulfilling life of dignity and freedom for herself and her people. Deborah E. McDowell is right when she observes that "the mother has been critically victimized by the European's gift of Christianity as an opiate to the black slave, a comforting myth which dimmed the horrors and brutalities of oppression."\(^9\)

The mind of Meridian's mother is possessed by religion so completely that she never complains against the church "because she believed the church building—the mortar and bricks—to be holy; she believed that this holiness had rubbed off from years of scripture reading and impassioned prayers, so that now holiness covered the walls like paint. She thought the church was literally God's house, and believed she felt his presence there when she entered the door; when she stepped back outside there was a different feeling, she believed" \((M:77)\). This irrational and blind faith is further reflected in her failure to see anything wrong with the church. Though the preacher was usually ununderstandable, "she sat every
Sunday convinced that this man—whoever was preaching at the time—was instilling in her the words and wisdom of God, when, in fact, every other sentence was incomprehensible" (M:77-78).

Her tendency to accept the authority of Church in every aspect of life also renders her incapable of understanding the inhuman nature of racism and the need to fight out the injustice and oppression inherent in this system. She does not feel disturbed by the policy of segregation and finds nothing wrong with the discrimination against the black. She seems to have fully internalized the philosophy that God has created the black as inferior to the white in every respect: "God separated the sheeps from the goats and the black folks from the white" (M:85). That is why she is utterly without any sympathy for the Civil Rights Movement going on for equal rights and opportunities to the black. The Civil Right workers were trying to educate black people about their right to vote and the need to register their names in voters' list. They also demonstrated against segregated facilities and even went to jail for the cause of justice, equality and freedom. But Mrs. Hill, conditioned as she is in her attitude by racist doctrine, fails to see any sense in anything that Civil Rights Workers are doing. She remonstrates her daughter about the Civil Rights Movement and her involvement in it: "As far as I am concerned", says Mrs. Hill, "You've
wasted a year of your life, fooling around with those people. The papers say they’re crazy” (M:85). It never bothers her if she has to sit in the back of the bus, and even if she is not allowed to use public toilets. It is clear from Mrs. Hill’s response to the problem of segregation and Civil Rights Movement that she is utterly ignorant about the racist politics behind the myth of white superiority. Though Mrs. Hill seems to be in harmony with the system, this is because she is devoid of the ability to understand and respond adequately to racism in a critical manner. This reduces her to a kind of tool in the hands of racist masters to perpetuate status quo.

Mrs. Hill tries to find answers to even her personal problems by accepting blindly the roles of wifehood and motherhood as determined by her society. She emerges as an example of black motherhood, an embodiment of self-sacrifice. She has had six children and has raised all of them herself. She believes that "if the good Lord gives you a child he means for you to take care of it" (M:87). She accepts this myth of motherhood so completely that she feels outraged when her daughter, Meridian, wants to give up the responsibility of rearing her own child. She accuses Meridian of being selfish in refusing the responsibility of rearing her child so that she may go to college. For Mrs. Hill, it is more important for a woman to raise a child than to think of her own growth
and freedom of mind.

Mrs Hill's own acceptance of the constraints of marriage and motherhood also reveals the conformist tendency in her personality. She was a school teacher before her marriage but this did not satisfy her and she felt that there was something vital missing from her life. As she had been brought up on the diets of conventional concepts of womanhood, she believed that a woman's life was not complete and meaningful without marriage and motherhood. So she entered the bond of marriage and for a year saw 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" (M:50).

Then came the inevitable consequences in the form of children and her very first pregnancy made her feel "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'"(M:50). This marked the end of her personal life, her freedom, and "there was no one she could cry out and say 'It's not fair'"(M:50). This loss of freedom to live a life of her own is the price she pays for responding to her inner urge for the fulfillment and realization of
self by conforming to the conventional concept of wom­
anhood laid down by society. Meridian, her daughter, sums it up when she observes: "Her mother was not a woman who should have had children. She was capable of thought and growth and action only if unfettered by the needs of dependents, or the demands, requirements, of a husband" (M:49).

The fact that the real spirit of life is drained out of her by the pressures of conformity to the prescribed roles of womanhood emerges strikingly when she is shown making artificial paper flowers: "Meridian's mother would take up a fistful of wire clothes hangers, straighten them out, and red, yellow and white crepe paper and her shears, and begin to cut out rose petals" (M:30). Then she would give them the shape of a flower and put "the finished product in a churn already crowded with the artificial blooms" (M:30). This is clearly suggestive of the absence of real essence, joy and beauty from her life. Her life may seem to have an outward pattern and may give illusion of shapliness, but is a source of pleasure and freshness neither to her self nor to anybody else. That her dependence on tradition and church has rendered her incapable of living a life of wholeness and making an adequate response to the challenges before her is further conveyed by the pil­lows she makes. They are small pillows — puckered and
dainty: "Prayer pillows, she called them. But they were too small for kneeling. They would only fit one knee, which Meridian's mother never seemed to notice" (M:30).

The failure of Mrs Hill even to notice that the pillows were too small for any use is a telling comment on constricting and blinding effects of the forces of conformism on her mind. Here Walker subtly underlines the insufficiency of Mrs Hill's approach and methods to face the realities of modern day life. This provides another evidence of Walker's abilities to put her own people into critical perspectives. Though she presents the black mothers in her fiction with a sense of respect and awe for their strength and stamina, she does not forget to bring out their failures to develop a more rational and dynamic mind—so necessary for a life of freedom dignity and wholeness.

The limitations inherent in an attitude of conformism have been highlighted by Walker not only through the portrayals of her characters in her novels, her short stories, too, provide useful insights into the causes and consequences of this approach to life. "The Diary of an African Nun" provides an example of how life lived in a strict conformity to the institutions like Catholicism is struck with barrenness and frustration. This results in one's alienation from one's self, from one's community and even from the natural rhythms of life. The very possibility of living a life of wholeness
and fulfilment turns into a mere dream, and natural creative urge and energy of life are wasted into the sands of artificiality and sterility.

The story is divided into six parts and focusses on the life of a Ugandan Catholic nun caught up between the demands of her natural self on the one hand and a strict code of conduct imposed by the Roman Catholic church on the other. In the very first section of the story, Walker dramatizes the loss of her individual identity as an African young girl by her adoption of the Euproean Church and culture. The Americans, Germans, French and Italians all come to her mission school as tourists. They all look at her from their own cultural perspectives and fail to recognize her individuality as an African girl. No careful reader can miss the element of colonial sense of arrogance and superiority in their perception of this young and beautiful nun. The Americans, with "their too much money and candid smiles" cannot understand her humility. The Germans consider this African nun as "a work of primitive art, housed in a magical color; the incarnation of civilization, anti-heathenism, and the fruit of a triumphing idea" (p:113). The French find her "charmant and would like to paint a picture" (p:113). The Italians are concerned with the giant cockroaches in the latrines and give her "hardly a glance, except in reproach for them" (p:113). None of the tourists sees in her the young girl who has stifled all
her needs, desires and urges, so necessary for a full and fertile life. This is, the price she has to pay for marrying an idea, an institution—Christ and the church.

This loss of her cultural identity and authentic life as a woman is the result of her failure to understand the consequences of choosing the life of a Catholic nun. As a child she came everyday to mission school and admired the nuns and priests who taught at the school because "they seemed so productive and full of intense, regal life" (p.114). But as a child she did not know "they could not have children" (p.114). She wanted to be like them and, therefore, chose to become a nun. But now all charms have fled and she feels as if her life is "shrouded in whiteness like the mountains" which she can see from her window (p.114).

This signifies her alienation from life which she can seek only from a distance. She no longer climbs these mountains or touches their rocks, plants and animals. She is bitter and sarcastic when she thinks of what her submission to the discipline of church has given her: "At twenty I earned the right to wear this dress, never to be without it, always to bathe myself in cold water even in winter, and to wear my mission cropped hair well covered, my nails clean and neatly clipped" (p.114). Here is an expression of her muffled protest against the impersonal and mechanical system of Catholic church. What seems to trouble her is the suppression of her
natural spirit of life by the artificial code of conduct prescribed for her as a nun. Her acute feeling of loss is quite evident when she ruminates: "The boys I knew as a child are kind to me now and gentle, and I see them married and kiss their children, each one of them so much what our Lord wanted—did he not say, 'suffer little children to come unto me?' but we have not yet been so lucky, and we never shall" (p.114).

These words of the nun reveal the vacuum in her life caused by the absence of her own man and children. As a woman she needs both, but she has been deprived of the possibility of realizing her womanhood through marriage and motherhood. It gives her moments of tormenting conflict between her obedience to the dictates of her church on the one hand and the pressures of natural instincts and desires for sublimation in love and procreation on the other. This we hear when she wonders:

"Must I still ask myself whether it was my husband, who came down bodiless from the sky, son of a proud father and flesh once upon the earth, who first took me and claimed the innocence of my body? Or was it the drumbeats, messengers of the sacred dance of life and deathlessness on earth? Must I still long to be within the black circle around the red, glowing fire, to feel the breath of love hot against my cheeks, the smell of love strong about my waiting thighs?" (p.115).

She contrasts the sterility she has been condemned to
by her conformity to the will of the church with the fertility of those around her who live a natural life of love and sex. The way she feels strongly fascinated by the mating rituals of these people indicates clearly her own sense of loss and frustration. She can at best only contemplate the pleasures of sex by thinking of herself as the wife of Christ in a "loveless, barren, hopeless Western marriage..." (p.117). At the sound of the drumbeats, "messengers of the sacred dance of life and deathlessness on earth," she experiences strong stirrings in her body and soul (p.115). This is the awakening of the impulse of sacred life smothered beneath the frosty nature of her Christian faith. She trembles "at the thought of the passions stifled beneath the voluminous rustling snow!" (p.115). But her loyalty to the Catholic Church prevents her joining the sacred dance of fertility. More than loyalty, it is the fear of being called a "cannibal" eating up "the life that is Christ" that does not allow her to participate in the joys of life and creativity (p.117).

The story is thus an account of the turmoils and torments the nun has to suffer because of her blind adherence to the canons of church. It brings out how uncritical acceptance of an external authority can destroy the peace and harmony in the life of an individual. It even tends to divorce the individual from the very springs of life by causing alienation from the course of nature. The adoption of
Western faith and culture may give to these Africans an illusion of belonging to an enlightened religion, but it muffles the sound of drumbeats and the pulse of life.

Walker's fiction, in this way, is a strong plea against all those forces and attitudes which tend to thwart the fulfilment of life. It is a criticism of all those traditional concepts, ideas and institutions which force the individual to conform to a set pattern of thought and behaviour. Through a subtle analysis, she lays bare the motives of external authorities in their attempt to control or manipulate individuals and, thus, deny them the freedom of choice and action. At the same time, she also exposes the limitations in the personality, attitude and behaviours of conformers who seek to escape personal responsibility for their own actions by submitting themselves to some external control. This may give them some sense of certainty and of being in harmony with the dominant forces in their environment but it makes it almost impossible for them to be fully at peace with themselves and to live a life of wholeness. Their dependence for strength on sources outside themselves only reveals their lack of awareness, confidence and courage. People adopting this strategy, Walker shows, fail either to comprehend the nature of challenges before them or are too weak to resist with sufficient clarity and strength all those persons, institutions or ideas which seek to enslave them. It is only after they shun the attitude
of conformism that they emerge as strong individuals and try to live life on their own terms. These liberated men and women who possess sufficient awareness and are also capable of withstanding pressures without dependence on any external source for strength and guidance emerge as figures of central significance in her world of fiction. It is their approach to life based on humanistic principles that enables them not only to live a life of fulfilment as individuals but also serve others by a meaningful integration with the people around them. This way of living one's life will be the subject of discussion in our next chapter.
NOTES


5ibid.


7Alice Walker, 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 PSJ for such textual quotations.

8Alice Walker, Meridian (New York:Washington Square,
1976). 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 *M* for such textual quotations.
