Chapter III

The Growing Strength of "The Double Stitch": The Womanist Affirmation in The Color Purple and The Temple of My Familiar

After discussing the Womanist angle in Walker’s first two novels, this chapter now attempts to decipher the Womanist shades in Walker’s third and most celebrated novel The Color Purple. It was this novel which established her as a Womanist writer, and also got her a Pulitzer Prize. By the time Walker wrote this novel her own belief in the sustainability of her Womanist theory had cemented. She needed no more confirmations from any sector to prove herself or her Womanist theory to anyone. Once she reached this milestone there was no looking back. One of the reasons for her success with The Color Purple seems to be her ardent belief that she was divinely aided while writing this novel. At the end of The Color Purple Walker thanked all the characters for coming to her, as if they were living entities or spirits which wanted their stories to be told. Walker also seems to be saying that these spirits could be those of her ancestors who were coming back to her to overlook and bless the work that she had undertaken of retelling their untold tales of struggles and triumphs:

I thank everybody in this book for coming

(A.W. author and medium)

(CP npag).

The Color Purple is primarily about a teenage girl growing into maturity and spiritual wholeness. Celie, the protagonist, along with a bunch of
other women traverses the male dominated domain in search of personal and group freedom. We meet Celie for the first time when she self-introduces herself as a physically and mentally abused teenager. Threatened and confused to such an extent that she is unable to even understand the implications of her present situation she addresses her letter not to any living entity but to the unanswering metaphysical God:

Dear God,

I am fourteen years old. I have always been a good girl. May be you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me (CP 01).

Celie is threatened by her Pa that if she told anyone about the rape her mother would die; it was a concealed threat which said that in the event of anybody coming to know of the rape, her mother would be murdered. So for the love of her mother Celie did not share her trauma with anyone but God. Gay Wilentz in his essay titled “Alice Walker: The Color Purple”, brings out this dilemma that Celie faces in the wake of her rape by her supposed father Alphonso:

Celie speaks out to God as if the spirit is in the room with her, explaining her pregnancy from the rape by her supposed father, and then asking God to help her understand her circumstances. Since to tell anyone else would “kill her mammy.” Celie’s only choice is talk to God (Wilentz 64).

The most amazing aspect of Celie’s first letter to God, is that, even in the most depressing and frustrating situation Celie bonds with her mother most sincerely. Instead of being angry with her mother for failing to protect her against the male predator, Celie loves her mother and holds
back her own pain and anguish in order to protect her life. The Womanist concern of female-bonding is present in *The Color Purple* from the beginning.

Though Celie bonds with women even before she is taught to do so, she herself is very lonely in her fight for survival. Celie resembles her fictional predecessors like Margaret and Mem in her own early portrayal as an abused daughter and wife, thoroughly incapable of protesting or asserting her human rights.

But as the novel progresses the difference between the earlier women and Celie emerges, because unlike Margaret and Mem, she is supported and loved by other women who help her be herself. When her first physical abuse begins she is just a child absolutely powerless against the perpetrator of the evil, her supposed father. Not only is she silenced by the physical and verbal male strength of her rapist, but also by their religious doctrine which preaches about respecting one’s parents.

Her other predicament identical to that of Margaret and Mem is that she was completely alienated and isolated at this stage. Nettie is the only one who loves her was herself a child. So she is in no way capable of lending any kind of support to Celie. There were no senior protective women around her and she has absolutely nowhere to run. As a result of which Celie began to internalize her acute objectification and had no need or desire to protest. Calvin Hernton describes this frightened and helpless Celie in his essay titled “Who’s Afraid of Alice Walker? *The Color Purple* as a Slave Narrative,” as under:
Trapped, alienated and helpless, Celie strains to survive. In the process she accommodates herself to the status quo. Similar to all people who experience intensive deprivation and abuse, Celie internalizes the negative definition of herself that her masters hold toward and force upon her (Hentton 9).

Not only is Celie trapped and alienated but she is also so very much subdued that she is incapable of envisioning a way out of her predicament. As it was, she does not have any supportive women around her and to add to it Celie did not know that the man at whose hand she is suffering is her step-father and not her real father. If she had known this reality then the guilt of having committed incest would not have bothered her at all. It is evident from the very first letter that she considers her rape as a punishment for some sin that she might have committed. Because in the very first letter she crosses off “I am” and writes instead “I have always been a good girl” (CP 01). This cutting off denotes her understanding that though she was a good girl earlier now she was not a good girl. It also described the way in which she looked upon her sexual abuse. She believed that sex is bad and therefore as she had sex she is a bad girl.

Thus we see Celie internalizing her negative self-image which the patriarchy and the puritanical society want her to live in. Though Celie has not been able to protect herself from the clutches of her step-father Alphonso, she is strong enough to protect her sister from his advances. This makes her a strong contender for the post of a Womanist, as a woman who stands by and protects other women:

I see him looking at my little sister. She scared. But I say I'll take care of you. With God help.... Sometimes he still be looking at
Nettie, but I always git in his light.... I ast him to take me instead of Nettie while our new mammy sick. But he just ast me what I’m talking about (CP 4-6-8).

Not only is Celie a born Womanist but Nettie also has the traits of a Womanist. When both she and her step-mother realize that Alphonso has raped Celie for a long time, they are shocked. At this point Nettie takes upon herself the responsibility of consoling both Celie and their step-mother:

I am in the bed crying. Nettie she finally see the light of day, clear. Our new Mammy she see it too. She in her room crying. Nettie tend to first one, then the other (CP 08).

Nettie’s concern for Celie is understandable but her love for their step-mother makes her a Womanist. That is the sheer beauty of *The Color Purple* that women stand by one another, no matter what their relationship. As Gay Wilentz puts it in his essay mentioned earlier, this Womanist concern exhibited by Celie is exemplary, looking at her situation of having grown up without any women role models to look up to:

Without any extended family system Celie has to take on the role of “mother” to her sister, and she manages to protect Nettie from the advances of Pa; ironically, it is Celie’s acceptance of sexual abuse which allows Nettie to remain unscathed (Wilentz 67).

Not only is the connection between women fascinating, but the way in which men interact in the *The Color Purple* is also very

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interesting. The bargain which happens between Alphones and Albert is quite revealing. Albert comes with a proposal to get married to Nettie, but instead Alphonso offers to allow Celie to get married with him, with quite a few incentives and promises. Alphonso on having enough with Celie wishes to get rid of her and therefore offers a list of bargains to Albert. He tells him that Celie was not a fresh girl; he can relax and do whatever he wishes with her without having to worry about having any more children. Then he promised him that Celie can work as hard as a man, take good care of his children and will not depend on him for clothes or food, as she will come with her own cow. Hidden behind all these promises and incentives were facts that Albert, if he was a smart person or even if he cared about Celie as a human would have been able to see. When Alphonso says, “you can do everything just like you want to and she ain’t gonna make you feed it or clothe it” (CP 09), then he should have asked Alphonso as to how does he have so much intimate knowledge about Celie? Just scratch the surface and the reality jumps out of all those words that Alphonso is using to fool him. The final comment that Alphonso makes about Celie was that, “she tell lies” (CP 09), which is his attempt to protect himself against any revelation that Celie might make to Albert. And a man believes another man more than he would ever believe a woman. So Alphonso is tapping on this male psychology of Albert. Finally when Albert needs a housekeeper badly enough he comes and takes Celie along with him to enslave her in one more role, that of a wife, a role designed by patriarchy to weaken women on one more front.

Initially Celie is so much under the control of the dominant patriarchal forces that she is deprived even of the dreams of liberation and freedom. She herself cannot visualize any other happy form of life.
Celie has a very resigned attitude towards life and she quietly accepts whatever comes her way. She does not protest and is not even in the position to stop her marriage to the unknown Albert. Her consent is never asked for, nor her wishes known. She is just like the cow that she takes with her as dowry; both are being led to wherever the men want them to go. Without a single word of dissent she goes away with Albert to be used and abused by him and his children.

On her first meeting with Mr....... (initially Walker doesn’t name him) Celie was introduced to the person who she finds to be the most beautiful woman in the world, and that was Shug Avery. Her husband Mr.......’s life-time lover, who gradually becomes one of the most important persons in her life. The beauty emanating from the Shug Avery photograph captures Celie for life. She is so fascinated by her photo that she instantly falls in love with her:

Shug Avery was a woman. The most beautiful woman I ever saw. She more pretty than my mama. She bout ten thousand times more prettier than me. I see her there in furs. Her face rouge. Her hair like somethin tail. She grinning with her foot upon somebody motorcar. Her eyes serious tho. Sad some (CP 7).

What is pleasantly missing here is the devastating effect of American beauty myth which celebrates white skin, blonde hair and blue eyes as the only symbols of beauty. Though Celie has no obvious orientation towards “Black is Beautiful”, she quite naturally prefers and appreciates ‘Black Beauty’. Thus making Celie a living embodiment of Walker’s Womanist spirit.
Celie connects with Shug so instantly and so intensely from the bottom of the heart that she is able to see the tear hidden behind her smiling face. What more examples does one need to prove that Celie is a born Womanist? She is capable of loving any woman, even though the woman would be her husband’s lover. Shug symbolizes power and determination, two virtues almost missing in Celie. Shug also gives Celie something to dream about, “I ast her to give me the picture. An all night long I stare at it. An now when I dream, I dream of Shug Avery” (CP 07).

Even before Shug comes into Celie’s life, she becomes instrumental in bringing Celie and Albert, closer. When Albert makes love to Celie for the first time, Celie remembers Shug and wonders that may be Shug liked what he was doing to her and so she puts her arm around Albert, “ …. and then I think bout Shug Avery. I know what he doing to me he done to Shug Avery and may be she like it. I put my arm around him” (CP 13).

This is female bonding at its best. Celie bonds with the absent woman more than she bonds with her present man. Sex with a man is nothing but abuse for Celie because her desire is never taken into consideration by either of the two men who abuse her. She is just an object of their very male sexual urge.

Compared to Celie, Nettie was luckier in many ways. She had a place to run to when she needs to escape their step-pa’s advances. Nettie went and lived with Celie and Albert. Celie made this announcement to God with a small inference to the female-bonding that happened in her Pa’s home. Celie mentioned in just one line, as to how Nettie hated to
leave their step-ma behind, when she left her home, “Nettie here with us. She run way from home. She say she hate to leave our stepma, but she had to git out, may be fine help for the other little one” (CP 17).

Nettie’s arrival in their home once again sparked the fire in Albert’s heart for her and he began to flirt with her every chance that he got and when she did not respond to his advances, he asks Celie to throw her out of their home. Nettie is happy to leave but before she goes, she advises Celie to fight for her rights, but Celie’s response is that fighting was beyond her, all that she could do was stay alive, “You got to fight. You got to fight. But I don’t know how to fight. All I know how to do is stay alive” (CP 18). Though this comment seems to be very gross on the surface of it yet this was one of the profound truths revealed by Celie. A survival tactic that she can teach all the bunch of women who help her become herself.

Celia made Nettie promise that she would write to her from wherever she went. Nettie promises saying that she would definitely write and only death would prevent her from writing. Celie’s last line in this letter is very poignant. She writes, Nettie does not fulfil her promise, because she never writes:

I say, Write.
She say, What?
I say, Write.
She say, Nothing but death can keep me from it.
She never writes (CP 19).

And so Celie presumes that Nettie is dead. Because if she would have been alive she would have definitely written to her. What she does
not know was the fact that when Nettie left Celie’s home and walked towards the town Albert followed her and he tried to molest her, but Nettie hit him back and managed to escape. A physically and psychologically hurt Albert promised to never allow Nettie’s letters to pass-on to Celie and thus separated the two sisters using his male power. On not receiving any mail from Nettie for a very long time Celie was convinced that her beloved sister was dead.

Later on when Kate, Albert’s sister, came she also advised her to fight for her rights. Celie voices the same lesson of survival that she has learnt from life that is, of surviving first on a very physical level:

You got to fight them, Celie, she say. I can’t do it for you. You got to fight them for yourself. I don’t say nothing. I think about Nettie, dead. She fifth, she run away what good it do? I don’t fight, I stay where I’m told. But I’m alive (CP 22).

Celie had devised her own survival tactics, one of them connects her to nature and ecology. She wrote in one of her letters that Albert regularly beats her up, about which she is incapable to doing anything. She realizes that as she cannot stop the beatings she should at least sustain through the painful ordeal. And for that she mentally converts herself into a piece of wood whenever Albert orders her to bring him his belt:

He say, Celie, git the belt. The children be outside the room peeking through the cracks. It all I can do not to cry. I make myself wood. I say to myself, Celie, you a tree. That’s how come I know trees fear man (CP 23).
This makes Celie an Eco-feminist even without knowing the term or its ideology. Ecology and its issues are very much a part of the Womanist theory. And so we observe that Celie is a born Womanist in more than one ways. On many such small and big occasions we see a dormant Womanist spirit peeking through the battered body of Celie. It will take a lot of love-therapy from Shug to facilitate the blooming of the Womanist spirit both is body and in soul.

Apart from Celie’s identification with the trees in her moments of terror which are related in her letter, there is also a very bleak picture of Albert that we get. From all the description that we get of Albert in Celie letters we can conclude that Albert is a man who can readily abuse women. Celie as his wife is a direct victim of his anger, as a husband is given unwritten power over his wife’s body. But Albert is not very kind or accommodating to his sister as well. When Kate tries to interfere on Celie’s behalf Albert curtly tells her to mind her own business. What is so alarming about his behaviour is that although he is a black man in a white racist South, he fails to identify with the pain of his victims. He himself must have been oppressed on the level of race, but he does not think twice before oppressing his women when he is in the power position. Calvin Hernton notes this tendency of black men as under:

Similar to other people who have been colonized and oppressed at one time or another, the oppressive experiences of black men have not deterred them from being oppressors themselves (Hernton 7-8).
Celie’s oppression ends only after the arrival of Shug Avery, Albert’s true love into their home and heart. Walker breaks many traditionally patriarchal stereotypes about women and their relationship with one another in this path-breaking novel of hers. Conventionally speaking Celie should hate Shug for being the only true love of her husband. But Celie, a born Womanist is easily able to remove the man from between them and is able to directly connect with Shug. The man-centered relationship is given a go-by by this uneducated rustic woman, who has absolutely no exposure to any feminist theory from anywhere. Celie’s ability to love Shug transcends her mental state from being only physical to something beyond metaphysical. Celie does not need a man to identity with; she is happy being a woman and falling in love with another attractive woman.

When Shug Avery first time comes to town as a famous blues singer, Albert almost dies of excitement, whereas Celie is unable to show her own happiness but prays in her heart for a chance to merely set her eyes on her, “Lord, I wants to go so bad. Not to dance. Not to drink. Not to play card. Not even to hear Shug Avery sing. I just be thankful to lay eyes on her” (CP 26).

The qualitative difference between the love of Celie and Albert surfaces when Shug falls ill and the church preacher takes her up for his sermon against immorality. Throughout the sermon Albert behaves as if he just does not know who Shug is whereas Celie strongly feels that somebody should get up and defend Shug. She expects Albert to be a man and do so, but notices him completely ignoring what was being said. She also deciphers the discrepancy between the relations of the women of the congregation. The other women find Albert very handsome and
attractive and therefore they smile at him whenever they get a chance. But these same women pray against Shug Avery who is condemned for the same sin as Albert:

I cut my eyes back at Mr……. when he say that street-cleaner. Somebody got to stand up for Shug, I think. But he don’t say nothing. He cross his legs first to one side, then to the other. He gaze out the window. The same women smile at him, say amen against Shug (CP 46).

Shug proves to be an alter ego for Celie as she is what Celie is not but desires to be Shug’s independence, her defiance and her apparent control over her environment seems to attract Celie towards that very woman whom she should hate. Celie is not only able to appreciate Shug’s beauty, but is also able to read the pain in her eyes, behind the wide grin that she has pasted on her face. Celie really cares for Shug, the human, not just Shug the powerful blues singer.

Celite’s devotion for Shug is not just a far-fetched phenomenon but is as concrete as her own existence. Celie’s whole-hearted acceptance of Shug’s arrival into her marital home proves the point beyond doubt. Contrary to everybody’s expectation Celie welcomes Shug without any kind of resistance, which surprises everybody including Albert. When she sees Albert approaching their home in a wagon she realizes that he has brought home a sick Shug, and the idea of greeting her in the rags that she is wearing makes her feel embarrassed. But before she can change into something presentable Shug and Albert arrive on her doorstep. Celie wants to welcome her with open arms but is unable to do so as she realizes that this is Albert’s home and she has not been ordered to do anything, “Come on in, I want to cry. To shout. Come on in. With
God help, Celie going to make you well. But I don’t say nothing. It not my house. Also I ain’t been told nothing” (CP 47).

Exactly opposite to Celie’s enthusiasm is Shug’s attitude of complete disrespect and hatred towards Celie. Shug later on reveals to Celie that she felt extremely threatened by Celie’s marital status and especially by the fact that she was Albert’s official wife, something that she could never be. This undeniable reality makes Shug very insecure in Celie’s presence and therefore she does what she can do to insult and devalue Celie as much as possible. Celie writes, “She look me over from head to foot. Then she crackle. Sound like a death rattle. You sure is ugly. She say, like she ain’t believed it” (CP 48).

The Art of loving another woman, no matter what the relation, is something the Shug learns from Celie. Both women benefit from one another’s presence in their lives. Celie is more open and receptive from the very beginning, whereas Shug gradually warms up to Celie’s selfless love and care. Both are equally important for the survival whole of one another. Their bonding strengthens with growing time, and Shug begins to appreciate Celie for everything that she does for her. Celie’s loving care brings back Shug from the clutches of death.

In the meantime many things have happened around Celie. Harpo, Albert’s son becomes the victim of patriarchy as much as Celie. Harpo wishes to marry a girl named Sofia, who is pregnant with his child. But Albert flatly refuses to allow him to marry Sofia, and Harpo is not in a position to protest, simply because he is not independent, neither economically nor psychologically. He is so much under his father’s
control that he can’t even ask his father the reason for his never working in the farm. He complains but just doesn’t insist that his father help him in his work. Celie writes in one of her letters:

    Harpo no better at fighting his daddy back than me....
    Harpo complain bout all the plowing he have to do. His
daddy say, You gonna do it. Harpo nearly big as his daddy.
    He strong in body but weak in will. He scared.... His face
    begin to look like a woman’s face (CP 29).

Harpo’s weakness stops him from interfering when his father insults Sofia for getting pregnant before marriage. He simply looks away and just does not protect Sofia against Albert’s mean tirade. It is Sofia who stands up against Albert’s accusations:

    He say. Look like you done got yourself in trouble.
    Naw suh, she say I ain’t in no trouble. Big, though....
    Who the father? He ast....
    Young womens no good these days, he say. Got they legs
    open to every Tom, Dick and Harry.
    Harpo look at his daddy like he never seen him before. But
    he don’t say nothing (CP 32-33).

This silence of Harpo at a time when he should stand up not only for himself but also for Sofia costs him a lot of good faith and trust. Sofia proves to be a better human-being between the two. Sofia knows the worth of her own dignity and is not ready to compromise even for the so-called societal pressure. Her attitude towards her pregnancy shows that she gives a damn about what people would say. Like a true Womanist she accepts her female body in all its limitations. Sofia is prepared to welcome her child all by herself without the help of its father. What is different in Sofia’s case is her support system. When Albert taunts her
for not pleading him to allow her marriage to Harpo, she mocks at him in turn by telling him that she is not alone, but has a sister and a brother-in-law who would happily have her in their home:

He say, Your daddy done throwed you out. Ready to live in the street I guess. She say, Naw, I ain’t living in the street. I’m living with my sister and her husband. They say I can live with them for the rest of my life....Harpo get up to come too. She say. Naw, Harpo, you stay here. When you free, me and the baby be waiting (CP 33).

Sofia is a woman of spirit. She realizes that Harpo has to first grow up and learn to define his interests, only then can he come and claim his love from Sofia. Finally, Harpo musters enough courage and gets married to Sofia and brings his family home.

Harpo and Sofia’s marriage seems to be of a very unconventional type. Sofia is the dominating figure in their relationship and Harpo does not even seem to mind much. But the social pressures make him feel an outcaste and so he wishes to ‘tame’ his wife as his father has tamed Celie:

Harpo want to know what to do to make Sofia mind. He sit out on the porch with Mr. He say, I tell her one thing, she do another. Never do what I say. always backtalk. To tell the truth, he sound a little proud of this to me....You ever hit her? Mr. ast Harpo look down at his hands. Now suh, he say low, embarrass. Well how you spect to make her mind? Wives is like children. You have to let ‘em know who got the upper hand. Nothing can do that better than a good sound beating (CP 37).
Albert’s patriarchal advice is reminiscent of what Calvin Hernton says about an oppressed person becoming an oppressor when given a chance. So Harpo who is oppressed by his father’s patriarchal supremacy is ready to oppress his wife using the same patriarchal tool.

Surprisingly, Celie also gives him the same advice, but this is not out of a desire to control but out of jealousy. Celie is so very envious of Sofia’s independence and self-esteem that she advises Harpo to beat her up. Celie is able to see that, though Harpo complains about Sofia’s audacity he is actually very happy with her. Harpo is unable to appreciate the presence of femininity in him and the fine balance of male elements within Sofia’s character. The beautifully balanced yin and yang is almost missed out by Harpo:

I like Sofia, but she don’t act like me at all. If she talking when Harpo and Mr. . . . . . . . . . come in the room, she keep right on .... I think bout this when Harpo ast me what he ought to do to her to make mind. I don’t mention how happy he is now. How three years pass and he still whistle and sing. I think bout how every time I jump when Mr. . . . . . . call me, she look surprise. And like she pity me. Beat her. I say (CP 38).

The advice is out of desperation, because Celie has never seen any such woman in her life who was able to stand up against her husband. But their advice does not work in Harpo’s case because when he tries to beat Sofia he is beaten black and blue as Sofia is physically stronger than Harpo, “Next time us see Harpo his face a mess of bruises. His lip cut. One of his eyes shut like a fist. He walk stiff and say his teef ache” (CP 38).
Celie’s jealousy works more against her than it works against Sofia. Celie is not able to sleep soundly until she asks Sofia’s forgiveness for having hurt her spirit. Celie is not able to understand what is it that is bothering her, but then suddenly she realizes that she has hurt Sofia in an indirect way. It is her own Womanist spirit which does not allow her to rest in peace:

For over a month I have trouble sleeping. I stay up late as I can ....
What it is? I ast myself.
A little voice say, Something you done wrong.
Somebody spirit you sin against. May be.
Way late one night it come to me Sofia. I sin against Sofia spirit (CP 41).

The guilt is more because it is a woman that she has sinned against. The Womanist connection that she has with other women prevents her from seeking solace in her jealousy. Even an uneducated, uninitiated Celie understands the importance of female-bonding. Women have to bond with one another in order to survive in the harsh, oppressive patriarchal world. Sofia and Celie reconcile after Celie accepts her mistake and apologizes:

You told Harpo to beat me, she said.
No I didn’t I said.
Don’t lie, she said....
I say it cause I’m a fool, I say.
I say it cause I’m jealous of you.
I say it cause you do what I can’t.
What that? She say.
Fight, I say ....
She mad before, sad now (CP 42).
After showing the reason for Celie’s advice to Harpo, Sofia instantly forgives her and helps her gain some confidence in her own self. Sofia in a very unassuming way opens up new images of women. She helps Celie understand that women do not necessarily have to be docile and silent. Earlier, before meeting Sofia, Celie felt that if women fight than they cannot survive. Because she had never seen a woman surviving after putting up a fight against patriarchy. Through her conflict with her husband’s acquired patriarchal attitude Sofia proves to be a role model for Celie. Now Celie can dream of having a different future. Sofia also teaches her the importance of getting mad. She tells her that it is absolutely fine to feel angry once in a while. She asks Celie, “What do you do when you get mad? She ast. I think I can’t even remember the last time I felt mad, I say” (CP 43).

Cелие explains that earlier she used to get angry at her mother because she used to make her work very hard in the house, but later on she could not feel mad at her mother as she was sick. Slowly she killed her anger within herself and began to feel “nothing at all” (CP 44). Cелие says that she also consoled herself by saying that life on this earth is transitory whereas heavenly peace will last forever, and so she would not get angry at Mr……as well. On hearing this Sofia advises her to bash up Albert first and then think of heaven:

Well, sometime Mr…….git on me pretty hard. I have to talk to Old Maker. But he my husband I shrug my shoulders. This life soon be over, I say. heaven last all ways.
You ought to bash Mr…….. head open, she say.
Think bout heaven later (CP 44).
Celie will act on this advice but much later after she has been evolved enough under Shug’s influence. But the seeds of transition are definitely sown by Sofia in the welcoming earth of Celie’s spirit. Here we see Sofia as Celie’s role-model. Celie is open enough to learn from anyone who is willing to teach her.

It is not only others who are role-models for Celie, but she herself also has many virtues which she can pass onto others. The art of loving another woman, no matter what the relation, is a lesson that Shug learns from Celie. Celie’s undying devotion and love for Shug permeates into the latter, who after living with Celie for some time begins to reciprocate Celie’s feelings.

On the one hand Celie and Shug two traditional arch-rivals come close, and on the other Sofia and Harpo separate due to Harpo’s insistence on making Sofia mind him. Here also once again tradition takes over love. Harpo was happy but not traditionally. The unconventional balance that sustained his marriage, is completely ignored by him, he was happy, he could have continued being happy, but his male ego decided that happiness was not his fate.

Initially Shug is rude to Celie and insults her whenever she gets a chance, but slowly she cannot but fall in love with the completely devoted Celie. One instance that Celie writes about in her letters shows the gradual change that is coming in Shug’s attitude. Once Celie is combing Shug hair and it is then that Shug begins to melt down and warm up to Celie:
I work on her like she 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 just right, she say. That feel like mama used to do. Or may be not mama. May be grandma. She reach for another cigarette. Start to hum a little tune (CP 55).

It is very difficult to believe that a wife could love her husband’s mistress so truly. But that is the only truth that Celie wishes to live with. Albert’s father comes to visit them to reprimand Albert for bringing Shug into his home. He has come to warn Albert that his home and his land still belong to him and so Albert must behave in the way he wants and throw Shug out of his home. In the entire exchange between the father and the son it is Celie’s behavior which is most eye-catching. For Celie, Albert’s father’s tirade is not against Albert’s lover but rather it is against her lover. She cannot stop it but she does protest in a manner available to her. Her hatred for Albert’s father takes the form of the traditional slave revenge that has been noted in slave-narratives, the revenge of putting one’s excretion in the food prepared for the masters:

Old Mr……say to Mr. ……., Just what is it bout this Shug Avery anyway, he say. She black as tar. She nappy headed. She got legs like baseball bats. Mr. …… don’t say nothing I drop little spit is Old Mr. ……[Sic]water…. I twirl the spit round with my finger. I think bout ground glass, wonder how you grind it. But I don’t feel mad at all. Just interest (CP 57).

Celie’s support for Shug is not overtly evident but is stronger than anyone can ever imagine. Albert father offers her his sympathy for allowing her husband’s whore stay with them, thinking that Celie is
victimized by the presence of the other woman. But the situation is exactly the opposite of what he thinks. What is noteworthy here is the fact that a senior man comes to rescue a woman when she is threatened by another woman, but this same gentleman turns a blind eye when his son beats and abuses his wives as if they were a slave. So patriarchal power over women is acceptable but a woman having some control over a man is not acceptable.

Finally when Sofia has had enough of Harpo’s nonsense about making up her mind she leaves him and goes to live with her sister Odessa. Before she finally decides to leave Harpo and go away, she has a small discussion with Celie, who is trying to patch things up between Sofia and Harpo. Sofia says that she is tired of Harpo’s attempts to make her mind, “I am getting tired of Harpo, she say. All he thinks about since us married is how to make me mind. He don’t want a wife, he want a dog” (CP 68).

Walker’s Womanist concerns are often voiced by her women characters. Sofia is well aware that Harpo is behaving in a manner that is dictated by his environment, but what she expects from Harpo is that he change himself to accommodate the reality of their home which is different from any other place. Sofia is not conditioned to accept whatever her husband throws on her. She has the desire and the will to change the patriarchal mind-set. Her only drawback is that she fights with the same tools that were used by her oppressors, like her ever readiness to fight it out.
Sofia also mentions how her lack of involvement in the bed does not bother Harpo. He just think about himself and never bothers to know what is up Sofia’s mind:

I don’t like to go to bed with him no more, she say. Used to be when he touch me I’d go all out my head.... But no more. now I feels tired all the time, No interest.... You know the worst part? She say. the worst part is I don’t think he notice. He git up there and enjoy himself just the same. No matter what I’m thinking. No matter what I feel. It just him (CP 69).

For Sofia happiness and contentment of both the partners in a marriage are non-negotiable issues. If that is not the case then, that marriage is as good as over. Therefore she decides to leave Harpo and go and live with Odessa.

After Sofia leaves Harpo converts his home into a jukejoint which does not attract many customers in the first few weeks of its opening. So he requests Shug to come and sing for him so that people would come at least to listen to her. Shug agrees and decides to take Celie with her to the jukejoint. Albert is thoroughly against Celie going along and so begins to mutter his dislike but Shug shuts him up with one single sentence and thus begins a new chapter in Celie’s life:

Mr. -------- muter, putting on his clothes. My wife can’t do that. No wife of mines.... He go on and on. Shug Avery finally say. Good thing I ain’t your damn wife. He hush then. All three of us go down to Harpo’s (CP 76).

Shug stands up for Celie and lets Albert know that now Celie is no longer alone, she is there to protect her. Shug also makes Celie feel
special and wanted by dedicating one of her songs to her. Celie had been feeling out of place at Harpo’s because Shug seemed to be concentrating on Albert alone, and so quite unconsciously Celie begins to cry on feeling left out. And then suddenly she hears Shug call out her name:

Then I hear my name. 
Shug saying Celie. Miss Celie. 
And I look up where she at. 
She say my name again. She say this song I’m bout to sing is call Miss Celie’s song, Cause she scratched it out of my head when I was sick (CP 77).

Celie is overwhelmed to be so recognized by her lover, Shug. All her life nobody has ever bothered to uphold her contribution in shaping their lives. The men had only used her body but her human value was never taken into account. Shug’s presence in her life has begun to have its positive influence on her. After being buried alive for a long time in a non-existent relationship Shug comes as a Christ figure and resurrects her out of the ruins of her marriage. Now in the true sense begins Celie’s journey towards wholeness and Womanism. The negative image that was given to her by the men around her begins to fall apart, and a new confident Celie emerges. It is nothing but Shug’s love and care which enables Celie to find herself. She is able to protect Celie against Albert because she has acquired a very strong sense of self, a product of her emotional and financial independence. Shug is the only woman who can silence Albert and fight him as an equal. The power that Shug has over Albert is also the power of love. The redeeming factor about Albert is his undying love and devotion for Shug.
Though Albert had not been able to fight his father and get married to Shug, his love for her had not diminished even after she left him and went away after the death of his wife. His ability to love someone so dearly suggests scope for improvement. If he can love someone so deeply, then he can definitely love humanity, if he wishes. This characteristic is utterly missing in Alphonso, Celie’s step-father. And therefore Albert grows to be a better human being, whereas, Alphonso, even in his death, remains a brute. Salvation comes to those who accept their faults and repent.

Meanwhile, Celie grows under the influence and support of Shug. When Shug finally decides to leave and go, Celie is devastated. The protection that she had felt in Shug’s presence suddenly seems to be taken away. Celie confides in Shug that in her absence Albert beats her up for not being Shug. As Shug has never seen this side of Albert she is shocked at this revelation. She promises not to leave until she is certain that Albert doesn’t beat her:

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He beat me when you not here, I say.
Who do, she say, Albert?
Mr. -----------------, I say
I can’t believe it, she say.
She sit down on the bench next to me real hard like she drop. What he beat you for? She ast. for being me and not you.... I won’t leave, she say, until I know Albert won’t even think about beating you (CP 79).
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Shug’s contribution to Celie’s life does not end with helping her survive a difficult marriage, but with time it grows more Womanist in intensity. Shug introduces Celie to the world of bodily pleasure. She
awakens Celie’s sexuality, which had been dormant for many years. The only sex that Celie was acquainted with was colored with the thick layers of incest and rape. In the encounters with men Celie have never known pleasure so her body and its mysteries never attracted her. Her involvement in the act with her husband is miniscules. All this is revealed to Shug when she asks Celie her opinion about her relationship with Albert. Shug is shocked to learn the answer:

She ast me, Tell me the truth, she say, do you mind if Albert sleep with me?
I think, I don’t care who Albert sleep with. But I don’t say that.....
You like to sleep with him? I ast.
Naw, I say.... What is it like?
He git up on you, heist your nightgown round your waist, plunge in. Most times I pretent I ain’t there. He never know the difference. Never ast me how I feel, nothing. Just do his business, get off. Go to sleep (CP 81).

Unbelievable as it seems to Shug that is the only reality of Celie’s life. It is then that Shug shares the pleasures of love-making to Celie. Shug introduces Celie to her own body. She tells her what it is to be involved in a passionate sexual act. For the first time in her life Celie realizes that something that she had dreaded all her life could have been moments of pleasure only if the men involved would have been more caring and understanding. Now Celie knows what she has been missing all this while and so even when she tells Shug that she doesn’t mind Albert sleeping with her, she silently cries when she hears them together:

I don’t care if you sleep with him, I say. And she take me at my word.

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I take me at my word too.
But when I hear them together all I can do is pull the quilt over my head and finger my little button and titties and cry (CP 82-83).

In the meantime Sofia, one of the strongest Womanist characters of *The Color Purple* faces the worst kind of racial oppression, especially looking at the time of the events. Sofia is a product of the post Reconstruction era, when Blacks in America were lawfully free, at least on paper. But as Sofia learns the hard way, so do we realize that freedom is just an illusion for these Black people trapped on the American soil.

Sofia who has inherited the white patriarchal values of resistance and power, believes that she can get away in the highly racist society by the mere use of her muscle-power and her ability to resist. But as it turns out these borrowed virtues prove to be her weakness, which lands her in trouble. On being asked to be the Mayor’s wife’s maid her reply sounds very uncharacteristic and thoroughly unexpected and unacceptable to the Mayor:

.... Would you like to work for me, be my maid?
Sofia say, Hell no.
She say, What you say?
Sofia say, Hell no.
Mayor look at Sofia, push his wife out the way. Stick out his chest. Girl, what you say to Miss. Millie?
Sofia say, I say, Hell no.
He slap her.
.... Sofia knock the man down ----
the police come.... Beat Sofia (CP 93).
Sofia is put in jail for twelve years for attacking the Mayor. It is while she is in the jail that she learns a lesson from the unassuming teacher Celie. Sofia learns the lesson of survival from Celie. She knows that in the jail she has to obey orders; if she does not comply she will be beaten to death. She shares her horrifying experiences with Celie and Albert when they go to meet her at the prison:

Everything nasty here, she say, even the air. Food bad enough to kill you with it.... How you manage? Us ast. Everytime they ast me to do something, Miss Celie, I act like I’m you. I jump right up and do just what they say (CP 93).

Sofia learns, though quite late, that surviving requires art and a lot of patience. Sofia tried to fight the white’s racism by their own weapons, i.e. muscle power and superiority complex and so she failed. Sofia wins her small battle with her muscle-power but loses the war of life and her best years are wasted away in the prison.

Here also we see many instances of female-bonding. In Sofia’s moments of crisis all her women relatives including Squeak stand by her. The kind of attachment that we had earlier witnessed between Shug and Celie is seen being repeated here. Squeak supports Harpo who breaks down when he comes to know of Sofia’s arrest. She takes care of Sofia’s children in her absence. Even when the family is hatching up a plan to decrease Sofia’s suffering by trying to get her out of the prison, Squeak offers to go and meet her white uncle who is the warden of the prison. She risks her life to save the life of her lover’s wife. She lays down herself to save her traditional enemy – the wife. Squeak is raped by her own white uncle when she goes to meet him and talk about Sofia. This
rape is reminiscent of what had happened with Celie herself. Though on the face of it, rape is the worst thing that can happen to a woman. Yet, it is this very incident which liberates Squeak from her own subjugation, gives back her name and her right to sing Lauren Berlant observes in her essay titled “Race, Gender, and Nation in The Color Purple”, that:

The Warden’s “liberties” with Squeak .... Organizes Squeak’s insertion into the “Womanist” order. Having exposed herself to sexual, racial and political abuse in the name of communal solidarity, Squeak assumes the right to her given name of Mary Agnes. She also earns the right to “sing” (Berlant 220).

What is evident is the fact that female-bonding is not an exception but a rule in The Color Purple. Women stand by other women no matter what their relationship. Sofia’s sister Odessa and her husband Jack take care of her children in her absence. No conscious effort is made by the women to bond with one-another, it rather comes across as a natural way of living.

Another interesting turn which occurs in these pages is the emergence of a new Squeak who takes Celie’s advice and demands to be called out by her real name Mary Agnes. When Sofia’s trouble begins, Squeak is informed about it only by Celie. Harpo does not tell her anything, as he does not consider her important enough to share his troubles. Celie who has recently acquired some self-esteem passes on its importance to Squeak and tells her that if she wishes to be taken seriously by her Harpo, then he should better start calling her by her real name:
What your real name? I ask her.
She says, Mary Agnes.
Make Harpo call you by your real name, I say. Then
may be he see you even when he trouble.
She look at me puzzle. I let it go (CP 89).

Celie’s growth is evident in this advice that she gives to Squeak. She has learnt that to make a man respect her, a woman has to first respect herself. She has to be clear about her own identity, before anyone acknowledges her existence. Squeak is unable to understand her advice because the awakening has yet not happened but after her rape by her own white uncle, she realizes the importance of this advice. When she returns from the prison all hurt and limping Harpo tries to console her, she looks at him straight and demands to know whether he likes her or just her colour:

She turn her face up to Harpo. Harpo, she say, do you really love me or just my color? Harpo say, I love you, Squeak. He kneel down and try to put his arms round her waist. She stand up. My name Mary Agnes, she say (CP 102).

Six months after she acquires her true identity Mary Agnes begins to sing. In *The Color Purple* there are more women who grow to be something that they weren’t in the beginning of the novel, compared to Walker’s earlier works. Womanism visits not only Celie, but also Squeak, Shug, Sofia and even Nettie to some extent. They become whole by the end of the novel. Their struggles are different but their goals are identical.
Walker's characters are in search of a Womanist salvation. Sofia's salvation comes with her acceptance of the white woman Eleanor Jane's undying love and admiration for her. When Eleanor was a kid and Sofia had to take care of her, Sofia refused to acknowledge the benevolent stance of the little girl. Her absolute hatred for the whites prevented her from accepting the little girl’s affection whenever there was a problem in the white family involving Sofia, Eleanor would inevitably side Sofia and speak on her behalf. But Sofia prefers to completely ignore her, “The little girl dote on Sofia, always stick up for her. Sofia never notice, she as deaf to the little girl as she is to her brother” (CP 106).

Even when Eleanor was a child, she was a Womanist in her own way. She would stand up for Sofia whenever there was any trouble for her as the Mayor's maid. She is able to see the beauty behind the black face of Sofia. When her brother accuses Sofia of injuring him, Eleanor stands up for her and says that it was Billy, her brother who hurt himself:

Sofia do it? she ast.
Little girl pipe up Billy do it his own self. She say. trying to kick Sofia leg.
The little girl dote on Sofia, always stick u for her. Sofia never notice, she as deaf to the little girl as she is to her brother (CP 106).

This is how Sofia is different from Celie. Female-bonding doesn’t come to her naturally. We can understand that, racial issues are on the top, but yet if the little girl is being different, she should be acknowledged. Especially because the little girl is not being condescending towards her, it is genuine affection.
Without probing deeper Walker does bring in the discussion on racism. The subtle manner in which racism operates is evident from the events when two races cross each other’s path. Here it is between Miss Millie, the White Mayor’s wife and Sofia. Miss Millie is gifted a car by her husband, but he refuses to teach her to drive and so she requests Sofia to show her how to drive. As it turns out Sofia succeeds in teaching her and so one day Miss Millie offers to drive Sofia her home. As usual Sofia sits in the front seat along with Miss Millie, who hesitantly reminds her that they are being in the South, where blacks do not sit besides Whites, if they are not teaching how to drive or clean:

Finally she say, Sofia, with a little laugh, This is the South.
Yes ma’am, I say.
She clear her throat, laugh some more. look where you sitting, she say.
I am sitting where I always sit, I say.
That’s the problem, she say Have you ever seen a white person and a colored sitting side by side in a car, when one of ‘em wasn’t showing the other one how to drive or clean it? (CP 109).

Racism is not over for Walker, but she wishes to highlight sexism, more than anything else.

Even within the white family the woman is an absolute nobody. When Sofia refuses to comply with Miss Millie’s request of becoming her maid, she is punished because she challenged the Mayor’s authority and not because she insulted a White woman. Again when the authorities decide to put Sofia in the Mayor’s house as a maid, nobody bothers to know whether Miss Millie is comfortable with the idea or not. She is
bought a car by her husband, because “if colored could have cars then one for her was past due” (CP 107). But he very conveniently refuses to teach her how to drive. Thus sexism is rampant in the white families, albeit more in the white than in black.

Before leaving Shug helps Celie awaken her physical desires, which ignite the need for fulfillment. Shug demystifies Celie’s sexuality and enables her to enjoy sex with Albert. When she returns again with her husband Grady, she inquires whether there is any improvement in love making:

Yall make love any better? She ast. Us try, I say. he try to play with the button but feel like his fingers dry. Us don’t git nowhere much You still a virgin? She ast. I reckon. I say (CP 115).

This proves that both Celie and Shug are Womanists at heart. Their love for one another supersedes their conventional envy for each other. Celie doesn’t mind if Albert sleeps with Shug and Shug in her turn helps Celie get more sexual gratification from her relationship with Albert.

The comfort level that Celie has with Shug is unsurpassable by any other person or relationship. Apart from God, Celie is able to confide only in Shug about the rape by her step-father and subsequent children she had from him. Shug’s love for her opens up the flood-gates and the tears that were damed-up overflow, “I start to cry too. I cry and cry and cry. Seem like it all come back to me, laying there in Shug arms. How it hurt and how much I was surprise” (CP 117).
Till now Celie had not allowed herself the luxury of crying over her unbearable past. There was no one intimate enough with whom she could share her pain. No sympathetic shoulder to cry on. Shug emancipates Celie’s soul from the held-up pain and liberates her from her past. The sin of incest sat heavy on Celie’s soul because till later she is unaware that Alphonso was not her real dad but her step-father. For the first-time ever Celie is allowed to complain, because this is the first time that somebody is willing to listen to her. Celie tells Shug that all her life she was an absolute nobody, a nobody who was completely alienated and forgotten by everybody. There was no one who would care for her. She exclaims, “Nobody ever love me, I say. She say (Shug), I love you, Miss Celie. And then she haul off and kiss me on the mouth” (CP 117-118).

Shug kisses Celie like nobody had ever kissed her before. And slowly their kissing gets converted into something more passionate:

Um, she say, like she surprise.
I kiss her back, say, um, too.
Us kiss and kiss till us can’t hardly kiss no more. then us touch each other (CP 118).

The kiss and the touch are more a part of consolation than lust. Celie was never made to feel desirable or loved. As a result her self-esteem was at its lowest ebb. Celie’s past experience with men have been very humiliating, so it was only for a woman to bring her up and be herself. Though lesbian in nature the intimacy shared by Shug and Celie is characteristically Womanist.
Gay Wilentz remarks in his essay mentioned earlier, that Shug becomes a spiritual mother for Celie who initiates her into her sexuality:

Through their lovemaking, Shug, as a spiritual mother, teaches Celie to appreciate and love her own body and self. In a sort of personal "initiation ceremony", Shug teaches Celie what she never learned from her own mother – how to find pleasure in one’s own body and how to give pleasure in return (Wilentz 71).

This encounter turns out to be the most transforming phenomenon in Celie’s life. Her Womanist assertion begins from this point onwards. Once her self-worth is strongly established, she can forge ahead and demand her rights to everything including her own life. The ultimate gift that Shug gives to Celie is her sister Nettie’s letters. Albert had been hiding Nettie’s letters from Celie because Nettie had resisted his advances. Shug is the first one to know about the letters because she is the one who accompanies Albert when he get the mail from the mail box. Shug notices that amongst the other mail there are letters with funny looking stamps on them. After she comes to know about Nettie and her absence, Shug puts two and two together and realizes that those letters are from Nettie to Celie. But Albert has not been giving them to Celie, Shug quietly steals one and gives it to Celie. This letter brings not only Nettie to life but also the hope for a better future. The proof of Nettie being alive gives Celie the desire to fight for her rights. Amazingly Celie is not ready to believe that Albert has been hiding her letters, she even goes ahead and defends him:

Saturday morning Shug put Nettie letter in my lap.... He been keeping your letters, say Shug . Naw, I say, Mr......
mean sometimes, but he not that mean. She say, Humpf, he that mean (CP 124).

The pain and anger that she has been storing unconsciously for all these years come rushing out in an avalanche of hatred that Celie feels for Albert. With murder in her eyes she approaches Albert, “I watch him so close, I begin to feel a lightening in the head. Fore I know anything I’m standing hind his chair with his razor open” (CP 125).

Shug stops her from murdering Albert, making her realize that Albert is not worth going to the prison for Albert’s this betrayal paves way for Celie’s emancipation. Even after all that Celie does for Albert, he is such a patriarch at heart that he feels no remorse at stealing Celie’s life-line, i.e. Nettie’s letters, Calvin Hernton comments on this aspect of Black men’s life in his essay mentioned earlier:

Although she toils mightily in Albert’s house and provides many services, including sex, she is penniless, and Albert treats her any way he chooses, because the overriding morality (ethics) of patriarchy toward women is that women have no rights that men are bound to respect this aspect of patriarchy is epitomized in Albert’s denial of Celie’s right to privacy by withholding her letters…. (Hernton 14).

In this moment of crisis Shug is the only one who stands by her giving her all the support that she can. Shug also tries to justify her own feelings for Albert, by sharing her story with Celie. Shug tells Celie that in the past Albert was a very different person. A person who laughed, danced, joked and loved to his heart’s content. She wonders as to where this jovial and loving Albert has disappeared. She promises that she does
not love this Albert who beats Celie up, “Cause I don’t know the Albert that don’t dance, can’t hardly laugh, never talk bout nothing, beat you and hid your sister Nettie’s tellers. Who he?” (CP 128).

Albert is a fine example of patriarchy working against itself. Albert’s father did not allow him to get married to Shug, because according to the laws of patriarchy man has absolute control over everything he owns including his wife and children. The consequence of this is that Albert’s sensitivity is mutilated beyond repair. Thus we see that one powerful man can oppress another powerless man. The power can assume any form that of money, muscle, social and political. Albert’s father yields his societal power on his son. His all-time lover Shug refuses to accept such an Albert who has lost touch with his Womanist side, as a result of the onslaught of patriarchy.

The two women begin to get hold of Celie’s lost life in a joint effort. Shug retrieves Nettie’s letters from Albert. These letters are more than just letters. They are almost like a book of revelations. If the letters would have reached Celie on time then she would have been able to get out of the oppressive relationship long ago. Nettie reveals the reason behind Albert hiding her letters in her very first letter. She tells her how Albert followed her when she left Celie’s home, and tried to force himself on her. In her defense, Nettie, hurt Albert enough to let her alone. This makes Albert so mad that he promises to kill any communication between the two sisters:

.... He got down from his horse and started to try to kiss me, and drag me back in the woods. .... I hurt him bad enough to make him let me alone. But he so mad. He said because
of what I’d done. I’d never hear from you again, and you would never hear from me (CP 131).

Albert, who has not known the power of bonding, is unable to visualize the damage that his act would have on the lives of the two women whom he pledges to separate.

There is one more life-changing revelation for Celie in Nettie’s first letter. Nettie reveals that she has found Celie’s daughter Olivia. Nettie on reaching the Reverend Mr……’s place is received by a girl, who has Celie’s eyes in Celie’s face, “And what was my surprise when a little girl opened the door and she had your eyes set in your face” (CP 132). This revelation opens up many more doors for Celie. Now she knows that her children are not dead. Just like her sister they are safe and sound and will be returning to her eventually.

If Celie was allowed the luxury of Nettie’s letter then, she would have been a different person altogether. Albert had not only deprived her of her bond with her kin, but deliberately kept her loveless. He never loved her and blocked all the love that could come her way through Nettie’s letters. In her very second letter Nettie writes about how much she misses and loves Celie, “But God, I miss you, Celie. I think about the time you laid yourself down for me. I love you will all my heart. Your sister, Nettie” (CP 133).

Nettie describes the two sisters’ anguish in words which Celie has never been able to express. They know that all they have in this world is one-another and therefore Nettie tries to be in the know of whatever is happening to Celie. She also tries to request Samuel to go and check on
Celie, but Samuel feels that he has no right to interfere between a husband and his wife. Nettie knows that Celie has no money to buy stamps for postage, so in her next letter she even sends Celie some stamps, which unfortunately reach Celie after years and years of agonizing separation:

I asked Samuel if he would visit you and Mr.-------- , just to see how you are. But he says he can’t risk putting himself between man and wife, --------- Write if you can. Here are some stamps (CP 134-5).

Unlike Celie, Nettie gets a chance to explore the world through her association with Samuel and Corrine. And through her letters she wishes to share with Celie everything that she learns during her journey to Africa as a Missionary. The Womanist characteristic of the desire for knowledge is taken very positively here in Nettie’s desire to know. She remembers her teacher, Ms. Beasley for keeping alive the desire to know:

And for keeping alive in me somehow the desire to know....Oh Celie, there are colored people in the world who want us to know! Want us to grow and see the light! They arenot all mean like Pa and Albert, or beaten down like ma was (CP 138-9).

There is nothing but hope in all of Nettie’s letters to Celie. If, Celie had been in ‘know’ of what was going on in Nettie’s life and how she would one day be liberated she would have led a better life. Nettie’s letters are nothing less than a spiritually enhancing text. The confirmation that Nettie gives in her letter regarding Celie’s children is more than liberating. Celie’s guilt of having abandoned her children is taken care of by placing the kids in the care of loving parents like
Samuel and Corrine. Nettie, is so excited when she reveals that Celie’s children are alive and happy that she considers her coming to them as a miracle:

Yes, their children, sent by “God” are your children, Celie. And they are being brought up in love, Christian charity and awareness of God. And now “God” has sent me to watch over them, .... It is a miracle. Isn’t it? (CP 139).

By taking away her children from her “God” has in fact done Celie a favour. Because if the children were allowed to stay with their mother, then their life would have been miserable.

If Nettie’s letters would have reached Celie on time then, even she would have traveled with Nettie to Africa, though just metaphorically if not literally. Because, Nettie shares all her experience with her even the tiniest details are not missed out. Celie’s religious understandings are also stirred through these letter. Nettie writes about Christ and the possibility of him being colored, as revealed is the Bible itself, “That’s why the bible says that Jesus Christ had hair like Lamb’s wool. Lamb’s wool is not straight, Celie. It isn’t even curly” (CP 141).

Before leaving for Africa Nettie accompanies Samuel and Corrine to the Missionary Society of New York, the society which would be sponsoring their visit. Here, for the first time they encounter the racist behavior of their fellow missionaries, who in ideal are working for the emancipation of Black people, but in reality are unable to shake away their racist presumptions. What Nettie finds amiss is a picture of a white missionary woman when she sees the walls of the society splattered with photographers of white men. Inadvertently Nettie realizes that Racism
and Sexism go hand in hand, "On every wall there was a picture of a white man.... I looked for a picture of the white woman but didn’t see one" (CP 143).

Nettie is sure to keep Celie with her wherever she goes. She introduces Celie to a new world which is much fairer than the world back home. Nettie relates her experiences in London where she meets white people who are eager to help them in their fight to abolish racism, and who happily invite black people into their homes and hearts. Nettie is so surprised to see the utterly desegregated society where there were no separate utensils for Blacks and Whites, ".... White men and women, ...., invited us to their gatherings and into their homes for tea, and to talk about our work.... We all used the same cups and plates" (CP 145). All Nettie’s letters end with a reassuring “I miss you” and “I love you”, which would have been enough for Celie to survive had she received the letters on time.

After reading the first two or three letters Celie is so mad at Albert that all she thinks of is murder. It is Shug who finally convinces her to not kill Albert giving her the hope of meeting Nettie and for the sake of her love. Instead Shug diverts her anger towards constructive means, and hands her a needle to bring out her frustration. “Okay, she say. And everyday we going to read Nettie’s letters and sew, a needle and not a razor in my hand, I think” (CP 153).

Nettie, Samuel and Corrine had gone to Africa with the mission to enlighten the people of Africa, and ‘civilize’ them to the effect of turning them into Christ believers. On their first day at the Olinka village they are offered the most sacred offering of the Olinkans, i.e. the roofleaf.
For the Olinkans the roofleaf was their God as it protected them against the onslaught of the various seasons, “We know a roofleaf is not Jesus Christ, but in its own humble way, is it not God?” (CP 160).

The ancient civilization protected their environment because they considered it sacred. Their gods were nature Gods, so it was not difficult for them to protect nature. Alice Walker reveals many things about the African society. Some positive, some negative. Sexism was very much a part of the world where Nettie and Celie came from but what Nettie discovers is that even the African village that they move into is as sexist as the society back home. The value of a woman in the Olinkan village was with regard to her relationship with her man. By herself a woman was nothing. Nettie noticed that the Olinkans did not send their daughters to the school that they had started. On inquiring Nettie gets a reply steeped in sexism:

When I asked a mother why she thought this, she said: a girl is nothing to herself; only to her husband can she become something. What can she become? I asked. Why, she said, the mother of his children (CP 162).

What is painful is the fact that even women have accepted their position viz-a-viz a man. Turning these women into Womanists would be an uphill task for anybody. As far as Celie’s daughter Olivia is concerned, she is a born Womanist. A girl-child whose beliefs in equality of all is so deep-rooted that without being consciously told she can recognize inequality instantly. It is she who questions Nettie as to why her Olinkan friend Tashi does not come to school. And when Nettie tells
her the reason, her Womanist understanding pleasantly surprises her aunt:

Why can’t Tashi come to school? She asked me. When I told her the Olinka don’t believe in educating girls she said, quick as a flash. They’re like white people at home who don’t want colored people to learn (CP 162).

Nettie writes about the mentality of the women in the Olinkan village, especially the chief’s wives. They are a bunch of unhappy women who consider themselves extremely lucky to be one of the chief’s wives, even if they are no better than slaves, “Even though they are unhappy and work like donkeys they still think it is an honor to be the chief’s wife” (CP 163).

Even though Olivia’s friend Tashi is not allowed to come to the school she learns all her lessons from Olivia who passes on her knowledge to Tashi in the comfort of Nettie’s hut. As a result of which Tashi begins to change into a thoughtful quiet girl. Her parents are not able to digest this change and so they come to Nettie complaining about the effect Olivia is having on her. They firmly state that they do not want their daughter to learn things that they don’t appreciate. They have specific roles for women, and Tashi is supposed to fit into one of these roles, “Our women are respected here, said the father .... There is always someone to look after the Olinka woman. A father. An uncle. A brother or nephew” (CP 167).

Alice Walker highlights the inherent patriarchy of the African society. For them to respect a woman is to control her. A woman who lives a life of their approval is a woman they would ‘respect’. But if she
drifts even a little from the path laid out for her by her father, then she
would be shunned and thrown out. Here, there is a mention of a woman
who defied all the roles designed for her, and as a punishment to her and
the other women she was sold off to the slave traders. While comparing
Tashi to this aunt, her parents inform Nettie about her:

She is becoming someone else; her face is beginning to
draw the spirit of one of her aunts who was sold to the
trader because she no longer fit into village life. This aunt
refused to marry the an chosen for her. Refused to bow to
the chief. Did nothing but lay up, crack cola nuts between
her teeth and giggle (CP 166).

There have always been deviants in almost all the societies of the world.
And when it is a woman who defies the laws of men, she is either
branded as a witch, or a mad woman. Nobody wishes to know the reason
behind this kind of behavior. They don’t allow women to be themselves.
In fact they don’t allow any form of dissent by anybody, whether women
or men, especially marginal men.

Alice Walker also touches upon the evils of modernization and
civilization through her reference to the road that is being constructed by
cutting through the forest and displacing the African tribes living in it.
The Olinkan’s attraction of all the activity happening around them seems
very childish to Nettie because they are unaware of the consequences.

Nettie then goes on to describe the female-bonding that she
noticed in the Olinkan village. Even though women shared their
husbands they would be great friends with one another. They would care
for one-another’s children. Men have no time for women, so women
make friends with one-another:
This friendship among women is something Samuel often
talks about.... Since the women are friends and will do
anything for one another.... And since they giggle and
gossip and nurse each other’s children, then they must be
happy with things as they are (CP 172).

This sense of female-bonding stays with the Black women even when
they come to America. Thus we can see that the strong Womanist
characteristics of female-bonding is very much a part of the Black
women’s tradition. But the strife between Black men and Black women
is confined not only to husband-wife relationship, but is an inherent part
of all male-female relationships. This is brought out in the relationship
between Tashi and her father. Nettie notes that even though all her life
Tashi tried her best to please her father, her father never appreciated her.
It is not only women who are conditioned in a certain manner, even men
are conditioned to be men and never allowed to connect with women in a
real manner, “All her young life she has tried to please her father, never
quite realizing that, as a girl, she never could” (CP 171).

Nettie describes in her letters how the road destroys the Olinka
village completely. The Olinkans not only lose their homes but also their
natural rights on their land and water. Like all marginals around the
world they are absolutely helpless to fight against the might of the
powerful white man. The only positive outcome of this devastation is
that more and more women have started sending their daughters to
school along with Tashi and Olivia. They have been able to prevail upon
their husbands and understood the importance of learning in the growing
times of difficulty:
.... More mothers are sending their daughters to school. The men do not like it: who wants a wife who knows everything her husband knows? They fume. But the women have their ways, and they love their children, even their girls (CP 176-7).

Then comes the life-changing revelation for Celie in the form of one of Nettie’s letters. Nettie writes to her a story about a Black enterprising businessman, whose success threatened the white business community so much that they one day lynched him and his two brothers. His wife went mad at the sight of the mutilated body of her husband. A stranger, then, walked into their lives and took control of the widow and her two daughters. This story needs no explanation for both the sisters, because they know who is being referred to in the story. The last line confirms everything, “Pa is not our pa!” (CP 182).

‘Pa’ is their step-father Alphonso, who for a long time was considered by these girls as their biological father. And this was one of the biggest obstacle for the spiritual growth of Celie. Her guilt of having committed the sin of incest had prevented Celie from asserting her own self. But now that she was free she could be herself. The confidence that was missing in her fills her up miraculously.

What we witness now is a new Celie. A Celie who is ready to face her past and interrogate her present Celie finds her identity intact among the ruins of her family. She is now able to look herself in the eye. The first thing that come to Celie’s mind is a statement which questions the very existence of God. She feels that if there was a waking God he would not have allowed all the bad things to happen to her, “My daddy lynch. My mama crazy. All my little half-brothers and sisters no kin to me. My
children not my sister and brother. Pa not pa. You must be sleep” (CP 183).

This “you” is God. This seems to be the last letter addressed to God. From here on Celie begins to write to Nettie. The one who is amazed at this shift is none other than Shug. She is surprised that Celie has ditched God. Celie writes:

I don’t write to God no more, I write to you. What happen to God? Ast Shug. Who that? I say. She look at me serious. Big a devil as you is, I say, you not worried bout no God, surely. She say, wait a minute. Hold on just a minute here. Just because I don’t harass it like some peoples us know don’t mean I ain’t got religion (CP 199).

Shug’s concept of religion is more spiritual than religious. Shug awakens Celie’s spirituality. All this while God was a white long bearded old man for Celie, Shug gives her a new picture. Shug disintegrates the figure of God residing in Church and the bible. She gives her a new insight about what is God and where to find it:

God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God. But only them that search for it inside find it. And sometimes it just manifest itself even if you not looking, or don’t know what you looking for (CP 202).

Shug advises Celie to look beyond the prescribed picture of God and find God inside not only herself but inside everything that God created. God is not confined to a race, a gender or even a species. God is everything and everything is God.
It? I ast
Yeah, It. God ain’t a he or a she, but a It.
But what do it look like? I ast.
Don’t look like nothing, she say. It ain’t a picture show. It ain’t something you can look at apart from anything else, including yourself. I believe God is everything, say Shug. Everything that is or ever was or ever will be. And when you can feel that, and be happy to feel that you’ve found It (CP 202-3).

Shug’s concept about the indivisibility of God is very much Indian. God is not something which can be confined in a text or a temple or any place of worship. He is everywhere. According to Walker all things created by God have an invisible connection with one-another. If you cut a tree you are bound to bleed. This is a thoroughly liberating phenomenon. Once we liberate God from the places of worship we liberate ourselves:

She say, My first step from the old white man was trees. Then air. Then birds. Then other people.... That feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all. I knew that if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed (CP 203).

Shug also reveals how God approves of sex. She says that it is one of the best things that God has made. And that there is no question of him not appreciating it. She explains to Celie that God just expects humans to appreciate what he has created for them. Not in a vain manner, but with a desire to share all the beautiful things that he has erected:

I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don’t notice it.... People think pleasing God is all God care about. But any fool living in
Shug completely alters the image of God that Celie has grown up with. Shug implores that God cannot definitely be of one specific gender. It is a spirit which is omnipresent. Thus the man-made hierarchy of placing God at the top and then conveniently placing himself second is completely deconstructed and that too quite logically. Spiritual awakening is one of the most important aspects of Celie’s metamorphosis. By denying the existence of God Celie is asserting her new found self. This proves to be the first step in the direction of self-independence. If she can free herself from the ultimate “man’s”, that is, God’s influence, she is surely capable of discarding men like Albert and Alphonso. As Shug says, “You have to git man off your eyeball, before you can see anything at all” (CP 204). Here it doesn’t seem that Walker is being a man-hater, instead what she is trying to do is that she is trying to balance the universe by giving everything that God created, its due importance. Just one of God’s creation cannot be the most important thing and superior to all others. Shug’s advice to Celie summarizes this point perfectly, “Whenever you trying to pray, and man plop himself on the other end of it, tell him to git lost, say Shug. Conjure up flowers, wind, water, a big rock” (CP 204).

God is not there in one figure which looks like man but is omnipresent in everyone and everything that It has created. This seems to be the only truth about God, but yet it is very difficult to accept as our religion. Because the ‘man-made religions of this world have been around for so long that it is difficult to replace it. Initially, Celie finds it hard to accept as well:
But this hard work, let me tell you. He been there so long, he don’t want to budge. He threaten lightening, floods and earthquakes.

Us fight. I hardly pray at all.

Every time I conjure up a rock, I throw it (CP 204).

Once Celie is able to equate man with God she finds the courage to confront Albert. Nettie’s promise to return with her children and Shug’s undying support supplements Celie with the missing ingredients of courage and self-confidence. Nettie’s letters bring to light not only Albert’s meanness but also Celie’s hidden Womanism. It opens up Celie’s hitherto unknown past for her.

Finally Shug feels that it is time for Celie to leave Albert and move on with her life. Like a true Womanist she invites Celie to come with her to Tennessee. She breaks the news to Albert one evening while the whole family is gathered for dinner. Shug says that she is leaving and Celie is going with her. Albert’s reaction is predictable, he is struck by the news of Shug’s departure, but on hearing that Celie is going he is absolutely furious:

Us leaving, Shug say again.

Celia is coming with us, say Shug.
Mr. --------------‘s head swivel back straight. Say what, he ast.
Celia is coming to Memphis with me.
Over my dead body, Mr. -------------- say.
You satisfied that what you want, Shug say, cool as clabber (CP 206).

Albert’s audacity is astounding. After cheating on Celie on almost all counts he wonders why she is not happy with him and
therefore has the guts to confront her. Unknown of the change that has visited his wife, Albert is as rude and obstinate as ever. But what he hears take the breath out of him:

He look over at me. I thought you was finally happy, he say. what wrong now?You a low down dog is what’s wrong, I say. it’s time to leave you and enter into the Creation. And your dead body just the welcome mat I need...You took my sister Nettie away from me, I say. And she was the only person love me in the world (CP 207).

These words leave Albert and everybody around him speechless. All that Albert can do is mutter out some sounds. Now it is Celie’s turn to speak and other’s to mute ly witness the whole act of self-assertion. Celie is independent in the real sense, she, with the help of other women, has succeeded in creating a new world where women are emotionally, socially and financially self-sufficient. The domination of men that Celie has suffered all her life is a thing of past now. It is the community of women who stand by her in this moment of freedom. Shug was always there but now Celie is joined by Sofia, Mary Agnes and all other women who laugh at Albert for making stupid remarks about women:

You bitch, he say. what will people say, you running off to Memphis like you don’t have a house to look after? Shug say.... Why any woman give a shit what people think is a mystery to me.... Say Grady.... A woman can’t git a man if peoples talk. Shug look at me and us giggle. Then us laugh sure nuff. Then squeek start to laugh. Then Sofia. All us laugh and laugh (CP 207-8).

This resounding laughter of this community of women is the warning bell that men need to sit up and acknowledge. It not only
liberates Celie from her sexist role but also empowers other women to be whatever they desire. Mary O’Connor comments on this connection of women in her essay titled “Subject, Voice, and Women in Some Contemporary Black American Women’s Writing” as under:

The connection with women, even to the extent of sexual love between them, has a privileged place in the novel. It weaves through the book in ascending power as the domination of men over Celie diminishes and as Celie’s own self-awareness and sense of identity grow (Connor 208).

Without any conscious effort all women have become Womanist in both mind and spirit. Celie liberates Mary Agnes too, first by giving her, her name back, and then by, helping her get back her singing. She also goes with Shug and Celie in order to pursue her career in singing. Squeak or rather Mary Agnes takes the cue from her role model Celie and assert her desire to sing in public. Harpo tries to stop her from going and singing, but with help from Sofia she has her ways:

Listen Squeak, say Harpo. You can’t go to Memphis. That’s all there is to it. Mary Agnes, say Squeak. Squeak, Mary Agnes, what difference do it make? It make a lot, say Squeak. When I was Mary Agnes I could sing in public (CP 210).

Sofia who is the true Womanist spirit, promises to take care of Mary Agnes’s children in her absence, “Go on sing, say Sofia, I’ll look after this one till you come back” (CP 211). Irrespective of what men
Think women have now begun to stand by one-another in their moments of crisis.

Women learn from one-another but men don’t do so. Even when Harpo doesn’t fight any further with Mary Agnes, Albert tries his best to break Celie’s morale and stop her from leaving. But all that he accomplishes is Celie’s spiritual connection with everything around her:

I say, until you do right by me, everything you touch will crumble. He laugh, who you think you is? He say, you can’t curse nobody. Look at you. You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman Goddam, he say, you nothing at all. Until you do right by me, I say, everything you even dream about will fail. I give it to him straight, just like it come to me. And it seem to come to me from the trees (CP 213).

Through the means of Celie all that has been polluted by men is answering back to Albert’s insults. She doesn’t seem to be the only one affected by Albert’s evil, the natural forces are cursing Albert through Celie. Albert is in no position to judge Celie’s power but the moment when Shug sees Celie’s face she realizes that Celie is not alone. She brings her into herself. It is then that Celie answers Albert in her own way:

Then I feel Shug shake me.... And I come to myself. I’m pore, I’m black, I may be ugly and can’t cook, a voice say to everything listening. But I’m here. Amen, say Shug. Amen, Amen (CP 214).

The self that Albert is trying so hard to negate becomes so strongly established in her own belief that no one can now reconvert her into her husband’s slave. She establishes her identity using the same terms
applied to her by her husband to negate her being and turns them to work in her favour. Mary O'Connor discusses this affirmation in her essay mentioned earlier and states that the ‘nothing’ that Albert uses to negate her existence is transformed and defeated by existence:

The nothing, then is transformed and defeated by existence, by I’m here, and by her saying, “I’m here”. I am, therefore I am not nothing, or not as object to be bartered, possessed, exploited, and abused. The fact of her presence resists formulations and implies a reality beyond the labels of one man’s discourse (Connor 205).

Albert realizes that the woman he has been oppressing for so long is beyond the field of his control, but only too late. This woman happily accepts that she is black and poor and ugly and therefore, not desirable to men whom she has to worry about pleasing. She does not have to follow the rules laid down by patriarchy for white beautiful women; she can thus break all the conventions and create a new tradition that fits her perfectly.

Celie begins a new phase of her life once she reaches Shug’s home in Memphis. Shug’s love and affection enables Celie to seek her absolute freedom. Psychological and emotional stability empowers Celie to seek her own calling. Celie relies on her ancestral art of stitching and converts it into a life sustaining and economically viable enterprise. Celie’s matrilineage rescues her through the art passed over from mother to daughter. Walker elaborately discusses this in her essay titled *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*, wherein she examines the various modes adopted by the suppressed Black women to exhibit their creativity, especially during slavery. Women used to make exquisite quilts to bring
out their confined art. Frank W. Shelton comments in his article titled "Alienation and Integration in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*", that Walker is invoking her women ancestors and offering them her profound gratitude. He comments:

She (Celie) thus becomes one of those women Walker described so movingly in her essay, "In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens", earlier black women who were essentially artists but whose gifts were so stifled and whose opportunities were so limited that they are never heard of by the outside world.... They found an outlet for their creativity where they could, and similarly Celie..., develops a way to express her personality in art (Shelton npag).

Celie doesn’t need to learn a new art-form, nor does she have to explore new avenues of occupation. She just has to do what she instinctively knows the best. Celie makes pants for everybody from Shug to Jack (Odessa’s husband). She keeps in mind the personal needs of the various people she designs for. That turns out to be her USP.

Celie’s spiritual growth is complete when we hear her talk about making love to God and her general attitude towards everything reveals her Womanist self. She is not surprised to see people accept the undeniable fact of women pall-bearers at Sofia’s mother’s funeral. She understands that in general folks will accept what they cannot change. If women allow the society to dictate to them, then the society will definitely do so. But if women lay down their own rules, there is no one to confront them:
Well, say Harpo at the funeral, here come the amazons....Folks crying and fanning and trying to keep a stray eye on they children, but they don’t stare at Sofia and her sisters. They act like this the way it always done. I love folks (CP 228).

Shug demystifies God for Celie and she in turn does that for Sofia and Albert. Celie is so thoroughly convinced in her belief regarding the oneness with God, that she is now able to make love with God. Sofia is scandalized to hear this, but Celie assures her that God knows what she means by saying this:

I smoke when I want to talk to God. I smoke when I want to make love. Lately I feel like me and God make love just fine anyhow....Miss Celie! Say Sofia. Shock. Girl, I’m bless, I say to Sofia. God knows what I mean (CP 227).

Celie shares her experience of the cosmic dance of the particles that make matter and energy. She connects Sofia and Harpo with the sound created through this eternal dance. They light up the reefer with Celie and feel awakened to the sound coming from everything around them:


Celie is pleasantly surprised to know that she is not the only one who has undergone a change, Albert has earned his liberation through
repentance. Celie's curse has had a profound impact on him. He could diffuse the effect only after he sent all Nettie's remaining letters to Celie. He became a completely new person once he purified his heart of all the meanness that had blocked his veins. Sofia tells Celie about Albert's journey from evil to malevolence. "Oh, she say, Harpo made him send you the rest of your sister's letters. Right after that he start to improve. You know meanness kill, she say" (CP 231).

Albert redeems himself absolutely by accepting Celie as she is and in fact making friends with her. As mentioned earlier, Albert is different from Celie's step-father Alphonso, because of the fact, that, he is not only capable of loving someone thoroughly, but is also able to accept his sin and repent. Towards the end of the novel Albert also turns into a Womanist.

In the meantime Corrinne dies in Africa and Nettie gets married to Samuel. She promises to come back to America soon with Celie's children. She also talks about the absolute exploitation of the Africans at the hands of the English colonizers. Tashi and the initiation process involving genital mutilation is mentioned, though just in the passing. It will be dealt in detail in one of the following novels.

Along with the happy news of Nettie's marriage comes the news of her inheritance of their home, land and the store that originally belonged to their real father but which was in Alphonso's control as long as he lived. But after his death Celie and Nettie are informed about it by his wife Daisy. Thereon life takes a beautiful turn for Celie. Just as Celie was always a Womanist without knowing it, the two sisters were always provided for by their parents without their having any clue of it. But the
ecstasy that Celie experiences at this juncture is best expressed in her own words when she welcomes Nettie back home to their “own home”, “Oh Nettie, us have a house! A house big enough for us and our children, for your husband and Shug. Now you can come home cause you have a home to come to!” (CP 253).

Just like a guardian spirit Shug takes good care of Celie, gives her her own identity and helps her become completely self-reliant. But the one thing that Celie is still dependent upon was Shug’s love. Unless and until Celie liberates herself from Shug’s love, Celie’s complete spiritual growth might not happen. And so, providence brings in a new teenage lover named Germaine in Shug’s life which pushes Celie away from her. Though painful initially this is the event which detaches Celie from everything that holds her back and liberates her to be what she wishes to be. It also brings the two spouses, Celie and Albert, together. Albert stands by Celie in her moment of crisis. Celie in one of her letters to Nettie writes, “Mr…… seem to be the only one understand my feeling” (CP 267). This change has come in their relationship precisely because both of them have turned Womanists in their own right. And both of them have begun to love and understand each-other in both mind and spirit. Albert also rescues Celie out of unwanted position when someone tries to flirt with Celie, “Mr…… have to come to the rescue. He tell the man, this lady my wife. The man vanish out the door” (CP 267-8). This camaraderie liberates both of them from their painful past and releases them from their prejudices for one-another.

Albert also participates in the art of sewing which he confesses he liked since he was a child, but his ‘manhood’ prevented him from taking
up a needle and sewing. Patriarchy had not confined women but had also limited men’s options of expressing himself:

When I was growing up, he said, I use to try to sew along with mama cause that’s what she was always doing. But everybody laughed at me. But you know, I liked it. Well, nobody gon laugh at you now, I said. Here, help me stitch in these pockets (CP 279).

Celie learns that liberation of the soul always involves liberating other souls as well. Since she comes to know about Shug’s new love interest she has been very frustrated but gradually she allows herself to move on and accept Shug’s individuality. She learns that love should not bind one, it should free the lover to do whatever s/he wishes to do. Celie finally wakes up to respect the individual rights of Shug and thus liberates herself from her negative emotions:

But then I think, Shug got a right to live too. She got a right to look over the world in whatever company she choose. Just cause I love her don’t take away none of her rights....Who am I to tell her who to love? My job just to love her good and true myself (CP 275-6).

This perception changes Celie’s focus to a great extent. Now she can live without getting over-possessive. Once the selfishness dissolves, there seems to be more space in her heart for love from all quarters. Albert can see the difference that has come upon Celie and therefore invites her to marry him again, both in “the spirit as well as in the flesh” (Walker: 1982). But Celie refuses to marry him, yet she welcomes his friendship. Now that Celie has learnt to be content with living without Shug, she
writes that she is coming back home. Celie tries to be calm and content in an effort to control herself:

Shug write me she coming home....
I be so calm. If she come, I be happy. If she don’t I be content. And then I figure this the lesson I was suppose to learn (CP 290).

And finally when Nettie returns with her family the whole community of women come close and form a new sisterhood which sustains all and welcomes everybody. This community is truly a Womanist community because it consists not only of women but of men, trees, stars, sky and everything created by God. In her final letter Celie’s salutation includes everything that she can think of, “Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God” (CP 292).

The all-inclusive salutation is a perfect end to this Womanist journey. Celie who started her sojourn all alone with the company of an almost absent God ends her search in the divine presence of everything that makes her whole. The salutation begins with ‘Dear God’ in the first letter, in-between steers towards her sister Nettie and finally culminates in the arms of the all-compassing Spirit called ‘God’. Here God is not the traditional God in face s/he is much more Womanist in his/her appeal because ‘it’ has been relieved of it’s humanly baggage.

Celie’s Womanist journey is undertaken not only by her but by everyone who comes across her path. She has many women role-models to guide her in her journey, without whose help her travel would not have been possible. But even Celie has managed to be a role model for
many including Shug and Sofia, who learn the lessons of survival tactics from her. Gina Michelle Collins remarks in her essay titled “The Color Purple: What Feminism Can Learn from a Southern Tradition”, that Celie has followed her role models and also been a role-model to many:

Celie’s transformation from slave to free woman is effected through her interaction and identification with a series of non-traditional, female role models. Celie not only follows her role models, but in fact she serves to be a role-model herself to Nettie, Sofia, Shug and Mary Agnes. All of them learn lessons in survival tactics from Celie (Collins 79).

Thus, we can justly say that The Color Purple is a Womanist story where women help one-another sustain and survive whole in a world bent upon negating their very existence. The Color Purple is a Womanist text both in its approach and its appeal. The text moves from the personal to the universal, and almost all Womanist characteristics are woven in its story.

From now onwards Walker’s protagonists are not going to turn into Womanists but they are going to be born Womanists.

The Temple of My Familiar

The Color Purple establishes Walker as a Womanist Writer. From now on she had to explore new avenues that express the Womanist ideology. In The Temple of My Familiar (1989) Walker extends the appeal of Womanism from Black women in particular to all beings in general. Not all protagonists are Black women and not all oppressors are white or black male. This is a story about remembering the long-forgotten, unwritten his/her story of human-kind. Through her characters
Walker wishes to strongly establish humanity in its ancient roots. She is trying to balance the past, present and the changeable future. Walker attempts to connect time – from ancient to present and beyond. Characters like Lissie and Zede are conveniently placed to help the other characters connect with their individual and collective past. This connection leads to wholeness, which is the most important characteristics of the Womanist theory. Lissie is the “one who remembers everything”, the account of her memory is not restricted to the confines of this birth only. It spans from the very beginning of the birth of this planet to the very present.

According to Walker our present is so very unstable precisely because we have conveniently forgotten our past. The balance can be restored only if we allow ourselves to remember our past and thus accept our responsibility of sustaining the present for the future generations.

Here, the characters do not necessarily undertake a Womanist journey *per se*, but yes they do grow spiritually which makes them more Womanist at the end in comparison to what they were in the beginning. *The Temple* is truly an all encompassing universal novel, which is Womanist is all its essence and appeal. Though there is a lot of talk about memory – both ancient and recent, this memory is very much rooted in the Womanist search of all its male and female characters.

At the very outset we are introduced to little Zede who does not need to learn the lessons of Womanism because she is born as one. Her encounters with feather-women, from whom she collects feather’s for her mother’s capes is unique in themselves. Even as a little child she is able to feel the difference between the natural versus the cultural. Zede is
emotionally and spiritually equipped enough to listen to the cry of the peacock when its beautiful feathers are ruthlessly plucked away:

Little Zede had stood waiting as the fat, perspiring woman who owned the peacocks held them in ashen, scratched hands and tore out the beautiful feathers one by one. It was then that Zede began to understand the peacock’s mournful cry (TF 03).

Though Zede is too young to make the connection between the culture of money and the suffering of the peacocks. The culture of money rarely thinks about the discomfort caused to others as the result of one person’s greed. Contrary to these forceful plucking Zede next goes to a woman who specializes in ‘found feathers’ – feathers which naturally fall off the back of the birds. She was poorer than the others but internally much more peaceful:

She then paid a visit to the old woman who specialized in “found feathers” and who was poorer than the others—but whose face was more peaceful. This old woman thought each feather she found was a gift from the Gods (TF 03).

The various stories in The Temple are interwoven like the designs in a quilt. The narrator introduces one character, talks a little about that character and then moves on to the next person. Zede’s life is destroyed in stages. First her father became ill and then died. Her mother could not change her way to accommodate the modern unethical marketing strategies in order to sell her capes. Zede’s life is completely altered when she grows up to be a young woman, her school is closed down and she is arrested under charges of being a communist. What happens next
is told to Carlotta her daughter by her husband Arveyda, as a part of the reconciliation mission between the estranged mother and the daughter.

The narrative then shifts to Carlotta and Arveyda, the two people who need to understand their own respective mothers and their pasts. Though Carlotta requires a lot of healing before she is able to connect with the one woman who has loved and betrayed her the most – her mother. But, as described by the narrator she is a woman with a Womanist sensibility. She loves people of all ethnic groups including men, women and children. She is all for cultural diversity and unity of all human beings in this very diversity:

She grew to recognize certain other “exotic” ethnic groups. She liked especially for some reason, the Among people.... The babies and their mothers.... It was the obvious culture that had gone into the making of the babies clothes....Carlotta loved, also, Samoan women.... And Balinese men (TF 10).

Carlotta’s love for humanity is not reserved only for women but is open for all. As a Womanist she is a universalist. And her flower garden includes flowers of all different colors and shades.

After Carlotta meets Arveyda the two of them seem to have been hitched up together to demystify the lives of their respective mothers Arveyda’s mother after living a very active social life, suddenly became a recluse who seemed to be looking for some love that she could not find in all her work. She died a very dissatisfied death. Even her final desire is not fulfilled by her sister. She wished to have one small line engraved on her head-stone, “Nothing, No Thing, Can Replace Love” (TF 13).
Even this wish remains unfulfilled. All her life she had played or rather interfered in other people’s affairs, towards the end she gave up everything and played only with herself. The organized religion that she was part of could not fill up the spiritual gap and therefore she left everything and returned to her own self:

She simply stopped and sat down and looked out a back window of the house for three years. Her church dissolved…. She began to play with her makeup, painting her face, dyeing her hair, doing her nails as if she were creating a work of art with her body, and with her mind she appeared to roam great empty distances (TF 12).

Arveyda is too young to understand this change that has visited his mother, but later on through his connection with Zede, Arveyda is able to decipher the mystery that is his mother.

Alice Walker for the first time includes in her work the powerful western mythology through the relationship between Arveyda and his mother-in-law Zede. The myth of Oedipus is put to work in this relationship. Arveyda works more as a medium to share the information about Zede’s past, which in turn would make Carlotta whole. He goes on long trips with Zede where she shares the story of her troubled past which she has been too afraid to share with her own daughter. Susanne Martikke highlights this point by saying:

What initially looks like betrayal – Arveyda’s and Zede’s courtship – eventually turns out to be beneficial. Arveyda acts as a medium between Zede and Carlotta. Through him Zede can finally communicate her painful story to her daughter (Martikke 178).
Carlotta is able to achieve her wholeness once she comes to know about her mother’s past and the living tradition that her father has left behind for her in the form of the three small yet throbbing black stones.

*The Temple of My Familiar* is a Womanist text from the very first page. Here nobody has to grow to become a Womanist. All the characters breathe Womanism. Zede while remembering her childhood days recollects how she and the other girls of her tribe were deeply nurtured and cared for by their mothers. Their mothers also transmitted their history and culture orally to these young girls. This is how they preserved their cultures, and sex education was also an essential part of their interaction, “Our mothers taught us about lovemaking and babies when we became senoritas, of course, but all along also they taught us the history of our civilization” (TF 46).

Women in Zede’s tribe were very creative and arty. They created beautiful garments for the priest to wear during the annual parade. So for Zede her search for a role model in creativity ended in her mother’s creative costumes. She need not search far for it:

Their costumes were made by women like my mother, who sometimes worked the whole year on the feathered and beaded and shell-bedecked outfits the priests wore. And every year when the perish swept by the crowd, their garments were more resplendent than the outfits made the year before (TF 46-7).

*The Temple* it seems is an attempt by Alice Walker to acknowledge and identify the roots of Black women’s creativity in the tribes of
Africa. This is the novel which commemorates her non-fiction writing *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*. Zede’s mother is a perfect embodiment of Alice Walker’s idea of a Black woman, her eccentricities, her joys, her creativity and her spirituality:

My mother had a special hut with mud walls and a grass roof for her work. There she would be sometimes for days at a time…. Some days she did nothing at all. My mother…. would sit with her back against the hut and smoke and stare out into the distance, as if she were blessing the thousands of acres of banana (TF 47).

Zede shares her traditional women’s knowledge and secrets with Arveyda. She tells him about the long forgotten unwritten history of womankind. She tells him how before history was documented it was her/story not his/story. She reveals to him how men and women lived in separate groups and how women were far more advanced and established than men. Men were still infants in their understanding of the world and themselves. On the other hand women were well-informed and strongly established in their knowledge of themselves and their environment. Women were into adornment and high fashion. The consciousness of fashion comes only after one is established in one’s existence. So long before men came to terms with themselves, women were well-established in their lives, “Women was entirely used to herself, while man was still infatuated with his relative newness. Woman was already into adornment. In truth, she was already into high fashion” (TF 49).

Once men come to know about the reproductive creativity is with women, they are convinced that women are the creators of earth, they are
the earth mother goddesses. And so they proclaimed women as their priests, having supernatural powers:

Then one of the men told of a birth among the women. That clinched it. Immediately they imagined a major muy grande, longer than the sky, producing, somehow, the earth. A goddess. And so, if the producer of the earth was a large woman, a goddess, then women must be her priest, and must possess great and supernatural powers (TF 49).

This is the part of oral tradition that Zede passes on to her daughter Carlotta through Arveyda. Alice Walker is trying to create a parallel myth alongside the original myth of creation. It might seem absurd and unrealistic at the, first instance but if we believe in the myths propogated by the dominant culture then we can surely allow Walker to create her own myths. Adam Sol justifies Walker’s claim by stating that her historical inconsistencies allows us to re-examine popular history and myth, “Historical inconsistencies serve to re-examine history and myth and attempt to make new myths for Walker’s own purposes” (Sol npag).

Zede is Arveyda’s and Carlotta’s connection with the past, then Lissie is the much needed bridge for Suwelo, who as a result of all his scholarship has forgotten completely about the cultural history of his race. Lissie introduces Suwelo to a history which he has not studied in his curriculum. He is a professor of American history who has not bothered to know anything beyond his own subject. He is lucky to have Lissie around him to help him heal himself and know the long- forgotten stories about his personal and collective pasts. Suwelo accepts that his generation of men have failed women, but he doesn’t seem to do anything to rectify this error. Walker uses the oral tradition of story-
telling to educate this spiritually vacant man. Adam Sol notes in his essay mentioned above that, Suwelo is the hardest nut to crack among all the young characters, who require spiritual healing, because he is firmly established in the dominant oppressive culture:

Suwelo needs more help than the others to release his story because he has been co-opted by the dominant culture. He is a professor of American history who has never read a book by a woman.... Gradually, as he hears the stories that revise his personal history, as well as that of the world, Suwelo comes to a new understanding (Sol npag).

Lissie seems to be the one carrying the oral tradition of Black women within herself. She not only transmits the knowledge, but in fact she lives it. Lissie keeps the past as alive as the present. She talks about the various forms of exploitation employed by the whites against the Black islanders, residing in the Island. The meaning of the name Lissie is explained to Suwelo by Miss Lissie when she recalls incidents from her previous lives for him, she says “Lissie means ‘the one who remembers everything’” (TF 52).

Through the character of Lissie Walker is trying to authenticate the her-story passed on by one generation of women to other. Lissie remembers for Suwelo the history of a few thousand years back. She tells him that she feels very happy to recall that, in all her lives she had always been a black woman, “I have always been a black woman, I say that without, I hope, any arrogance or undue pride, for I know this was just luck” (TF 53). She describes herself to be a fighter. One who does not forgive mediocrity.
From the present life Lissie recalls almost everything from her birth onwards. According to her children remember everything when they are infants. They understand all that goes around them. Lissie describes her life on the island where she was born. That island was under the rule of white colonists who had deprived the local population of all their rights and freedom. The island had been a great source of natural resources. All these resources were taken to the mainland for the white population and the poor black natives were whipped even for tasting milk or eating fruits. And because of this after 50 years of slavery these people were found lacking in vitamins and so the people had to be forced to eat these things:

In those days, in slavery, the people were whipped for tasting the milk or stealing the greens or eating the fruit; consequently, nearly fifty years later they had to be almost forced to eat those things (TF 55).

Here Lissie also talks about how during the times of slavery the Black women were robbed off one of their most treasured hobbies, i.e. their kitchen gardens through which they could keep their connection alive with mother earth. Walker brings out this pathos in Lissie’s statement thus, “My mother and the other women on the Island had to be prodded into going back to planting little kitchen gardens” (TF 55). Lissie’s mother also gradually begins to own-up her long-lost legacy. Almost like Lissie, her mother also dreams of her past births:

For weeks her dreams were all she could talk about. The people and events in them, the fabulous lands she saw – she never understood they were her lands – the houses she visited that ‘just felt so familiar’, the food she ate (TF 57).
In the story about Hal, Lissie tells Suwelo how art and spirit enhancing activities were taken away from the lives of the Black people, systematically first during slavery by their white overseer and then by the following Black generation of men who lost their touch with the spirit within. Hal loved to draw even as a small baby. But his father could not appreciate this expressive art form as he thought that one could not have a living out of drawing:

You take Hal, well. He was an artist. A painter. But his daddy hated that in him, and I’ve seen him take the stick away and stamp out the drawing -- .... Drawing was something his father wanted to do himself, something may be he he had a real talent for, but you can’t draw pictures for a living...., and may be his own daddy had broken him early, forbidding him to try. Before that it would have been the overseer on the plantation during slavery time (TF 60).

Here Walker is referring to the inhuman mutilation of art from the lives of Black slaves. And gradually art almost disappeared from the lives of these people. The women were somehow able to keep their connection with art alive through their little kitchen gardens, but men were not so lucky and so just like Hal’s father their frustration got transferred on to their children. Lissie notes:

When he broke that commitment to art, to making beauty, to recording, to bearing witness, to saying yessiree to the life spirit, whose only request sometimes is just that you acknowledge you truly see it, he broke something in Hal (TF 60).

Lissie remembers that in one of her births she was captured from Africa along with her mother, sister, and brother. She recalls the
hardships faced during their journey to America and her subsequent life as a slave on a plantation.

Zede confides in Arveyda something that she had not talked about to anyone, not even her daughter Carlotta. She tells him how she had met Carlotta’s father Jesus and how she and her new-born daughter survived the brutalities of her capturers and survived. Later on she and Carlotta begin to live in a mental asylum and then they are rescued by one of the inmates, Mary Ann. Mary Ann was a rich girl who paid for the atrocities committed by her parents on the environment. Though she was worth billions of dollars she was not happy being a rich white girl:

Mary Ann described them as people who had personally assassinated six rivers and massacred twelve lakes, because they manufactured a deadly substance that was always swimming away from them (TF 78).

In the stories narrated by Lissie to Suwelo Walker beautifully establishes the missing link between Humans and apes. Lissie narrates how the children were sent to the gorilla colonies when their mothers and aunts were tired and wanted to rest. She initiates the talk about peace and while narrating the various incidents of her lifetimes she says that she had known peace only when she spent time with her gorilla cousins. She relates the strange but positive connection which existed between humans and apes. The love and the care that she received from these cousins were never equaled by any human-beings ever. She loved their social structure where the entire family lived together and cared for the young ones:
Our cousins were big -- .... They seemed strange to us because they lived together as a family; that is, the fathers and uncles lived with the mothers and aunts, and all of them played with and looked after the children (TF 83).

For a very long time humans and apes co-existed together but then according to Lissie, outsiders resembling the people living in the jungle came and destroyed the happy co-habitation and killed and mutilated the gorillas. This developed an air of distrust and hatred between the animals and human and then they gradually drifted apart, “the trust that had been between us now disappeared” (TF 86).

It was then that men began to have control over women and children, and that too because they proved to be stronger:

Then it was that men, because they were stronger, at least during those periods when women were weak from childbearing, begin to think of owning women and children (TF 86).

At the end Lissie concludes that she was at peace only when she was with her huge cousins, “My life with the cousins is the only dream memory of peace that I have” (TF 86-7).

Lissie’s story about animal relatives makes Suwelo awaken to the connection between humans and animals. His environmental instinct catches fire and he begins to examine all that is around him and realizes how we have been ill-treating life in all possible manners. In this awakening Walker shows her growing concern for all the various aspects of life on earth. She is increasingly becoming aware of the life-force
which inhabits all the creatures and beings of this world. She is becoming more of an Eco-feminist in her observation of the world around her:

The bees contributed honey, but not really – it was taken from them. What, he now wondered, did the bees eat themselves; surely they didn’t make honey for human beings. It was the flowers that contributed honey to both bees and people, the flowers that were always giving something: beauty, cheerfulness, pollen, and sees (TF 88).

Lissie is like the God as described by Shankara, the great Indian philosopher, formless - the one who changed her form constantly. She was more than one woman simultaneously:

..... I had never in my life before found anyone who could recognize how many different women I was. Oh, some people, even my mama and papa, commented on how I didn’t seem to have, as they put it, ‘no certain definite form’, but to them I looked enough like myself from day to day that it didn’t matter (TF 91).

Walker is trying to document her theory through the character of Lissie. Because the world has forgotten everything about her, the onus is on her to remember all that she can. She becomes a living monument of history. In fact women have passed on their history orally from one generation to another for centuries. But now in this utterly Womanist text a man is the audience and he is included in this story not only about women but about all humanity. The Womanist quality of all-inclusiveness is very much evident in all the different character groups evolved in the narrative. Hal is a born Womanist who doesn’t need any
proof to believe in his wife’s stories, in fact he provides authentication for her memory:

Lissie remembered and reported on stuff nobody’s every heard of, stuff nobody ever could have told her. Stuff she’d never read because it wasn’t in the books she had (TF 101).

Hal was one man who could identify with women and their pain of child-bearing like no other man could. The moment he sees his wife Lissie delivering their daughter Lulu, he decides to never touch his wife sexually ever-after. Because he is unable to see her go through so much pain:

.... I swore it would never happen again, and my desire for her, for sex with her or with any woman, died and I became a eunuch myself. I just knew I would never be able to deal with making love to a woman ever again (TF 106-7).

Lissie then shares with Suwelo her experience of taking captive a bird as a familiar or a pet. From this story comes the title of this novel. Lissie is shown to be very proud of possessing a familiar without realizing that even that being desires it own freedom. That all living beings are sacred enough to be worshipped is a lesson Lissie learns much later. But in that birth she was utterly unaware of this. But, after all that pet was her pet and therefore it fought for its freedom and broke two glass bowls and one metal bowl in the process:

For I understood quite well by now that all of this activity on the familiar’s part was about freedom and that by my actions I was destroying our relationship .... [my familiar] who was so cheerful and loyal to me, and whom I so
Hal’s life and his story is as Womanist as all the stories of Lissie. Through Hal’s family history Walker once again comments on the homosexuality of human beings. Here the rape scene is quite different compared to the earlier rape scenes in her works. It is a man who is a victim for once and not a woman. But the way in which this rape is handled makes it one of its kinds. Hal’s father is raped by his white friend Heath, and the mixed feelings of hatred and love confuse him to a great extent. Hatred was a result of the violation and the love was not something easily decipherable but was very much present in his heart. Though he hated to accept it, Hal’s father also had a streak of homosexuality in him:

Without understanding how it could be possible, my father wanted to be wanted by this man holding on to him, and he wanted to want....He hated Heath because Heath had forced him to look at the little bit of Heath there was in himself (TF 134).

Womanism very openly accepts lesbians and gays in its folds. Lissie, like a true Womanist explains to Hal that ‘queers’ have always been a part of existence on earth since the beginning of the very creation. As a womanist is “Committed to survival and wholeness of the entire people male and female” (SMG xi), Lissie is just a manifestation of this ideology. Lissie explains:

She said queers have been in every century in which she found herself-- and she giggled when she said it – and claimed to have seen queer behavior even among the cousins, always the epitome of moral behavior where Lissie was concerned (TF 135).
Walker beautifully combines the discussion of sex and God even in this novel. She uses logic to explain the idea of her 'God', a God who was not imprisoned in some church or religious doctrine. In this discussion she carries forward some characters of her earlier novel *The Color Purple*. Olivia whose daughter Fannie is one of the protagonists of this novel remembers how her adopted father Samuel interpreted the concept of spirituality and God after living with the Olinkans for some time. Olivia while talking to her friend Lance remembers:

We had all begun to see, in Africa—where people worshipped many things, including the roofleaf plant, which they used to cover their houses— the ‘God’ was not a monolith, and not the property of Moses, as we’d been led to think, and not separate from us, or absent from whatever world one inhabited (TF 144).

God according to the Gospel of Alice Walker is one who does not come to us as a result of believing in some Bible or some preaching, but it is an entity which is present everywhere at all times. One has to look for one’s own God and then what one finds is the true essence of spirituality the the basic purpose of our existence on this planet:

The religion that one discovered on one’s own was a story of the earth, the cosmos, creation itself; and whatever ‘Good’ one wanted could be found not down the long road of eternity, but right in one’s own town, one’s home, one’s country. The God discovered on one’s own speaks nothing of turning the other cheek. Or rendering unto Caeser. But only of the beauty and greatness of the earth, the universe, the cosmos. Of creation. Of the possibilities for joy (TF 145).

The love for the spirit that Walker talks about in her theory of Womanism is mentioned here by Samuel who says that the man of color is privileged over the white man in his admission of the Spirit which exists in everything and not just a monolithic God:
‘What is one absolute truth about the man of color on this earth?’ .... ‘he admits spirit,’ .... And by this he meant spirit in everything, not just in God or the Holy Ghost, who at one time was the Female in the Deity, or Jesus Christ (TF: 145).

Walker not only liberates human beings from the clutches of the society and culture created by their forefathers, but also releases God from the confines of narrow understanding of man-made religion.

Fanny, Suwelo’s wife’s liberation comes with her acceptance of the unknown past of her mother, wherein there was as much pain as liberation. Like her grandmother Celie, her mother Olivia also gives birth to a child out of wedlock. This child is happily welcomed in the family of Womanists, with Celie and Shug as the head of the family, a female child would have been more than welcome. Fanny remembers her mother telling her about her adopted mother Corrine, who had helped her father in creating the Olinka alphabet.

Walker includes more than just black history and culture in her discussion in *The Temple*, she brings in South American, Native American, and even Eastern culture, especially women’s cultural references. Corrine’s mother was a Cherokee, a Native American Tribe. She also has a strong matrilineage on her side. Her grandmother had created the Cherokee alphabet and that art is what she passes on to her grand-daughter Corrine:

She (Corrine) was Cherokee on her mother’s side, and her mother’s mother had been involved in the creation of the Cherokee alphabet and had also been an editor of the first Cherokee newspaper ever printed in the Cherokee language (TF 149).
This makes both Womanism and its appeal an universal affair. Details which were missed out in *The Color Purple* are thoughtfully interwoven in the narrative of *The Temple*. It is Olivia who inherits the rich Black culture from her real mother Celie, is also blessed by the Spirit of the Native American Tribe. Walker proves true to her word as she upholds and celebrates women's culture from across the globe.

Fanny and Suwelo are two very unlikely people who need to know a lot about one-another before they can each allow their Womanist spirits to grow. Fanny was born in a family of Womanists where even people like Albert had become Womanists at the time of her arrival. In contrast, Suwelo was still a hard-core patriarch, who had well-defined unalterable roles for men and women. His wife could never make him push a grocery cart. Simply because he said it reminded him of 'women’. He believed ‘men-don’t-push cart’ and so he will not allow anyone to budge him from his belief. Adam Sol opines in his above mentioned essay, that Suwelo behaves in a peculiar way because he is completely cut off from his personal history; he is like a lost child who needs to be brought back on the right track:

He is also cut off from his personal history, even to the extent that he is uncomfortable bringing a cart to the grocery store because it reminds him of his mother and grandmother (Sol npag).

Olivia proves to be a true matriarch for her daughter Fanny, who introduces her not only to the Womanist women in their lives but also a host of men who were as ‘skilled’ in their respective art forms as the women around them. Men and women who have suffered at the hands of
slavery, but had come out of it as strong, skillful and contented people. They lived their lives as if it was a party and allowed the spirit of Womanism flew their hearts. They were not ashamed to be artists nor were they ashamed to take up a needle and sew:

There were many men who came regularly to visit 'Miss Celie and Miss Shug'. Almost always they were men with some kind of talent.... Magicians, jugglers, good horseshoe throwers, the occasional man who quilted or did needlepoint.... Sometimes they said this laughing, sometimes they said it in tears. But that they were still at the banquet of life was always affirmed (TF 167).

Walker’s Womanist characteristic of respecting tears is clearly visible here. The men in The Temple are as respectful towards tears as women, and in fact they seem to consider it as a counter-balance of laughter, “values tears as natural counter-balance of laughter” (SMG xi).

Like her mother, Fanny is also a fatherless child. Olivia tried very hard to fill up that vacuum but yet Fanny’s wholeness happens only after she meets her father, Dahvid or Ola when she goes to Africa to meet him. Olivia needs to reveal the story of the past to her daughter for the survival whole of not only herself but also of her husband Suwelo. According to Olivia nothing is ancient and nothing new in the real sense, because the present is the physical manifestation of the past and so if the future:

“Well, you see how to me all daily stories are in fact ancient, and ancient ones current.... There is nothing new under the sun and that nothing in the past is more mysterious than the behavior of the present (TF 171-2).
Fanny resembles Lissie in many ways, especially when she so easily commutes between the past and the present. She regularly falls in love with the spirits from the past and they seem to be as real to her as the “real” world. She kept the past alive in her own way. It seems Fanny could not come to terms with her present because she knew very little of her own personal history. Once she meets her father Ola and her half-sister in Africa they fill up the gaps in her knowledge about herself and her African past connected through her father. Adam Sol notes in his essay mentioned above that Fanny finds her spiritual center once she meets her father and sister in Africa:

Her experiences and conversations with her father and also with her half-sister Nzinga connect Fanny to her personal history and culture and allow her to return home with a renewed sense of herself and her spiritual center (Sol npag).

The influence of patriarchy in Africa is revealed to Fanny by her sister Nzingha. Soon after men and women combined their societies, did men begin to treat as their slaves and reduced the role of women to just their physical being. Their spirituality was thrown out of their system completely. This prevented the women from aspiring or even trying for their individual freedom, “A woman was for breeding, a woman was for sex, a woman – well, in our language the word for woman is the same as for seed granary” (TF 256).

Their father Ola is no exception to this rule. Though he fought against the oppression of the whites and the dictatorship of the military regime asserting human dignity for everyone, could not treat his uneducated and illiterate wife with the same dignity. He completely
ignored her and kept her in the village, while he himself lived in the city with all the comforts of his ministership. Ola becomes a saviour for the people and pain for the government because of a play he wrote in memory of the very wife whom he ignored all her life. It was this play that awakened the conscience of his nation and made the government his enemy:

It was my father's play about my mother that completely dissolved the government's confidence in him and separated the people from the government. May be this was because "the people" contained men and women; government, only men (TF 260).

It was with this play that Ola brought to light the hitherto ignored issue of women's oppression. The mere objectification of women was brought out in open for everyone to dissect and digest. People began to retrospect and introspect. There were arguments, brawls, and controversies about it everywhere. The most important aspect of the whole issue was that people did not take Ola's comments personally. The entire attitude towards women began to change:

For instance, it was as if they'd never before thought of women or the possibility that women were human beings in their own right at all. This was the greatest sting in the slap. My father's insights into the oppression of women, black women by black men, who should have had more understanding – having criticized the white man's ignorance in dealing with black people for so long – made many of the people uncomfortable, but they were also, eventually, stimulated to change (TF 261).
This was the greatest triumphs for Ola who himself had changed in order to understand the pain and struggle undergone by his wife in order to become a soldier, a wife and a mother. It was now that he understood the disillusionment that she felt with her own government made of her own people. Ola’s sexist awakening leads him to his spiritual and political awakening. It is only after he tries to understand his wife’s life and her disillusionment that he is able to hold up a mirror to the world that he lives in.

Fanny it seems is an epitome of Womanism. Celie’s granddaughter has to be the one to carry forward the Womanist torch. Unlike any of her predecessors Fanny as a character is seeped in Womanism. She breathes Womanism. Her husband Suwelo is unable to understand this aspect of his wife’s being. He is surprised to see that his wife can be more people than herself, one at the same time. Her unique way of finding information is almost unbelievable for Suwelo:

She picked up information in ways I never understood either. She’d given up reading in any systematic way; the information she needed simply came to her. She’d visit a friend, or someone she barely knew, for example, and knock over a vase. The water from the vase would splash on a stack of books on the floor. Fanny would carefully dry off all the books on hands and knees, apologizing profusely the whole time. Then the information or whatever it was, she’d been looking for, vaguely, would appear on the wettest page of one of the books.... Her eye would rest on the page for only a minute, as she absorbed the information, and she would be on her way (TF 277).

This, though is quite unusual and mysterious for Suwelo to understand, is not inexplicable. If one awakens to nature and every particle in the universe, and takes it as a complete whole interconnected with one-
another, then such experiences are not unusual. In fact, then it becomes the way of life. Fanny herself does not find this surprising because she herself is living this reality. She has been able to transcend this physical ‘real’ world and is connected to the metaphysical ‘dream’ world which is more real to her than the ‘real’ world. Fanny was so much at one with the entire universe. What she wishes for happens magically and what she is against, fails automatically, “I came to believe that whatever Fanny wished for would happen, and that whatever she was even remotely against would fail” (TF 279).

This, though seems magical, is not. Because once you unlock yourself (open all your door and windows) the world the world comes alive and embraces you with open arms. She seemed to believe in the ideology ‘whatever I embrace, becomes’ (TF 280). This kind of understanding can come only to a completely evolved Womanist. Fanny is whole. She does not need to become anything; she is what she is from the very start.

The “Gospel according to Shug” is a spiritual manifesto created by Alice Walker. It takes “Womanism” from the physical level to the spiritual one. All the tenets of Womanism are redefined and enhanced. It instructs, guides, sustains and reinforces the Womanist feelings. It proves that for Alice Walker Womanism is nothing less than a religion. A religion which includes each and every thing created by God in this universe. It preaches peace and harmony between all. It is a journey unto spirituality. Shug formed her own church, but did not call it so; instead she called it a band. A traditional black term used for black women’s churches:
‘Band’ was what renegade black women’s churches were called traditionally; it means a group of people who share a common bond and purpose and whose notion of spiritual reality is radically at odds with mainstream on prevailing ones (TF 299).

Racial conflict which was dormant in The Color Purple becomes overtly manifested in the character of Fanny. She has a mysterious desire to cut off all heads with blonde hair. Fanny herself is unable to understand this hatred and so she takes the help of a psychoanalyst, who helps her understand how the sword in hand was subconsciously given to her by her grandmother Shug:

“Perhaps its she [Shug] who put the sword in your hand?”

“Perhaps”, said Fanny. “And how did you know it is a sword? It really is a sword…. I look at a blonde head and, zip, it’s in the gutter” (TF 300).

Fanny’s predicament does not stop here. In fact it begins from here. Once she has cut the head, she would try to fix it again on the other (white) person’s head. Because though her subconscious makes her commit a murder, her conscious self rejects the violence and tries to make amends:

That I’m down in the gutter grabbing the head and reaching for the body, which is still walking along by the way, and furiously fastening the head back on. I won’t be a racist,” said Fanny grimly. “I won’t be a murderer. I won’t do to them what they’ve done to black people. I’ll die first” (TF 300).
Racism is the ghost that Fanny is trying to chase away. In all her fantasies it is this discrimination that she is fighting against. Fanny echoes Gandhiji when she says that she doesn’t hate the whites but their racism, just as Gandhiji had said that we Indians should hate the British rule not the Britishers, “It’s racism and greed that have to go. Not white people” (TF 302).

It is Olivia who helps her daughter understand the ill-effects of racism. She tries to cure her ‘sickness’. The concept of racism is so overpowering for Fanny that it becomes difficult to think straight, without thinking of murder. Olivia tries to explain to Fanny the reasons behind a person’s viciousness. She feels that most people give back what they have received as children, “the child will always, as an adult, do to someone else whatever was done to him when he was a child. It is how we as human beings, are made” (TF 310).

In order to counter this explanation Fanny gives the example of her grandmother Celie who according to her was not made sick by the ugly childhood that she had. But Olivia reveals gradually the sick attitude that Celie had towards her dog, Creighton. She would ill-treat the dog just as she herself was treated as a child. Celie would beat up the dog with a belt, kick him even if not in the way, etc. this was a sickness which needed to be cured. So Shug took the dog with her to Memphis and trained it to be an independent being and not a slave. Till then even when it received a kick from Celie it would go and lick her hand, but now when Celie tried to beat him he bit her back. This is reminiscent of what Shug had done to Celie. Earlier it was celie who was made to realize her independence and was set free by Shug:
Yes, said Mom. ‘Creighton was no longer a slave; he was a
dog. Not only that, Creighton knew the difference. The next
time Mama Celie tried to beat him, he bit her. And Miss
Shug’s laughter, I believe, that prevented it’ (TF 312).

The amazing thing about Walker is that she does not hesitate in exposing
the shortcomings of any of her characters. Even though she had shown
Celie developing from a slave to a strong Womanist she does not hesitate
to reveal her drawbacks. Celie’s inhuman treatment of a dog is taken as a
sickness and a cure is offered in The Temple of My Familiar a sequel to
The Color Purple. Celie’s treatment of her dog proves Calvin Hernton’s
theory right, wherein he states that a person who is oppressed can
become an oppressor if provided with such an opportunity.

Fanny is lucky to have both her parents stand by her in times of
her crisis. Ola, Fanny’s father tries to explain her frustration towards the
whites in very simple historic terms. He says that it is a natural reaction
against the condescending attitudes of the whites towards the entire black
race:

“This frustration with the whites”, Ola said, thoughtfully,
and not responding to her smile, “is a natural reaction to
what they have, collectively, done to you, not simply as an
individual but as a people, a culture, a race (TF 216).

Gradually Fanny the Womanist unfolds before our eyes. She is the
most evolved Womanist that Walker has created from amongst all her
characters of her first four novels. Her level of female bonding is
unsurpassed. When she decides to establish a harmonious relationship
with her ex-husband Suwelo, at her father’s behest, she tells him how she
despised him because he did not try to understand the women he was sleeping with. Especially Carlotta, whom he had described to Fanny as a woman without substance:

“I know,” said Fanny. “What you said was, she meant nothing whatever to you; and, furthermore, she had no substance. It was when you said that, that I hated you. I hated you as a man (TF 320).

Fanny tells Suwelo that she felt betrayed as a woman, not as a wife, because as it was she did not believe in the institution of marriage. Suwelo argues that he said such things about Carlotta only to hurt her less. But as he says that while he said all this he forgot that he was talking to a Womanist. To which Fanny says that the most important thing was that Suwelo forgot that he was talking to Carlotta’s masseuse:

“Men must have mercy on women, Suwelo,” she said coldly. “They must feel women’s bodies as a masseuse feels them; not just caress them superficially and use them as if they’re calendar pinups, centerfolds, or paper dolls. What woman could trust a man who came back from another women’s arms with a story such as yours? I simply couldn’t” (TF 321).

Fanny, the true Womanist shows us the conflict that Womanists have to face in a yet-not-liberated world. She faces the same racial, sexual conflicts that the early black feminists had to face. The pre-conceived notions about race and gender were hard to break. And so she felt like leaving everything and retreating in a world of her own creation. Her disappointment is profound precisely because she has been brought up on the ideals of Womanism by true Womanists themselves. She is disillusioned completely when she faces the ‘real’ world outside her
grandmother’s home, which has nothing to do with Womanism, and is overtly hostile towards all the democratic ideas of equality, liberty and freedom:

“I was sick of explaining everything”, said Fanny, with great weariness. “In my women’s studies class and in the administration office at the college I had to explain about blacks; to you and other men I had to explain about women. None of you seemed capable of using your own eyes and feelings to try to comprehend things and people for yourself....” (TF 321).

Fanny’s hatred for Whites is thus explained, through her journey into her past. Her White friend Tanya, who reminds her of her childhood experience as a black child in a White dominated world. Although she was a very much loved child within her own house she faced the brute force of racism. Tanya was the White friend whose grandmother beat Fany up because Fanny touched and kissed Tanya on her face. The violence in this act was so destructive that for a very long time Fanny could not come to terms with it:

One day when we were playing together in my background, you kissed me on the cheek. My grandmother .... Slapped you so hard she knocked you down.... And she said, “If I ever catch your putting your black mouth on Tanya again. I’ll knock your little black head off” (TF 330).

Fanny had forgotten this particular incident, but the pain had always sustained. Fanny is able to fully redeem herself only when she is able to overpower her form of racism. The hatred that she felt for the whites gets dissolved when this story from her personal past is re-told ad she is able to come to terms with the violence that she had harboured all her life.
Only after she meets her father's second wife, a white woman named Mary Jane, that Fanny could finally destroy the negative stereotypes that she had about white. Fanny learns that this woman had left her comfortable British life behind and had come to Olinka to run a school for retarded children. This white woman touches Fanny's life like no one else and she is forced to exclaim, "I'd no idea a white person, especially a white woman, would touch upon my own life so meaningfully" (TF 351).

Fanny leaves Africa with a promise to be back to help her sister Nzingha produce their father's plays. Fanny does not confine her healing to herself but passes on to the others by turning into a healer herself. She becomes a masseur and heals through her massages everybody, from her husband Suwelo to his lover Carlotta.

Suwelo's final healing happens after he receives a cassette from Miss. Lissie wherein she shares the final moments of her truth with him. Suwelo needed to be cleansed of his sexist assumptions about everything in general and women in particular. The story that now Miss Lissie leaves behind for Suwelo changes his attitude almost completely. She breaks all the barriers and puts him in a position to see humanity as it was before man became the supreme. Suwelo learns his life's lessons from this great teacher herself. Lissie admits to Suwelo, in cassettes she leaves for him after she has died, that she had lied to him when she had said that she was always a black woman. She reveals that occasionally she has been a white woman and man. But it seems that she does not want to remember these births and so she avoids mentioning them to Suwelo.
The title of this novel is justified in Lissie’s recollections of the close relationship between humans and animals. She tells Suwelo that once upon a time, much before the times of recorded history women and men lived into different groups. Women used to keep lions as their familiar (or pet). Lissie was a white man in this particular birth. Her mother’s familiar was a lion called Husa:

Her familiar was an enormous and very much present lion: they went everywhere together. This lion also had a family of his own. There was a lot of visiting between us, and in the lion’s little family of cubs, I was always welcome (TF 357).

As long as men and women lived in separate groups, there was no conflict between humans and animals. Women took various animals as their familiar. But once these two opposite groups merged then the conflict began. Because men felt threatened in the presence of the wild animals, they felt neglected as the women seemed to lavish more love and attention to the animals compared to them. So they banned women from meeting their animal friends, and drove away the animals deeper into the jungle:

In the merger, the men asserted themselves, alone, as the familiars of women. They moved in with their dogs, whom they ordered to chase us. This was a time of trauma for women and animals alike (TF 367).

Before this merger happened Lissie tells Suwelo that both men and women were happy living separately in their own camps. Because both loved their individuality and both had separate ways of living. Their
coming and living together was a major loss for them, as each group lost its individual and unique traits:

And they had both lost their freedom to each other. The men now took it on themselves to say what should and should not be done by all, which meant they lost the freedom of their long, undisturbed, contemplative days in the men’s camp; and the women in compliance with the men’s bossiness, but more because they now became emotionally dependent on the individual man (TF 367).

This story is the most important story for Suwelo because this liberates him from the pain of having to see his mother die at the hands of his father. Suwelo is able to for the first time share with Carlotta the painful history of his mother. He had so firmly closed the doors of his heart, that even the memory of his parents could not enter it. He hated them so much for leaving him alone, that he tried to erase their presence completely from his living memory.

The story about the oppression of women at the hands of the men allows him to rewind his own life-history. Carlotta, who has come to terms with her own painful part, aids Suwelo in confronting and accepting the ghosts from his past. He remembers the day of their accident and recollects the picture of his mother, who had tried to get out of her husband’s speeding car:

“Her nails were broken off, every one of them; her fingertips bloody,” he says, “Now I understood what had happened, and why they were dead. My mother was trying to get out of the car”…. He held on to my mother as she struggled to get out of the speeding car” (TF 403).
Suwelo is able to forgive his mother for at least trying to save herself for him. But his healing can happen only if he forgives his abusive father for taking away their happiness, due to his hatred for having failed them by coming from the World War II with a maimed body and lost mind. Suwelo opens up his heart not only for his mother but also for his father and thus experiences the profound opening of a chakra at the end of his spine, “He feels a chakra opening at the base of his spine. Something begins to unfurl, like a tiny fag, or a sleepy snake” (TF 402). This reference to the opening of the Kundalini in the Indian Yoga System reveals Alice Walker’s inclination towards Indian Philosophy.

Thus, all the four characters aid one another in their process of becoming whole. The earlier passion that was the base of their relationship is replaced by a Womanist understanding of one-another’s lives. Fanny and Arveyda realize towards the end of the novel that they are the reincarnation of the primordial spirit and flesh. Their union symbolizes the union of all the elements that Womanism stands for. In their ecstasy both of them experience the Spirit as it is inherent in everything created by God. Their love-making unites the Spirit with its flesh:

Fanny .... Readily takes Arveyda’s “candle” into her warm hand. When she has seated herself on it, and feels how smugly it fits, as if it has found its proper niche, .... Fanny feels as if the glow of the candle that warms but could never burn has melted her.... Arveyda feels as if he has rushed to meet all the ancestors and they have welcomed him with joy. “My .... Spirit,” says Fanny .... “My .... Flesh,” says Arveyda (TF 408-9).
According to Martikke the merging of Fanny and Arveyda does more than just healing both the involved parties. It redeems the fictional world of *The Temple* from its destructive duality:

Arveyda’s healing by Fanny has a universal dimension, which is emphasized by its position at the end of the novel. The two merge in mutual recognition of the ancient world described in Lissie’s dream memories. Fanny and Arveyda, in their merging, redeem the fictional world of *Temple* from its destructive duality separating men from women, humans from their natural surroundings and from each other.... the ultimate healing, however, is intended for the reader (Martikke 182).

To conclude this discussion it would suffice to say that in order to attain the Womanist wholeness all the characters have to look up to their matriarchs who remember their recent and ancient past for them. Thus the knowledge received by the characters firmly roots them in their own identity. Acknowledging the past both personal and collective, liberates them from the shackles of mind-boggling pain and hatred. The past that they conquer is both personal and collective. The ultimate goal is spiritual wholeness and each character finally does attain that seemingly impossible but yet alluring goal. It is their mothers who stand by them and assist them in liberating themselves through their tales. Susanne Martikke’s comment would be a perfect conclusion to this discussion about the new tale of myth, fiction and displacement:

.... Elements characterizing Zede’s and Lissie’s tales resurface repeatedly during the plot, immersing the searching individuals in the mythical past’s atmosphere and influencing them to the extent of trying to recreate that mythical past’s setting in their own lives. This is how Lissie and Zede become priestesses of wholeness whose advice,
cloaked in tales, is being followed by Suwelo, Arveyda, Carlotta and Fanny (Martikke 180).

Thus, we can say that the mothers’ have played an essential role in the Womanist growth of all Alice Walker characters. The oral tradition of the African Americans has been aptly utilized by Walker to bring about a connection between their rich past and the happening future.