CHAPTER IV

EVOLUTION FROM BIOLOGICAL MOTHERS THROUGH
COMMUNITY MOTHERS TO SPIRITUAL MOTHERS

This chapter examines the practices and roles of black motherhood in the American and African context as represented in Alice Walker’s novels and attempts to deduce a conceptual framework, from the study of the novels of Alice Walker, on mothers and mothering. It also analyses and contextualizes Walker’s radical redefinition of black motherhood in her effort to empower the African American society racially. As a civil right activist, she combines her revolutionary themes with her womanist ideology and spiritual philosophy. In her novels, she presents motherhood as a site of empowerment. As a radical thinker, she aims at transcending the biological limits of motherhood. She situates her concept of black mother and mothering connecting the maternal ancestors at a spiritual level. Her theoretical, political and spiritual background creates a concrete space for the evolution of motherhood from a radical point of view. Moreover, her revisiting of African nations makes her question the maternal practices in African nations.

Alice Walker, who portrays the relationship between parent and child, male and female, and female and female, is one among the few writers who examines the impact of poverty on the mother – child relationship. She believes in ancestral worship and often thematises it in her writings. She is different from other Black writers in her racial identification with Africans, Native Americans and Europeans, which enables her to trace ancestry back to Africa, the Cherokee nation and Scotland and Ireland.

She discusses her African American maternal theory in her non-fictional work In Search of Our Mother’s Garden (1983). Alice Walker considers motherhood as a site of power because it serves as the medium to pass on the artistic talents across generations, to
rewrite the racio-political history and to transfer maternal history orally. Moreover, she does not believe in the power of biological mothers and mothering, but firmly believes that those, even friends and strangers, who are concerned about children can attain the status of mother irrespective of their biological constraints and age. She considers maternal identity as a position of authority for black women.

In *In Search of Our Mother's Garden*, she discloses her personal experiences and reactions to various issues that occur in and around her. This book “is a personal account that is yet shared, in its theme, and its meaning, by all of us” (238). In one of the essays, she proudly reasons out how she acquired her name from her great-great-great-grandmother. In this book, she also asserts the importance of mother-root for the survival of any tradition. Moreover, she acknowledges the artistic talents of black mothers and tries to revive the artistic talents of the black mothers who were once slaves. Through this book, she tries to universalize her assumptions of the role of mothers and she believes that transmitting the innate creative sparks of the mothers of each generation to the next generation is an inevitable obligation of mother work.

And so our mothers and grandmothers have, a more often than not anonymously, handed on the creative spark, the seed of the flower they themselves never hoped to see; or like a sealed letter they could not plainly read.... Yet so many of the stories that I write, that we all write, are my mother's stories.... but something of the manner in which she spoke, something of the urgency that involves the knowledge that her stories – like her life – must be recorded. It is probably for this reason that so much of what I have written is about characters whose counterparts in real life are so much older than I am. (240)
Alice Walker considers the publication of this book an opportunity to honour her mother who was an unacknowledged historian and creative artist. She records her mother’s story with a sense of warmth and appreciation which reads as follows: “My mother always told this story with a most curious expression of her face. She automatically raised her head higher than ever – it was always high – and there was a look of righteousness, a kind of holy heat coming from her eyes”. (9)

Alice Walker’s deep faith in ancestral and communal bonding is revealed when she highlights the impact that the domestic art form had on her and her sense of reverence for it. To Walker, it is the sense of imagination and spiritual feeling which is the legacy and heritage that her great-great-grandmothers have handed down to her and this has helped her to portray characters who display so much artistry and creativity in her novels.

While discussing the rich legacy of her ancestors, Alice Walker recollects her own mother and her creative spirit which she records in this essay with respectful joy:

She made all the clothes she wore, even my brother’s overall. She made all the towels and sheets we used. She spent the summers canning vegetables and fruits. She spent the winter evenings making quilts enough to cover all our beds. During the ‘working’ day she labored beside – not behind – my father in the fields. (emphasis added) (238)

Though her mother never became famous, she succeeded in handing over her blazing creative spark to her daughter and Alice Walker dutifully pays homage to the great artist. Her mother’s art of storytelling and gardening has also influenced Alice Walker to a great extent about which she writes with pride. She acknowledges her mother’s talent to turn the rocky soil she landed on into a garden. Moreover, she states that she is guided by “this
heritage of a love of beauty and a respect for strength” (243). Alice Walker honours her mother by portraying her mother as an institution of artistry.

In Walker’s view, her grandmother and mother were artists whose springs of creativity found no release. She regards them as “creators...because they were rich spiritually” (1983: 233). In her collection Living by the Word (1988) she calls these ancestors her “spirit helpers” (97) and expresses her immense joy in finding resemblances between her and her ancestors. They were creators whose “strain of enduring their unused and unwanted talent drove them insane” (1983: 233). Alice Walker situates her concept of motherhood within the above said pattern. Starting from her first novel to the recent one she has presented the theme of ancestral reverence in one form or the other.

Like Morrison and Naylor, Alice Walker’s interests lie in task-oriented maternal practices. She fixes protection, nurturance, training and healing as the topmost priorities of mother work. She insists on the physical and psychological well-being of the young generation. Hence the need for healing and spirituality gains prominence in her writings. Renewal of individual and communal energy is an integral part of her writings. Apart from these elaborate and broader categories of responsibilities she asserts the need for educating children especially the daughters on the issues of sexuality and reproductive system. The discussion on the physical body from the postmodern and psychoanalytical perspective throws light on the theme of motherhood in the novels such as Possessing the Secret of Joy (1992). Her keen interest in artistry enables her to view artistry as well as culinary arts as a transgenerational quality. She affirms that vital role of education in the lives of African American Women.

Alice Walker’s all fictional works are chosen for research and her The Way Forward is with a Broken Heart and Now is the Time to Open Your Heart are left out of the
purview of the research as they concentrate on queer theory and New Age philosophy respectively.

Alice Walker emphasizes the need for protecting children especially during their formative years. This emphasis is found ample measure in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970), *Meridian* (1976), *The Color Purple* (1982), and *By the Light of My Father’s Smile* (1998). She also stresses the need to nurture African American children by connecting them with their cultural values in her novels. *The Third Life of Grange Copeland, Meridian,* and *Temple of My Familiar* (1989) exemplify this. And she asserts the need to educate children regarding sexuality and reproduction which would free them from racial/sexual subjugation and make them independent and dignified beings.

*The Third Life of Grange Copeland* critiques the condition of Black motherhood at the time when the sharecropping system was prevalent. In this novel, she presents three mothers whose roles and functions differ from one another. Margaret is a failed biological mother, Mem is a failed wife but a successful biological mother and Josie is an unsuccessful biological and surrogate mother. She differentiates the mother roles and the mothering capacities of Margaret, Mem and Josie. Elliot Butler – Evans (1993) remarks that the roles of these women fulfil the textual and ideological functions of the novel.

*The Third Life of Grange Copeland* revolves around the protagonist Grange Copeland from the 1920s to the 1960s that almost covers the tales of three generation of his family. Alice Walker does not discuss the childhood days of Grange Copeland as he is introduced as an ineffective and inefficient husband and father. Grange Copeland, a victim of racism and a sexist victimizer has played a crucial role in highlighting the impacts of the sharecropping system on mothering. Grange’s inability to repay the debt that he received from his white master influences his wife Margaret’s mothering capacities which ultimately affects the wellbeing of his son Brownfield. Through the portrayal of Margaret
and her son Brownfield, Alice Walker asserts the need of parental love during the formative years. Margaret spends one half of her life in trying to get the love and affection of Grange Copeland and the other half in a gnawing sense of guilt about her immorality and her bastard son Star. Though she supports her husband economically, she fails to nurture her son Brownfield. Her struggle to support her family is revealed in the text thus:

His mother left him each morning with a hasty hug and a sugartit on which he sucked through wet weather and dry, across the dusty clearing or miry, until she returned. She worked all day pulling baits for ready money. Her legs were always clean when she left home always coated with mud and slime of baits when she came back. (TLGC 6)

Her hard work represents the condition of black women in the share cropping system. Margaret sinks into alcoholism due to the deplorable behaviour of Grange Copeland and she loses her interest in her Son Brownfield. She neglects him and fails to look after the well being of her son even at the physical level. He develops sores due to Margaret’s indifferent behaviour and lack of proper nutrition. Margaret’s and Grange’s perpetual quarrel in the family affects the childhood days of Brownfield. Even though she plays a minor role in the novel her presence influences the dominant narrative pattern. She is ignorant of her role in nurturing and protecting her son as a mother. Butler-Evans (1989) comments thus on the role of Margaret:

Margaret’s story is largely contained within the dominant narrative frame. Her suffering is represented as part of the larger spiritual annihilation that is characteristic of the share cropping system. The narrative strategy of having events filtered through the mind of Brownfield precludes a telling of Margaret’s story, yet her story remains a disrupting presence embedded with the dominant narrative. (110)
Her role becomes dominant only through its impact on Brownfield. Belonging to a society where mothers are viewed as Gods, Brownfield ironically views his mother as a dog. This is the result of irresponsive attitude of Margaret as a mother.

Margaret and Brownfield who live under the pressure of sharecropping system – unlike in the set-up of traditional extended African family where there is possibility of other-mothering and community mothering – suffer simultaneously due to the absence of othermothers and community mothers. Her role as a victim of sexual and economical exploitation directly reflects on the growth of her son. Unable to fight against the situation Margaret commits suicide along with her bastard son Star without claiming any responsibility for Brownfield. Through the narration of the impact of sharecropping system and the economic issues on motherhood, Alice Walker has portrayed Margaret as a failed mother who does not fulfil the expected mother tasks. Margaret’s inefficiency in mothering affects not only Brownfield’s childhood but also his later roles as husband and father. Usha Puri (1989) observes a similarity between Brownfield and Cholly Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye* who is known for his indifferent attitude towards his children and wife. As Pauline’s and Cholly Breedlove’s behaviour result in the improper life of Pecola, Margaret’s and Grange Copeland’s behaviour results in the failure of Brownfield. Brownfield’s failure in life challenges the life of his wife Mem.

Mem, unlike Margaret, is a well-educated teacher and she is killed by her husband Brownfield. Mem, who represents the next generation, is not an exception to the racist and economic exploitation of the white masters. Though she is a person with a high character and aesthetics sense, her fate changes after her marriage to the irresponsible Brownfield. Her status after her marriage is sympathetically described in the text:

> From a plump woman she became skinny. To Brownfield she didn’t look like a woman at all. Even her wonderful breasts dried up and shrank; her
hair fell out and only good thing he could say for her was that she kept herself clean. He berated her cleanliness, but, because it was a small thing, and because at times she did seem to have so little, he did not hit her for it.

(TLGC 77)

Even though she falls a victim, she protects her children using what she has gained of her education. She never allows her husband Brownfield to disturb the children especially her daughter. Unlike her mother-in-law Margaret who lacks the necessary mental strength to resist any kind of oppression, Mem possesses a greater amount of mental stamina to cope with the oppressive situation but finally succumbs to her husband’s brutal strength.

Her determination in protecting and nurturing children is seen through Ruth, the daughter of Mem. Both Margaret and Mem share the same environment to enforce their maternal thinking and perform their mothering tasks. It is interesting to note that Margaret fails whereas Mem succeeds. This showcases the impacts of the nature of mother in executing the work. Margaret, illiterate and sexually exploited, fails as she does not have the strong will to perform the black mother’s role. Contrarily, Mem, a well-educated, morally independent and strong willed woman who resists economic and sexual exploitation succeeds as a good mother as she understands the role of mothers in children’s lives. Mem, by understanding her prescribed role, nurtures her daughter Ruth as “a saint” and makes heroic efforts to meet her human needs. Although Mem gives up her life opposing Brownfield’s acceptance of his ‘place’ in southern society, she succeeds in moving the family to a town where Ruth has the benefit of enjoying a real house and formal schooling. More importantly, Mem maintains her human dignity amidst a dehumanizing environment and becomes a powerful role model to Ruth. Like the women whom Alice Walker describes in “In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens” she proves to be a role model as an “exquisite butterfly trapped in an evil honey” (232). By “inheriting” her
mother’s "vibrant creative spirit", Ruth transcends the limitations which the white society seeks to impose on black women (Butler-Evans 1989: 198). Mem’s nurturance of Ruth makes the later imbibe all the good qualities in the South and could imagine a broader world beyond the South.

Mem’s role in this novel is connected to Jessie and it opens up another category of mother that is surrogate mothering. Mem seeks refuge to Josie, her aunt, after the death of her mother. Unlike Mem’s mother who was a preacher, Josie possesses a number of, what has been called immoral habits. Josie’s role in this novel vividly portrays the nature of black women who take unusual decisions to escape from poverty. She involves in prostitution as her parents disown her for her premarital pregnancy. Elliot Butler Evans views Josie as “a composite of contradiction” (114). Even though she chooses prostitution as profession, there are a number of evidences in the text to prove that Josie is forced into prostitution.

Josie is an example of the condition of black teenage mothers. Through her, Alice Walker states the reasons boldly for the emergences black women’s “controlling images” – the notions that are attached to black women and are used to justify their oppression. Josie’s “ubiquitous black prostitute” (Collins 1991: 7) image serves as a controlling image in this novel. When her parents know about her pregnancy, they subject Josie to brutal and subhuman treatment. Her mother never comes forward to protect her. Instead, she “stood outside the ringed pack of men, how many of them knowledgeable of her daughter’s swollen body she did not know” (56). As Josie is chased away from home she is forced into prostitution just to survive. Moreover, as she could not face the situation she fails to bring up her daughter Lorene in a proper way. She is the opposite of Toni Morrison’s Helene Wright’s mother Rochelle in Sula. Josie considers Mem as her adopted daughter.
but she fails in her roles as biological mother and surrogate mother to Lorene and Mem respectively.

Thus, in this novel, Alice Walker intertwines her idea of mother and mothering with the problems of intra-racial sexual exploitation. She concludes that the heterosexual nuclear family, racism, and dominance of black patriarchy are the reasons for the failure of black motherhood. Moreover, she vividly differentiates the ways in which motherhood emerges in different generations.

Alice Walker believes that African American motherhood has a lineage from its African past. Moreover, she believes that motherhood is an experience and one must not become a mother either due to the force of circumstance or out of ignorance as seen in the novel *Meridian*. This novel, apart from its theme on Civil Rights Movement, deals with the concept of motherhood. Barbara Christian (1984) states that “as if they were the common threads of a fabric, Alice Walker uses the images of black children and black mothers, of nature and music, and of the relationship between the body and the spirit in every chapter” (211). The novel is rich in its motherhood theme that is present in almost every chapter in some form.

The novel also highlights the challenges that await the biological mother. Meridian’s understanding of the difficulties of motherhood makes her give up her own child. She rejects her motherhood in order to attain selfhood. Ranveer (1995) comments thus on Meridian as mother:

*Meridian*, Walker’s second novel, is about the female protagonist of the same name who gradually awakens from her subordinate status as a black female, daughter, wife and mother to her own self and tries to become the maternal provider of the larger black community. In short, she ties her tubes,
rejects the status of a biological mother but tries to become community's mother. (171)

Meridian gets married at a young age without knowing what married life is like or what prospects it would hold for her. When she is seventeen she is a "deserted wife, a mother, a daughter-in-law" (M 76). In course of time, she is attracted towards the Civil Rights Movement and receives scholarship for higher education. In order to pursue higher education she wants to leave her child with her mother. Her mother refuses to take care of Meridian's son which has an everlasting impact on the psyche of Meridian. Throughout the novel she remembers her mother's attitude symbolically at various places. Her mother's rejection of responsibility to take care of the baby pitches her into a conflict with her mother. Their relationship highlights the changes that took place in black motherhood within America. Unlike the slave mothers who were ready to protect and nurture the non-biological children, Mrs. Hill refuses to protect her own grandson and to serve as othermother to him. Her mother Mrs. Hill is not a person who is capable of mothering because she "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). Her impatience to meet the needs of her dependents shows her unmothering attitude. Motherhood is a distraction for Mrs. Hill as it demands time, care and nurturing ability from a mother. Motherhood becomes a burden for her as it challenges her privacy. For Mrs. Hill, motherhood means a distracting status.

Even after a conflict, Mrs. Hill is not ready to pay attention to Meridian's desire. Her mother's rejection to preserve Meridian's dream results in the loss of the daughter's failure to mother her son. Her mother also suffers from the same kind of ignorance in avoiding children in her life. For that Mrs. Hill "could never forgive her community, her family, his family, the whole world, for not warning her against children.... 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). Meridian never once felt that she has been protected by her mother even
as Mrs. Hill thought motherhood as a debilitating pressure on her privacy. Commenting on
mother and daughter relationship in Meridian, Barbara Christian (1984) says:

*[although Meridian’s mother has not been given information about the
restrictions of motherhood, both she and her daughter are told about its
glory. Thus, Meridian’s conflict is further exacerbated by her knowledge of
her maternal children; mothers who did anything and everything to keep
their children.... Meridian is tormented by the memory of those slave
mothers who had to starve themselves to death to feed their children. (102)*

Erickson (1989) states that Meridian harbours troubled feelings about her mother
because of the unloving quality of her mother which is similar to death. The conflict
between mother and daughter adds to the guilty conscience of Meridian. Winchell states
the reason for Meridian becoming a mother early in her life thus: “...her mother fails to
teach her the most basic biological facts...in the way of sex education” (61). Observing the
relationship between Meridian and her mother, Winchell (1992) states that: “Meridian’s
relationship with her mother is certainly not the nurturing relationship” (59). Apart from
failing to perform her motherwork, she deliberately fails to find out the artistic talent in
Meridian. Melissa Walker (1990), a prominent critic of Alice Walker, points out that the
chapter entitled "Gold" is the best example for parental rejection of a child's intellect. As a
seven-year-old child, Meridian buries a large bar of gold. When she asks her parents to
come and look at the gold they refuse to do so. Meridian buries the gold and forgets about
it. Gold stands for Meridian's talents and intelligence which her parents do not recognize.
Meridian has got a powerful motherline that helps in survival. Meridian knows four generations of grandmothers who have sacrificed their lives for the well-being of their children. Ironically it is her mother who connected her to this motherline. Meridian’s great-great-grandmother was a slave and two of her children were sold when they were toddlers. She followed the buyer for days together to steal them back. As a punishment, her master whips her till her "bones began to show through the muscles on her back" (M 122). Her master allows her to keep the children with her but on the condition that she should provide them nothing to eat. They survive till their teens by eating berries and fish. After her death due to slow starvation even the children were sold on the day of their mother's burial. Meridian’s great-grandmother’s talent for painting decorations was exploited by her master. At the same time she was allowed to keep some money for herself. With the money she earned, she bought freedom for herself, her children and her husband. Meridian’s grandmother who follows this motherline is also known for her sacrifice to save the life of Mrs. Hill. The latter’s ambition to become a school teacher is fulfilled only by Meridian’s grandmother. Even though her relationship with Meridian is complex, Mrs. Hill has supported her sisters and brothers economically.

Meridian is psychologically attached to her father. She identifies more with her father than with her mother. Meridian views her father as a person with a gentle temperament. Meridian’s father, Mr. Hill, is a person who values the hard work of the Indians, the original inhabitants of the land. Her father is a wanderer, a mourner, and a person who empathizes with others’ terrible conditions. Feather Mae is the paternal grandmother of Mr. Hill. Her father connects Meridian to her paternal ancestry through his storytelling. Feather Mae is a strong-willed woman who creates an empathetic sense in the minds of the young generation.
Feather Mae never believes in any religion but she worships the sun. “Feather Mae renounced all religion that was not based on the experience of physical ecstasy – thereby shocking her Baptist church and its unsympathetic congregation – and near the end of her life she loved walking nude about her yard and worshipped only the sun” (M 57). In the chapter “Sacred Serpent” Meridian identifies oneness with Feather Mae who has become a role model for Meridian.

In spite of the fact that Meridian has got a good motherline to follow, she could not fulfil her motherwork as she views it as a hindrance to her freedom. Throughout her life Meridian is caught between her personal desire to become a mother and her fear of becoming a mother. Her adoption of non-violent resistance for the sake of the black children reveals her maternal capability. She transcends the boundaries of biological mother and reaches the level of a community mother. Meridian rejects motherhood but not its symbolic images and implications. Even though Meridian decides to break away from all the stereotypical bonds including motherhood, she suffers from guilty consciousness. When she believes that motherhood is a hindrance to her professional growth, she abandons her son and thus commits a sin against Black motherhood. When she comes to know about her maternal history, she feels herself unworthy of the tradition as she could not meet the requirements of a good mother. She is aware that she could not play the role of mother appropriately by suppressing her own self. In spite of the ruptures she experienced with her mother as a black woman she has not abandoned her mother completely. Winchell states the reason thus: “Believing that it is death not to love one’s mother, Meridian continues to see her mother as Black mother personified, in spite of Mrs. Hill’s failures as a mother” (60). Alice Walker highlights the difference between Mrs. Hill and Meridian as mothers. Mrs. Hill has raised her six children without love and attachment whereas Meridian loves Eddie Junior that in turn serves to be the one crucial factor that
makes her emerge as a community mother later: “One day she really looked at her child and loved him with as much love as she loved the moon or a tree, which was a considerable amount of impersonal love” (M 90). Mrs. Hill could not escape from mothering her children whereas Meridian could afford to abandon mothering. The reason is that Meridian lived in the age of choice but not her mother.

Alice Walker clearly distinguishes the condition of black motherhood in Africa, slave motherhood in America and black motherhood in America. In an extended family set-up in Africa where mothers were given the highest place in the society, women had no necessity to deny motherhood. In America, the slaves were denied to have their children with or around them. At the same time, the slave mothers were valued by their white masters for their nurturing and breeding capacity. That is they were considered a source of more materials (re)production. So, during this period, mothers were valued for their reproductive capacities and treated as a commodity to produce more slaves. Unlike her African culture and the Black American experience during slavery, Meridian looks at sexuality as a source of pleasure rather than as a means to create a next generation. Nevertheless, she is not aware of women’s reproductive system and contraceptive methods. During 1960s and 70s, there was a deliberate need among African American women to know about contraceptive methods to break the stereotypical and “controlling image” (Collins 1991: 7) of the black mother.

Miss. Winter’s role in Meridian’s life is remarkable. The healing of Meridian takes place when she dreams of her mother who refuses to take care of her. Miss. Winter’s attitude towards her culture and her people makes her more Afro-centric. The attitude enables her to teach Jazz and Blues to the students of Saxon college. By situating Ms. Winter in an Afro-centric context Alice Walker assigns her the task of healing and thus projects her as a community mother. The words of Miss. Winter soothe her mind and she
reconciles herself with her mother. This leads her to forgive Truman towards the end of the novel. Miss Winter serves as the healer of Meridian. Winchell (1992) views the role played by Miss. Winter in Meridian’s decision to opt for Civil Rights Movement and Meridian’s emergence into community motherhood towards the end of the novel thus: “...Meridian is granted expiation for her sins against her biological mother by her symbolic mother, Miss. Winter, [sic] Meridian chooses not to become pure spirit forever, but chooses rather a role among living” (63).

When she is at Saxon College she encounters the spirit of Louvenie, who stands as a symbolic of Meridian’s maternal ancestors. Meridian is not related to Louvenie biologically but she accepts her as her ancestor by accepting the community history. Louvinie was brought from West Africa to America as a slave. She was placed in a Saxon plantation in America. She is placed in charge of the kitchen garden as she was considered too ugly to work in the house with white children. But all the children adore her for her ability to tell stories about Africa and America. As part of her storytelling, she narrates the story of a black man who buried white children unto their neck and took their heads off as cabbages. On listening to this horror story, a seven-year old son of Saxon dies due to heart attack and as a punishment her tongue is cut out. She buries her tongue under a magnolia tree in the Saxon plantation. Even before her death, the slaves believed that the tree possessed a magical power and it could sing and the birds that lived in the tree also possessed “the power to obscure vision”(M 44). The same tree remains yet on the campus of Saxon College and when the administration decides to cut the tree, she rebelled against them along with the students of the college against the cutting down of the tree.

Alice Walker combines her radical ideology with the conventional ideology of mothering when she delineates mothers and motherhood. Besides discussing the responsibility of biological mothers and significance of the motherline, she expresses her
discontent over the issue of confining motherhood to the biological level. She pushes motherhood to go beyond the biological level. Meridian believes that along with life, the children receive the "heritage of sacrifice and suffering" (M 215) from their ancestors.

She also narrates the episode of Wild Child which is similar to Toni Morrison’s presentation of Wild in *Jazz*. Wild Child is a thirteen-year-old young girl, who is impregnated by an unknown person. There is no one to help during her life time. Meridian calls up schools for special children and then homes for unwed mothers-only to find there were none who would accept Wile Chile, the wild child. Without anyone’s assistance, especially her mother’s, she dies violently. Alice Walker describes the pain of Wild Child’s death as: “The Wild Child escaped. Running heavily across a street, her stomach the largest part of her, she was hit by a speeder and killed” (M 37). Through this episode Walker concentrates on the condition of unwed and psychologically ill girl children and the sexual exploitation that awaits them with rapacious claws in the society.

In describing Meridian’s psychological development, Alice Walker focuses on events in the life of any young girl. In *Meridian* particularly Alice Walker scorns the cultural milieu that brands the discovery of sex as sordid. Meridian undergoes a personal transformation towards the end of the novel and is able to absolve her feelings of guilt about her inability to be a mother as she is capable of mothering the community children.

Meridian was not instructed by anyone about sexuality and the impact of the act of sex on a women's life. Margaret and Mem accepted society’s definition of a woman. Contrary to this Meridian begins her life confining herself to the societal norms of womanhood and ends up as a Civil Rights Movement participant and community mother. Barbara Christian (1984) rightly puts that the Civil Rights Movement helps her to “… redefine herself in her own terms as a woman and as a mother. In her first novel Alice Walker emphasized the oppression that has destroyed many black women; in her second
novel, she shows the relationship between the oppression and the creative sparks that have
black woman to define themselves” (236).

Indeed, Meridian is haunted by the sense of guilt over her failure to win her
mother’s love and her failure to be a mother, to mother and to nurture. By her own failure
as a mother she is unable to forgive anybody and this cripples her. Indeed, towards the end
of the novel, Meridian’s personal identity becomes collective identity. Even though
Meridian fails to perform the maternal practices, she does not abandon motherhood. The
idea behind the concept of mother is enlarged in the case of Meridian for it comes to mean
not only those who give birth to babies but also those who are willing to struggle to make
life possible and to enjoy life’s fullness against unnatural restrictions imposed by the race
and tradition. Thus, in Meridian, Alice Walker gives the story of a woman who is caught
between her own ideologies of mothering and the societal norms of mothering and who
ultimately wins life by following her own ideologies.

In The Color Purple (1989) Alice Walker shows how a mother could fail to perform
the tasks of the mother in rearing her own children whereas she fulfils the maternal tasks in
mothering other’s children. In this epistolary novel, Celie, Nettie, Shug Avery, Sofia and
Mary Agnes play vital mother roles. To Hernton (1987) the presence of Shug, Celie and
Mary Agnes signifies the power of “radiant” female energy which is more than
“matriarchy” and which becomes spiritual. (24-25)

It is the story of a fourteen-year-old girl who is raped by her stepfather and is
forced into pregnancy. This story highlights the life of this girl who becomes a biological
mother, traverses the stage of othermother and completes her life as community mother.
Celia’s story, according to Winchell, is based on Walker’s great-great-grand mother who
was also raped and impregnated at the age of eleven by her master. It is interesting to note
that this act of recreating her ancestors alive in this novel is politically motivated. Du
Plessis has suggested that in fulfilling or completing her biological mother’s work, the twentieth century woman writer is inclined to dramatize her mother’s situation, recreating her mother as a character and raising her destiny by reinscribing it in fiction. Alice Walker, who gives rebirth to her step-grandmother through Celie in The Color Purple, revives her relationship with the woman whom she has elsewhere called her fore-mother.

Comparing Toni Morrison’s The Bluest Eye with The Color Purple, Usha Puri (1989) points out that their approach to the forbidden theme – the raping of daughter by the stepfather as radical:

Just as eleven year old Pecola, who is sexually abused by her father, is cut off from the community and becomes a scapegoat for their conscience after she descends into madness, in The Color Purple, fourteen year old Celie is violated and abused by her step-father and is so horrified and ashamed of her experiences that she can only write to God. But while Pecola is totally “damaged”, Celie comes to value herself and love herself. While in Morrison’s The Bluest Eye the spring bends into a complete circle to “break” a young black girl completely, in Walker’s The Color Purple, it helps an abused, broken girl to transform her life and to retain some of the color, exuberance and supple quality of the spring. Both novels focus on the sexual oppression black women experience in their relationships with black men and both writers acknowledge the abused black women. (76)

This novel showcases the presence of patriarchy in Black families. Calvin C. Hernton (1987) comments on the absence of strong mothers thus:
The belief that men should be all-powerful and that women should be weak is at the foundation of all patriarchal ideology, which is clearly depicted in *The Color Purple*. Patriarchy is “good” because men are sacred, and matriarchy is “bad” because women are profane. This self-fulfilling dictum of the patriarchy is illustrated in the conspicuous absence of strong mother or grandmother figures, who are familiar personages in historical black communities. (12)

Molly Hite (1990) remarks that *The Color Purple* “overtly repudiate[s]” (447) traditional mothering. Moreover, the roles of mothers, daughters, sisters and narrator have become “slippery and permeable” (447). It also conveys the failure of traditional definition of mothering and it projects mothering as a “relative activity” (448). In this novel mothers are “no guarantors of succession or legitimacy, and mothering is a slippery and even reversible relationship” (448-449). Throughout this novel mothering is shown as a reciprocal activity.

Celie, who becomes mother at tender age, acts mother to a host of people. This maternal language is articulated through Celie’s willingness to mother her sister Nettie and half-sisters and half-brothers. Moreover, she nurses her mother with maternal affection which is a reversal of traditional mothering. At this juncture Celie emerges as an “adopted mother”.

Celie, apart from mothering her own mother, she mothers her sister Nettie. And, to add complexity to the role of mothering Nettie in turn, performs motherly tasks to Celie’s children. Nettie acts as surrogate mother to Celie’s children Olivia and Adam. Nettie, unlike Celie, never becomes a biological mother but emerges as a successful surrogate mother to her sister’s children.
There is reversal of mother roles in the case of Celie and Shug Avery, the blues Singer. Through their relationship, which may be called the peer group mothering, a new category of mothering emerges. Shug Avery is viewed by critics as Alice Walker’s “mouth piece … [and] a womanist catalyst” (Hernton 19). Celie’s husband Albert brings his girl friend Shug Avery to his house where Celie meets her for the first time. Celie admires Shug’s physical beauty and bold attitude. Alice Walker through Celie – Shug Avery’s relationship looks out for a balance in portraying lesbian and maternal practices simultaneously. Hooks (1990) points out that Walker is “revisioning mothering so that it becomes a task any willing female can perform, irrespective of whether or not she has given birth”. (468)

Celie, who is sexually abused by her step-father, ill-treated by her husband in a loveless marriage, unloved by step children, and who is also a sufferer of the loss of her own mother, sister and her own children, copes with love only as a result of Shug’s healing ability. When Shug falls sick in Celie’s place she nurses Shug with maternal affection. While nursing Shug, Celie recollects her mother-work to her daughter Olivia and her own mother. Shug too understands the maternal care that resembles her mother’s and grandmother’s maternal nurturance. This is well portrayed in the novel thus:

I [Celie] work on her like she [Shug Avery] a doll or like she Olivia – or like she mama. I comb and pat, comb and pat. First she say, hurry up and git finish. Then she melt down a little and lean back against my knees. That feel right, she say. That feel like mama used to do. Or maybe not mama. Maybe grandma. (CP 51)

On the other hand, Shug Avery’s protective nature as a mother towards Celie is shown through the incident of how she changes Albert from beating and ill treating Celie. Shug says firmly thus: “I won’t leave, she say, until I know Albert won’t even think about
beating you." (CP72). Celie too affirms the reason for the change of attitude in Albert thus: “He ain’t beat me much since you made him quit, I say. Just a slap now and then when he ain’t got nothing else to do” (101). Hernton comments on the role of Shug Avery in the life of Celie thus: “She has also physically nurtured and loved Celie, she has brought out some of the woman so deeply repressed and undiscovered in Celie”. (20)

Moreover, next to God, Celie confesses only to Shug. Here her bonding with Shug Avery serves as a healing factor. Shug Avery symbolizes hope in the life of Celie as Shug’s arrival brings back everything that she has lost from the early days of her life especially the information of her children’s survival and the hope of reuniting with them. Through their life Alice Walker portrays the lesbian and maternal attitude of women. Through Shug she becomes aware of herself, her body and her identity. Thomas F. Marvin (1994) views Shug:

…as a “nurse” and a “mother-imago” or a “mother surrogate” for Celie and others suggest that Shug functions as a role-model.....Shug Avery can be considered child[ren] or follower[s], of Legba, a West African spirit closely associated with musicians, who opens the door to the spiritual world and provides opportunities for the social and psychological growth of the individual.... Like a West African orisha, Shug is as capricious as she is powerful, and she often chastises her devotees. (411-422)

Shug heals Celie in all respects including the pain of loss of children. Celie is unable to appreciate the act of maternity as a joyous deed. For her even the word “pregnancy” is a twinge. She states: “By the time I got back home I was feeling so bad I couldn’t do nothing but sleep. I tried to work on some new pants I’m trying to make for pregnant women, but just the thought of anybody getting pregnant make me want to cry”(230).
Celie’s soreness towards maternal thinking is healed by Shug Avery. Like the Legba (Refer Appendix III) spirit she heals the crippled feelings of Celie towards maternity and assists Celie to emerge as a community mother towards the end of the novel.

Shug’s role is crucial as she “comes across as being a woman’s woman. She is like the character Mattie in Naylor’s Brewster Place, or like at least one of the women about whom Toni Morrison writes in most of her books” (Hernton 21). According to Hernton, Shug is a catalyst who transforms Celie, Sofia, Mary Agnes and Albert “from fragmentation to union based on equality and love between women and women, as well as between women and men”. (Hernton 23)

Sofia is one among the powerful mothers of Alice Walker as the characterization of Sofia highlights Alice Walker’s desire of being a Social Activist. Sofia symbolizes one of the controlling images of Black women as mammy and she is often being interrupted by the white world. On the other hand, she remains a challenge to Black patriarchy by not obeying Albert and Harpo.

The Color Purple as a maternal narrative highlights the importance of women mothering one another irrespective of their age and relationship. As a radical thinker, Alice Walker wants black motherhood to be a political space where women assist one another to attain self realization and self-identity.

The maternal theory presented in The Color Purple is expanded in her next novel The Temple of My Familiar. Based on the theme of motherhood The Temple of My Familiar can be considered a sequel. This polemical writing of Alice Walker is a tale of Black motherhood. A motherhood reading of The Temple of My Familiar divides the novel into two sections. One part is a chronological detail of mother worship and the cult of motherhood in various nations. Another part of the novel deals with the children’s views on
their mothers. Most of the characters who appeared in *The Color Purple* revisit this novel and share their views on their mothers. Thus, the views on Celie, Shug, and Nettie as mothers get expanded through this novel. *The Color Purple* not only contains the opinions of children about their mothers but also it highlights the black ideology that in mothers’ creation the daughters are inseparable from mothers. Alice Walker completes the theme of motherhood that is left unfinished in *The Color Purple*. In *The Color Purple* she presents motherhood and mothering in a slippery manner whereas in *The Temple of My Familiar* she concretises the theme of motherhood by giving the children’s views on mothers and mothering and by giving the mystical aspects of Mother Goddess worship.

A close reading of *The Temple of My Familiar*, a novel on matrilinear diaspora, proves Alice Walker’s commitment in recreating matrilineal community across time and space. All the characters in this novel Lessie, Fanny, Anne, Shug Avery and Celie in *The Temple of My Familiar* connect themselves either to their mothers or to mothering or to mother worship. In this novel, Walker recreates a primordial world of matriarchs. Zede and Lessie introduce the cult of mother goddess worship. Alice Walker uses Fanny and Anne Nzingha to project the positive mother – daughter relationship. From her first novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* to her fourth novel *The Temple of My Familiar* there is fruition in the theme of motherhood. This evolution gets concluded in *The Temple of My Familiar*. In *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* Alice Walker presents the condition of black mothers and mothering that operate under the risks of racism and sexism. In *Meridian*, she challenges the idealisation of black motherhood through a woman who oscillates between the images of ‘good mother’ – that lead to the romanticization of black motherhood – and self identity. In *The Color Purple* she narrates the story of two women who find their identity and maternal power by transcending beyond lesbianism. In *The Temple of My Familiar* the theme of motherhood attains maturity through her exposé of
mother-daughter relationship during different times in different continents and by rendering the mystical image of mother goddess worship.

Alice Walker states the reason for writing this novel thus: “from me wanting to know my mama, you know. I wanted to know the very first woman our common mother from all those years ago, and I just...thought and dreamed my way back to her”. (qtd. in Winchell 130-131)

Olivia, the daughter of Celie, adores her mother for all her artistic talent and mourns the fact that she has not been brought up by Celie. At the same time she respects her “adopted mother” Nettie, for all the mother work she performed for Olivia and her brother Adam. Olivia, as a mother, fails to impress her daughter Fanny. Olivia’s academic interests are inherited from her ‘adoptive mother’ Corrine. Olivia imitates Corrine and Nettie rather than Celie as Celie was not with Olivia during her formative years. Apart from describing the inheritance of the aesthetic from the motherline Walker gives academic superiority and intellectual contribution of mothers through Corrine’s motherline thus:

the creation of alphabet had been Corrine’s idea. She was Cherokee on her mother’s side, and her mother’s mother had been involved in the creation of the Cherokee alphabets and had been an editor of the Cherokee alphabets and had been an editor of the first Cherokee newspaper ever printed in the Cherokee language. (TMF 149)

Olivia’s interest in missionary life and books makes her not divert her attention towards Fanny. Fanny considers mother – daughter relationship to be mutual. Fanny experiences a different love from her mother. She says about her mother:

My mother did not particularly interest me....I used to sit on the floor at her feet, having crawled about the house until I was tired, and look up at her, hoping she would put aside her book for a moment and play with me....I
soon learned to pay little attention to my mother as she paid to me and my life was a round of fascinating events and spontaneous smiles. (TMF 153)

Contrary to Cholly and Pecola in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* and Brownfield in *The Third life of Grange Copeland* who experienced inattentiveness of their mothers, Fanny enjoys “fascinating events and spontaneous smiles” (ibid). Nevertheless she remembers her childhood days as a period of “long bliss”. Fanny remembers her happy childhood with her grandmother Celie and Shug. Fanny is a well protected child in the presence of Celie and Shug. Fanny represents the condition of children in African extended family. She criticises her mother as “a boring woman, who rarely laughed and always had her nose in a book” (ibid). She differentiates her mother from her grand mothers Celie and Shug often. She always appreciates Celie’s readiness to attend to her needs by showering enough love through unspoken maternal language such as kissing and hugging with warmth. She views Celie and Shug as “two queens” (156) who ruled her home.

In African extended families training the children is easier as they have many role models to choose from. In this novel Fanny learns to do all jobs that her grand mothers do. She says:

I tried to cook. I tried to cut wood as I saw Big Mama’s best friend Miss. Sofia, do. I tried to build a house out of stove wood and make blinds for it out of pieces of straw. I imagined myself a car, like Mama Shug’s and drove it by the hour. I brought money home and also took everybody out….Sometimes I imagined doing the things my mother and grandfather did. I ‘read’. (TMF 153-154)

This extended family set-up enables her to look at the best part in each one. Even though she identifies her mother a boring and inattentive mother she admires her mother’s talents in teaching:
What she has instead in an astonishing clarity about things, expressed in a straightforward, unassuming manners. Listening to her here makes me realize why the students in her classes at the nursing school always perform well academically, and also have some of her soul-rooted quietness....Her audiences here are wonderful. African, Asian, Caribbean, and white students from all over the world. (TMF 156)

Fanny’s independent nature is the result of multiple mothering.

Anne Nzingha, the half sister of Fanny, plays a vital role in the evolution of the motherhood theme in *The Temple of My Familiar*. Nzingha’s narration about her mother is a crucial tale in the conceptualisation of Alice Walker’s maternal theory. Nzingha’s mother is a guerrilla of Mbeles- African underground revolutionary group that fight against imperialism. Her mother is known as Harriet among Mbeles. Among the novels chosen for analysis Harriet is the only one character in Alice Walker who appears as mutineer and fulfils the prescribed maternal duties successfully. Nzingha says about her mother thus:

She was a brilliant fighter...but not a scholar or thinker or even, really, a social person. She was very quiet, solitary, spoke more eloquently with her actions than with her words, which were very few and uttered as if she was weary....My mother took care of me, and waited. Right there in the little hut he left her in, and the hut she’d erected herself. (TMF 255-256)

Harriet’s political interest was never a hindrance to her maternal work and maternal thinking. She has given the best part of her attention to her daughter Nzingha. Despite her painful insurrectionist life, she has looked after the protection of Nzingha. Moreover, Harriet has nurtured Nzingha with the best cultural values that have made Nzingha to preserve her cultural roots throughout her life.
Harriet’s decision to leave Nzingha in the residential school does not please Nzingha. Nzingha meets her mother only few times after she goes to the residential school. However, every time she meets her mother, Nzingha finds a difference in Harriet’s appearance and attitude. She puts it as follows:

She was so unlike the mother I has left! It was really amazing. Her eyes were red, her hair mattly and wild. There was a coarseness in her mannerisms and slackness in her expression I’d never seen and never thought my gentle mother could have. Nor did I understand yet about changes in the personality wrought by grief....She had that puffy, slatternly, dissipated look people get when they have no way of seeing themselves. I don’t think she even owned a mirror. I didn’t know this woman. (TMF 258-259)

There is vivid alienation in the relationship between the daughter and the mother. Her role in the revolutionary world does not allow her to be with her throughout her life. Nevertheless, she can not be considered a failed biological mother as Meridian. Her nurturance-ability is seen in the successful life of Anne. She had been a good role model to Anne as far as her public life is concerned. She remembers her mother Harriet thus:

My Mother had no education but was extremely ‘psychic’ she continued, ‘even politically psychic, which is rare....It was a government she had helped—through immense risk and personal sacrifice—put into power, but that, once in power, conveniently forgot she existed....My mother was the kind of woman who could fight in the mountains on the caves or gorges for months, even years, alongside the men and how blow-up power station, and at the same time accept, with obvious gratitude, the shelter of her five-year-old’s arms in the middle of the night. (TMF 256-257)
She has never failed in her mother work as she has nurtured Anne during her formative years. Her readiness to leave Anne in the boarding school run by white nuns showcases her firm belief in maternal role and desire to give a good life to Anne. Unlike Jadine in Tar Baby, white culture does not corrupt Anne. Anne’s deep-rooted admiration for her culture is the result of her mother’s patriotic nature and untamed revolutionary life. Anne never likes white culture for its “animated...artificial events”. (TMF 265)

Anne Nzingha is sensitively alert to the western influence on native culture and the White world’s treatment of “‘Black’ Africa – ‘Negro’ Africa” (TMF 271). She views white civilisation as founded on the destruction of the black woman as Goddess in her own world. She accepts her nation ‘Africa’ “no matter how ‘backward’ or ‘impoverished’”. (TMF 271)

Her argument with a professor in Sorbonne University had made her discontinue her education. Her entire argument centres on the cult of mother Goddess worship. She argues with her Professor who presents “the ugliness of the face of the African Goddess, with her dreadlocked hair-snakes” (TMF 269). To Anne, the mother goddess Isis of Africa: is an angel. She is the mother of Christian angels. She is Isis, the mother Horus, sister and lover of Orisis, Goddess of Egypt. The Goddess, who, long before she became Isis, was known all over Africa as simply the Great Mother, Creator of All, Protector of All, the Keeper of Earth. The Goddess….That She – the spirit of Mothering, of Creating, of Blessing and Protecting All. (TMF 268-269)

Anne comments the birth of Athena, the Western metamorphosis of Isis thus:

…Athena had sprung ‘full blown’ from the mind of Zeus because she was an idea, given by Greek men to their God; and that ‘idea’ was the destruction of the African Goddess Isis into the Greek Goddess Athena. But
since no one at the Sorbonne had been taught anything about Isis, it was impossible for them to connect her with Athena. I must have appeared to be simply another raving African. (TMF 271)

Anne is the mouth piece of Alice Walker to critique the condition of the Mother Goddess cult in the twentieth century. Anne Nzingha’s role in this novel is noteworthy as her memories about her revolutionary mother lifts up Alice Walker’s maternal theory to a higher level. Moreover, Anne Nzingha represents the attitude of contemporary women towards Mother Goddess worship and their cultural rootedness. In this novel, even though she presents a vast history of matriarchy she hardly ever fails to concentrates on aspects of maternal thinking and mother work.

Apart from the character of Anne, Alice Walker makes use of Lessie and Zede rewrite the myth of Western motherhood theories. Zede and Lessie are Walker’s invention to revitalize and accentuate the cult of black motherhood. If Lessie represents the socio-political condition of mothers, mothering and mother goddess worship during different centuries, Zede represents the socio-cultural condition of Mother Goddess worship and the status of mothers and mothering in different continents. Zede’s memories about her mothers (the community of women) highlight the nurturance accept of maternity. She informs the readers how the mothers used to teach about love making and babies when the daughters used to come of age which is absent in Meridian. Besides, the mothers were committed to teach the daughter the history of their civilisation. Training is another strategy used by Alice Walker’s mothers who belong to different centuries and different continents. These acts were repeated in a particular pattern for the survival of the motherline. Zede also reminds the others of the days when menstruation was considered the period of celebration in a women centred world. Zede says:
Anyway, we would all gather by Ixtaphtaphaehex, the Goddess, for that’s what her name meant, and our mothers would prepare food, and the young girls went up and down the sides of falls collecting bits of wood for a fire. After eating and bathing we drew up in a circle near the fire, and if someone was nursing a tattoo, her mother would work on it, rubbing in the dye, while someone else’s mother told stories of long ago. (TMF 46)

Through this storytelling, Zede understands and learns about the priests who used to pray for the people. They used to wear costumes made by women from feathers. Zede’s mother used to prepare such traditional costumes. Zede too learns the art of preparing feather costumes with devotion.

Lessie thinks that in all the lives in the recent past up to a few thousand years she was always a black woman. In one of her births she was a victim of slaver trade. According to Lessie, slave trade was initiated to destroy the religion of mother worship. In order to invade the status of woman, women’s temples were destroyed and women and children were dragged out forcefully to marry into male dominated societies. Or they would be sold in slave trade. According to Alice Walker, the Mother Goddess worship is one of the root causes for slave trade.

Through the life of Lessie, Alice Walker comments on the sexist attitudes of black mothers in Africa. As Lessie’s father passed away, as per the custom of her African society, Lessie along with her two sisters, a brother and her mother came under the responsibility of her uncle. But her uncle sold all of them as slaves. Her helpless mother prostrates before him for mercy in order to save the children. Alice Walker illustrates the plight of every single black mother and the plight of mother–children relationship during slavery. As Toni Morrison’s Beloved highlights the horrors of slavery in America, Alice
Walker’s *The Temple of My Familiar* describes the horrors of the Middle passage. Alice Walker brings out the pathetic state of mother and children thus:

Babies were not permitted on the slave ship, nor mothers too far advanced in pregnancy. Some of the babies were simply smashed against the ground by the captors of their mothers, some were left on the trail to die, some were sold or, less usually, adopted by a tribe that did not believe in or participate in the slave trade – that is, they refused to sell or buy anyone – and to whom small children, so recently inseparable from the source of all life, were especially sacred. (*TMF* 67)

Once they reached the shores of America, the death of mother, separation of her sisters and brother shattered the soul of Lessie.

In another incarnation Lessie lived as a Native American in a temple with her mother who was considered queen for her wisdom and healing capacities. All women in their nations were trained by their mothers and they were particular about the flourishing of their maternal clan. Thus Alice Walker stresses the nature of matrilinear primitive societies.

In another incarnation, Lessie as a Moor was burnt alive for witchcraft. Alice Walker interprets witch crafting as people’s acquisition of Mother worship. She also comments on how Goddess worship took different forms from era to era. Suwelo, the husband of Fanny states that Goddess worship took different shape as “Black Madonna” thus:

It was they (or, rather, we) who thought the Christian religion that flourished in Spain would let the Goddess of Africa ‘pass’ into the modern world as ‘the Black Madonna’. After all, this was how the gods and goddesses moved from era to era before, though Islam, our official religion
for quite a long time by now, would have nothing to do with this
notion; instead, whole families in Africa who worshiped the Goddess were
routinely killed, sold into slavery, or converted to Islam at the point of the
sword. (TMF 195)

Lessie’s memory of her different incarnations can be considered historiographical
documentation of Mother-Goddess worship. Lessie exemplifies the nature of Mother
Goddess worship in various ages and Nzingha illustrates the African Mother Goddess in
contemporary society.

Alice Walker has made various references to ancient female deities, especially the
beheading of the African goddess figure by the Inquisitors. Lissie reveals that the ancient
Africans believed Isis as the spiritual mother from whom othermother goddesses emerged.
Isis, (Refer Appendix III) a dark skinned Goddess who remained a spiritual mother, is
often portrayed with the infant Horus in her arms. She was known as Aset in the ancient
Kenet. Isis is an ancient Egyptian Mother Goddess, the wife of the Osiris (Refer Appendix
III) and the mother of falcon-headed Horus, who is often shown suckling at her breast.
During the long span of many dynastic changes in Egypt, Isis was, at certain times and at
certain places, melded with other, local goddesses. At times she is shown as with the
horned disc of Hathor, the Cow Goddess who was also associated with milk and
motherhood. She is usually depicted as a slender, graceful young woman who helps the
people those who pray for romance, fertility, and fidelity. As a mother, Isis is a protectress
of women and children. She shares similarities with the Hindu Goddess Durga. The images
and the myths that are associated with Isis always stress the importance of fertility.

Ma’at, another goddess occupies the highest position in the Universal Order and is
considered powerful. She is often portrayed as representing a twin pair, known as truth
and order. She is motherly and strongly protective, and cares deeply for all Her children by
comforting them. She is said to be able to cure infertility in women. Obudua is another Yoruba spiritual mother who is a cocreator and co-partner and wife to Obatala or Orishala. Yoruban is Oshun and he is regarded as the opening to the powerful forces of the primordial mother. He promises rebirth following the process of death and decay. Other qualities of the primordial mother include Iyanla, who is the great wise mother, the water deities Yemoja/ Yemaya and Osun, and Oya, a powerful deity of the forest and hunting. The conception of several female deities reveals Alice Walker’s notion of motherhood – creator, primordial mother, protector and spiritual mother. As a new age philosopher who believes in the spiritual power and the procreative energy of women, Alice Walker tries to usher in a renaissance of the Mother Goddess worship for the benefit of world peace.

In *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, a sequel to *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker demystifies the mother figure/matriarch image of Africa in order to correct the misperceptions that have arisen in the name of rituals in Africa.

In this political novel which deals with the clitoridectomy, a practice of female circumcision or female genital mutilation, she questions the Edenic image of Africa. In the process of demystifying the mother image of Africa she attacks patriarchy that poses a threat to wifehood and motherhood. Most of the characters in this novel connect themselves either with mothering or with the institution of motherhood. It highlights the evil effects of clitoridectomy on African motherhood by weaving a sympathetic story to make the reader understand the trauma behind this painful practice.

The beginning of the novel is symbolically connected with the role of matriarchs in protecting girl children and preserving their health in order to become a healthy mother. In the epigraph, Alice Walker presents an apt saying in the African folk-culture: “When the axe came into the forest, the trees said the handle is one of us” (*PSJ* n.p). She has used this saying to challenge the role of matriarchs who indirectly support patriarchy to
dominate women. In the name of god and religious practices – placing the woman in the centre as mother figure – the men of the community make other women submissive and be an obedient participant in the male constructed society.

In this novel there are four mother characters, of whom Tashi and Lisette are biological mothers and as M’Lissa and Ryne are stereotypical mother figures in the patriarchal world. Tashi represents the victims of clitoridectomy and M’Lissa stands for the nationally accepted mother figure who acts against the well-being of her fellow women of the community in order to support the culturally constructed norms of their tribal community.

Tashi and her sister Dura are the victims of circumcision. Dura dies due to the over bleeding caused by infibulations. As a result of Dura’s death, Tashi suffers from blood fixation. Even after experiencing the horrors of circumcision, Tashi accepts to undergo the circumcision process as a gesture of obeying the cultural norm. She and mother Catherine never know how to disobey their cultural norms of the society. As a result of infibulations, she gives birth to a mentally challenged son Bentu Morago (who appeared as a young cousin of Fanny) and she aborts her second child to avoid the painful caesarian delivery. For Tashi motherhood is a painful phenomenon.

Catherine represents the condition of mothers in African tribal society where they do not know to protest the life-threatening act of circumcision. Alice Walker through Catherine reveals the inability of biological mothers in executing their motherwork through protection and nurturance. Tashi understands the situation properly. As an African woman who “can never bring themselves to blame their mothers” (PSI 19), Tashi views Catherine as a strong willed woman by saying: “I have never seen anyone work as hard as my mother, or pull her sharer of the work with a more resigned dignity” (PSI 16).
Bentu Morago calls her a “frowning mother” (PSJ 95). Her failure to make her son progress mentally is the result of her physical inability to perform the mother work. Tashi perceives a collective consciousness in the sufferings of these women. Her maternal thinking motivates her to murder M'Lissa in order to save her community. As she goes to prison she is free from guilt. She views being in the prison as a relief. Putting an end to this tradition of circumcision, she views this as a punishment for her failed motherhood. After the punishment she is able to support herself emotionally. She remembers her mother thus:

I smiled with her. I liked the person my mother was in prison. She was warm and comfortable, as if she were an entirely different person than the driven frowning mother I'd always known....One of my mother’s favorite expressions was: It’s a wonder you don’t forget I’m your mother! But I never did. Perhaps it was because I felt connected to her scent. Which was warm, lovely, soft I felt I could quite happily have spent my lifetime under one of her arms.... Even now, in middle age, I like to snuggle her, though contorting my lanky body into a shape that fits cuddly under her neck is something of a feat. She barely tolerates it, though, and immediately moves away. (PSJ 94-96)

Tashi’s strong desire to mother her son reunites her with her son. Tashi exemplifies some negative aspects of motherhood caused by genital mutilation, as M’ Lissa represents the female conspirator aligning with the patriarchy to keep going the tradition of sexual oppression against women. Through the character of M’Lissa, Alice Walker demystifies the image of African mother figure in general and the image of African community mother in particular. M’ Lissa is a tsunga (the one who performs genital mutilation) of her Olinka community and she has inherited the position from her mother. She is the one who
performs circumcision on Tashi and her sister Dura. Though M'Lissa is herself a victim of genital mutilation that has left her with a malfunctioning left leg, she is unsympathetically rigorous in her enthusiasm for enforcing the most painful of circumcision on girls. When Tashi’s mother wants mildest circumcision the suspicious male witch-doctor senses a violation of the rule and performs the infibulations himself cutting even the tendons of her leg. This act of the male witch-doctor symbolizes the attitude of patriarchy towards sexuality and motherhood.

In this novel, M’ Lissa is shown as a community mother but with a deviation. Ironically she is a community mother who is accepted by patriarchy. She is accepted by every powerful person in the community. And this highlights the failed role of matriarchs in the community. M’bati’s statement about her reveals that M’Lissa has been a tool in the hands of patriarchy: “Mother Lissa is a national monument, she said. Recognized as a heroine by every faction of the government, including the National Liberation Front” (PSI 153-154). That is, she is the one who is accepted by the recognized and patronized institutionalized patriarchy.

As a matriarch, she attains that status from her mother. It is hereditary in their family of tsungas and M’ Lissa has imbibed the attitude of viewing everything devoid of feeling. M’ Lissa’s awareness of her ironical position is evident from her confession where she questions her strength:

I have been strong. This is what I tell the tourists who came to see me, and the young mothers and the old mothers and everybody who comes. It is what they tell me back: the president and the politicians and the visitors from the churches and the schools. Strong and brave. Dragging my half-body wherever half a body was needed. In service to tradition,
to what makes us a people. In service to the country and what makes us
who we are. But who are we but torturers of children? (PSJ 226)

As a contrast to M’Lissa, Tashi worries about everyone who is the victim of
circumcision: “I am weeping now, myself. For myself. For Adam. For our son. For the
daughter I was forced to abort”. (PSJ 224)

She mourns not only for the victims related to her but for the unknown who
suffered due to circumcision and she “has been crying all our tears” (PSJ 225). Her
empathising motherly concern is such that she identifies her aborted daughter with
M’bati. It is all this that makes her the community mother. Alice Walker tries to project
Tashi who does not have the heritage of matriarchy and motherline yet becomes a
mother figure to the whole community as she wins liberation for the whole community.
This is evident from her treatment of M’bati as her own daughter. “She is the daughter I
should have had. Perhaps could have had, had I not aborted her out of fear” (PSJ 159).

Tashi is afraid of physical pain and hence rejects motherhood but not its
symbolic implications. Yet, she emerges as the one who adores the warmth of M’bati
an unknown woman. She says:

…I am your mother. If you take my hand before all of these people, all
of these judges, all of these policemen and warders and rubbernecks in
the audience, you will discover that the two of us can fly…. We are
lighter than air, lighter than thistle. Mother and daughter heading for the
sun. (PSJ 159-160)

As she shows the “motherly” (PSJ 161) affection towards M bati, she evolves as
a spiritual mother. She has lost her mother when she was an infant and yet she never
believed in her mother's death, because she experiences her mother's presence spiritually. Even though she serves as an assistant to M' Lissa she does not forget her mother who had died due to circumcision. Alice Walker highlights Tashi's attitude towards motherhood when she accepts M'bati as her spiritual daughter.

Tashi's relationship with Pierre, the son of Adam and his French mistress Settle, reveals motherhood at the spiritual level. Pierre, a gay intellectual, is the representative of black–white biracial group. Tashi rejects him by throwing stones at him. After the murder of M' Lissa her attitude towards Pierre changes. She understands that Pierre is willing to look after Benny. Tashi forgives the adultery of Adam after attaining the wholeness of herself and this protective nature is understood by Pierre.

Throughout the novel Alice Walker comments on the failure of the Olinka society in understanding as well as recognizing the power of women. She protests against a woman's use of her talent and power in hindering the empowerment of other women of the same community and in doing this she takes a political position against the fellow-blacks of the African community. Pointing out the Olinka people's attitude of not recognizing mothers, Alice Walker remarks: “They do not however, thank the child for bringing the food or send thanks to her mother for preparing it”. (PSJ 237)

In an interview with Giddings (1992), Alice Walker explains the statement made by a psychoanalyst that “Negro women” cannot utter a lie and they cannot bring themselves to blame their mothers. She says:

I knew that phrase would leap out of the novel. It explains the pattern of our repression, our self-repression. It has been extremely difficult to blame our mothers for anything, because we can see so clearly what
they’ve been up against. It almost killed me to see women in Kenya and other places who actually have grooves in their foreheads from carrying heavy loads. How so you say Look what you’ve doing to me? ... For our own health, we have to examine the ways in which we’ve been harmed by our mother’s collaboration. (Walker 1992: 59)

Alice Walker states that women have to minimize the pain that men give them so that they will not hate their sons. She reasons out her thought thus:

Yes. Perhaps that is why mothers protect them so; why daughters ... are sacrificed – even when there’s no actual son in the house. That’s why we cannot continue this. We want our sons and we want our daughters. We can’t raise sons who will break into a woman’s body and just help themselves. (ibid)

Thus, in this polemical novel Alice Walker subverts the image of the matriarch of Africa and redefines the role of the African matriarch.

Alice Walker’s By the Light of My Father’s Smile is “[a] powerful story about love, forgiveness, passion and being true to yourself” (Detroit Free Press). Her sixth novel shares the theme of her earlier novel Possessing the Secret of Joy and it deals with the subject of female sexuality. Apart from its major themes of love, reconciliation, sexuality and superficiality, this novel asserts the importance of “shared parenting” advocated by Bell Hooks and Sara Ruddick. Alice Walker as a motherhood theoretician takes up the task of highlighting the roles of fathers in the lives of daughters in Meridian. Next to Meridian, it is only in this novel that she revives the theme of shared parenting. Basically, this novel concentrates on the need of parents to
be educated regarding the importance of both the genders. In an interview with Evelyn C. White, Alice Walker has stated:

My novel is really a call to fathers to stand with daughters and help protect them in a world where they are vulnerable. If a child has a strong mother, she’s very lucky. But barring that, she gets faulty information and easily becomes a victim....Both parents should talk to both genders because what happens now simply upholds the patriarchy. The man gets to tell the boy to be the aggressor. The system has already told the woman that she is to submit. We need to break this. Parents need to understand that they made their children together. One is male, the other is female, but they are not that different spiritually. (‘Readers Guide’ BLMFS)

In an interview with Evelyn C. White, Alice Walker reveals the reason for adopting sexuality as her theme for the sixth novel:

When I was working on the last novel Possessing the Secret of Joy I realized that sexuality is the place where life has definitely fallen into the pit for women. The only way we’ll ever change that is by affirming, celebrating and acknowledging sexuality in our daily lives. (ibid)

In this novel, Alice Walker introduces the readers to the African in Mesoamerica and creates a new cultural group called Mundo, a race resulting from the fusion of African and American bloodlines in Mexico.

By the Light of My Father’s Smile is also a political novel as it revolts against the established notion of submissive sexuality of women. Even though this novel concentrates on the father – daughter relationship and emphasizes the role of fathers in the lives of daughters, it also has strong arguments on biological mothering and
mother-daughter relationship not only in African American community but also in Europe.

Lily Paul’s/Pauline’s character needs to be evaluated as it involves the development of motherhood from biological to communal stage. Lily Paul struggles against family tradition and poverty to discover her own voice. She is the daughter of a poor man who had worked in a meat packing company. Through the characters of Lily Paul’s father and mother, Alice Walker describes the condition of the black family which struggles against poverty. Their episode in this novel is an illustration of a black mother’s ignorance about abortion and birth control methods. Her mother’s ignorance leads her to giving birth to ten children. They struggle to feed and rear them.

Lily Paul nurses her sisters and brothers because her mother is unable to control them. She states that she has become a mother from the age of five. She states this with a tinge of pathos:

I was a mother from the age of five, I said. It happened gradually. Lily Paul, hand me the diaper; Lily Paul, hand me the baby’s bottle. Lily Paul, hold Joey. By the time I was eight I could cook dinner while holding one baby and watching over two more. (BLMFS 100)

She is forced to become the othermother to her sisters and brothers and to accept the responsibility of the younger ones rather than the elder ones. She is unable to go to school due to these inconducive familial conditions. Her thirst to learn typewriting and to know about the people of different lands becomes a mere dream. Even though she plays the role of othermother she does not get the satisfaction of being so as a biological mother. She says, “I loved my little brothers and sisters, but somewhere in me I realized they weren’t my kids”. (BLMFS 104)
When Winston abuses Pauline sexually her mother does not come forward to protect her. Instead, she wants Lily Paul to get married to Winston. This makes Lily Paul view her mother as imperfect. Lily Paul's mother nurtures her when she was a young girl but she could not get the same kind of protective love from her mother in her adulthood even as Toni Morrison’s Pecola and Sula miss their mothers’ love during their young adulthood. Lily Paul compares her mother with Persephone who took revenge against the abduction of her daughter. She longs for her mother’s revolt against Winston. The point of her referring Persephone is her realization of the inadequacy of her pathetic accusation of her mother:

Persephone’s mother did not betray her, I said, burrowing my nose in her neck. Persephone’s mother missed her daughter. She turned the earth to winter when Persephone could not be found. My mother didn’t even ask me what had happened. I didn’t really know, anyway. When I turned up pregnant she said how lucky I was Winston was around and that he was someone who wanted me. (BLMFS 105)

As a result of her relationship with Winston, she begets a son and proves herself to be a good mother and later on a good grandmother too. Pauline, in the process of fighting against her poverty, retrieves the culinary art from her mother and uses it to become financially successful. Pauline, Susannah and Irene form a women’s community. For Irene, Lily Paul is a mother and a perfect role model to be followed. Irene has keenness of perception to identify the etymological significance of the apparently Christian words in the name Lily Paul. She says: “It is the best, said Irene. The lily is the flower of Lilith, the first mother. The rough one who was bored by Adam and went off to have adventures elsewhere. The one before Eve.”(178) The etymological reference of ‘Lily’ to Lilith highlights religious and cultural perceptions that the mother Goddess is
considered both primary and primordial. It is also interesting to note that the name of Shug Avery is Lily Shug Avery.

Pauline’s achievements and her understanding of other women make her a mother figure for other women including Irene. She has become an ancient symbol of feminine potential energy. She is viewed as “Yoni” (178), a word of Sanskrit origin that means a source, womb and female genitals and which is a symbol of divine procreative energy that is conventionally represented by a circular stone. (Refer Appendix III).

Lily Paul who functioned once under the patriarchal model has become a model of omniscient matriarchal figure and a symbol for the very source of pro-creativity. This is what Irene means when she says:

It is really, the lily, ancient symbol for the yoni. People used to think that with just a lily and her yoni a woman could impregnate herself....when the Goddess Hathor squeezed milk from her breast to form Milky Way, the drops that fell to earth became calla lilies. So Lily is a powerful name. Perhaps it is the Lily that controls Paul. (BLMFS 178-179)

Like Celie in The Color Purple, Lily Paul who has been the othermother to her own sisters and brothers, crosses the level and the function of biological mother and becomes a community mother. She functions as a protector, healer and nurturer to the members of the community. Irene views her as a “kind of ghetto goddess, ... who created her own life and lives it to the hilt” . (BLMFS 179) Even though she has experienced “Idyllic” childhood (ibid), she manages to be a perfect mother symbol to the whole community.

Langley – Magdalena relationship is another example of the mother – daughter
relationship that highlights the need for harmony in a mother–daughter relationship. Langley, the wife of Robinson, is never given a chance to narrate in the novel. She is quite uncomfortable with Robinson who dominates the children. Magdalena is otherwise known as June in her childhood and is nicknamed “Mad Dog” that symbolizes her fearlessness and free spirit. She is presented as a tragic character. At the age of fifteen, when she was sexually intimate with her Mundo boyfriend she received memorable whipping with a silver-studded belt from her father from which she never recovered. This makes her harbour a sort of aversion towards her father. Magdalena spends the rest of her life in sorrow. In order to mask her pain, she starts eating more food and becomes obese. She is an academician and dies unexpectedly of a broken heart. In the afterlife, she meets her mother by the river side where her mother is in a dilemma over crossing or not crossing the river. A free conversation takes place in the chapter “The River” in which forgiveness and renewal of relationship make amends for earlier loses between the two. After the reconciliation only Langley’s mind and soul get ready to cross the river which means ‘life’ itself. Magdelena is not happy with her mother’s irresponsible way. Susannah tries to explain that their father loved Magdalena, but she refuses to accept it thus.

Oh, June, she [Susannah] says. Come on.

That you were loved and I [Magdalena] was not?

But you were loved. Mama and daddy loved you [Magdelena]

Mama loved me. [Susannah]

Daddy loved you [Magdelena], too. (BLMFS 116)

In spite of her understanding of her mother’s love for her, Magdalena does not feel any closeness with her mother.

I thought about my mother. When she was dying I used to visit and read
her. She would doze, and then I would stop reading and stare at her face. I was trying to remember how it felt to love her. For I ceased loving her when she abandoned me. There were moments of tenderness between us, moments of affection. (BLMFS 120)

After her mother’s death Magdalena communicates with the help of Manulita, with her mother. The renewal of relationship leads to their continuing their relationship after life. Her mother’s guilt is erased, mutual communication is established and a reunion takes place.

Alice Walker’s radical thinking makes her instruct the women regarding the role of contraceptive method. Pauline states that her mother died of over reproduction. Margaret, Mem, Meridian, Celie, and Lily Paul’s mother are the illustration used by Alice Walker to educate the need for awareness among women. Lily Paul’s mother does not feel comfortable with her own body due to over-bearing of children. Pauline’s attitude towards her children, mothers and husband is brought out only through the voice of Pauline as a daughter. After the death of her mother she is blamed for everything but she says: “I loved her with all my daughter’s heart, hearing that she died blaming me for abandoning her caused me to suffer” (BLMFS 129).

Irene, an illicit daughter and a dwarf in the novel, remains as a symbol of mankind’s inhuman attitude towards others. After the death of her mother, Irene’s family members give her up to the church. Her dwarf stature urges the villagers of Greece to deny her humanity. As time passes, on the family’s wealth comes into the hands of Irene as her father and his sons die.

Irene is from Greece, and her people view her as a grotesque creature rather than as a human being. Her physical stature and mental make-up never go together. Even though she is small in stature she possesses a great deal of compassion. Her
exemplary character of giving gifts and sharing the knowledge she has acquired make her an appreciable being.

Irene’s strong willed nature never allows her to be disturbed by anyone. Apart from determining her own life, she is also willing to guide others. She understands the potential that Susannah and Pauline possess. She is the one who comments on mother worship and the power of the female during the middle ages. She also talks about women who were burnt alive during the middle ages in the name of witchcraft. The motive behind such witchcrafting, says Irene, was to destroy the feminine power. She reflects on this thus:

The Envy! sighed Irene. It gives me gooseflesh just to imagine it. Better to chop off heads and cut Indian babies in half, or destroy black families in Africa by brutalizing and enslaving them – all of which they did – than to realize that much of the “uncivilized” world, unlike Europe, had not been forced to kill off its mother and made to shrink its spirit to half its size. (BLMFS 186)

Irene’s statement expresses the anger and the pain of women for those who were burnt alive in the name of witchcraft. This showcases the capability of Irene to connect to the women who belonged to different centuries. This also showcases the need for transgenerational womanhood and motherhood.

In this novel, Alice Walker uses mythological and religious mother figures like Orisis, Isis, Medusa, Ixtaphahahex, Durga, Ma’at, Obudua, Iyanla and Yamaya, Persephone and Lily (Refer Appendix III). This use highlights the importance of viewing mother goddess cult for creating a motherhood that is omniscient and omnipresent. The Temple of My Familiar and By the Light of my Father’s Smile are the two novels in which she revives the mother Goddess cult.
Thus, apart from critiquing the role of fathers in daughters’ life, this novel emphasizes the need for the functional presence of strong mothers in the life of daughters. Lily Paul’s suffering caused by her mother’s ignorance of the reproductive system, the absence of Irene’s mother, Susannah’s rejection of motherhood and Magdalene’s longings to capture the action of her mother make this work not only a novel of mother–daughter relationship but ironically, a negative perspectivisation on motherhood that is used for a concrete suggestion of positive motherhood – at least of what it should be.

Alice Walker’s novels show a different perspective on motherhood. The novels deal with the impact of patriarchy on the institution of motherhood. The novels also strive to challenge the idea of motherhood as a construct to function only at the biological level. The ability of the failed biological mothers to emerge as community mothers forms a major part of her novel and this is an aspect peculiar to her novels. There is also in the novels of Alice Walker the peculiar concept of motherhood that views mothers belonging to different generations forming a cohesive chain of motherhood functions. The novels also explicate the procreative power of woman which makes women in general and mothers in particular a supreme power. This enables Alice Walker to trace the mother figures, goddess images and the function of feminine energy through different generations and races to prove that feminine energy is primary and universal. Besides glorifying the primordial feminine power, she also challenges the oppressive factor that remains in a community in the name of rituals. Moreover, her vision of mothers as preservers of culture makes her fit into the African American ideology of motherhood. Focusing on preservation, education and healing as the primary tasks of motherwork, she portrays mothers as cultural ambassadors.