Chapter 2

Writing As/For Survival

Talk is the key to liberation, one’s tongue the very machete of freedom.

Alice Walker (The Temple of my Familiar).

Survival is the most important concern that ecology relates to, both in theory and practice. Ecologists and environmentalists are keen on warning against the dangers that are in store for living beings. In a fast fading biosphere, one has to be aware of the various stifling forces that strangle life. Only a definition of the actual state of the universe can lead to a change by restoring the “wholeness” that has been lost. Articulation or narration constitutes the first step towards ecological restoration, as it helps to raise consciousness about the present state of affairs. What is needed is a “process of collective, politicized storytelling” as Sheila Collins says in the context of the Appalachian women (WR 54).

Narration has always served as an important means for survival. Shaharazad’s experience in Thousand and One Nights is often cited to explicate the life-giving power of storytelling. It was by virtue of her gift for narration that she escaped death. Writings from the prisons reveal that the urge for narration cannot be stifled by the iron bars. In the days of slavery, it was the same gift of story-telling that had sustained the slaves in the midst of hard physical labour and dehumanizing treatment by the cruel masters. An
examination of black history reveals a rich treasury of folk-tales and Negro spirituals. The community had been sustained by their songs and narratives which were orally transmitted to their future generations.

The strong link between survival and narration is emphasized by William Rueckert in considering poems as “part of the energy pathways which sustain life” (EK 108). Rueckert uses the word “poem” in a broad sense so as to include every form of literary expression. In his opinion, King Lear, Moby Dick, “Song of Myself”--all are poems. He says: “Poems are a verbal equivalent of fossil fuel (stored energy), but they are a renewable source of energy, coming as they do, from those ever generative twin matrices, language and imagination” (109). Some poems, with their capacity to remain active and capable of energy transfer, continue to sustain life and the human community. He continues: “literature in general and individual works in particular are one among many human suns” (109). He insists on the need to maintain connections between literature and the sun, the ultimate source of life in the biosphere. The relationship between literature and the biosphere is reinforced in his statement that green plants are among the most creative organisms on earth; they are nature’s poets.

The South is noted for its robust and vital storytelling tradition. Folklorist Benjamin A. Botkin calls the South “a storied region” (Southern Culture 488). With an extensive repertoire of folktales, legends, jests and anecdotes the South has always attracted folklore collectors. The tales have a social significance because they “teach values, develop communicative skills,
bind people together, and imbue life with art” (Southern Culture 488). Bettina Aptheker quotes an observation made by Carol Christ which stresses the importance of stories in imparting knowledge:

Without stories there is no articulation of experience. Without stories a woman is lost when she comes to make the important decisions in her life. She does not learn to value her struggles, to celebrate her strengths, to comprehend her pain. Without stories she cannot understand herself. Without stories she is alienated from the deeper experiences of self and world that have been called spiritual or religious. (qtd. in Tapestries 42)

Black literary history buds from the slave narratives. Calvin Hernton traces the origin and development of slave narratives in his book, The Sexual Mountain and Black Women Writers. It is the life story of a former slave who has gained freedom through many trials and hardships. As the white masters punished and brutally suppressed every attempt by the slaves to learn to read or write, many “former slaves had to tell—narrate—their life stories to a person who could write” (Mountain 1). The literate person wrote down the stories in the story telling style of the former slaves. The earlier writers were all motivated by the condition of oppression and a strong desire to ameliorate this. Their aim was to report on and define the condition of the race and the struggle it undertakes. With their belief in the magical power possessed by the word, the slaves hoped that the word would help to bring about a change. Walker has stressed the importance of this in the collection of
essays *Living by the Word*. When she asks the “two-headed woman” (in a dream) as to what she should do to help the world survive, the woman replied: “Live by the word and keep walking” (2). It has been the black writer’s burden to resist the colonizer’s oppression. Calvin Hernton observes: “By virtue of its origin, nature, and function, black writing is ‘mission conscious’ and is necessarily a hazardous undertaking” (38). Hence black literature is informed primarily by the racial and cultural history of the Blacks.

The slave narratives, which first appeared in rudimentary form during the latter part of the eighteenth century developed into a unique genre of black literature between 1830 and 1865. Characteristically they have a beginning, a middle, and an end. Hernton says that a succession of episodes, scenes and utterances of moral outcry form the substance of these narratives. They take the readers through the daily round of plantation life, the hard physical labour that the slaves are subjected to and the struggle for survival in a world of systematic enslavement. Hernton gives a vivid picture of the plight of the slaves that constitutes the theme of these narratives:

We witness cruelty, violence and human frailty so repugnant that we find it difficult to believe or imagine. We see loved ones mercilessly torn apart and sold away. We witness rapes, beatings and killings. We see a total disregard for the family and dignity of the slaves. We experience moments of stolen joy, that suddenly turn to bleak tragedy, and we witness the slaves’ sweat and labor
for which they are not paid and not appreciated. Alas, through constant torture and deprivation, we see human beings conditioned into believing in the superiority of their oppressors and reduced to an incredible mentality of self loathing and personal negation.

(Mountain 2)

By the time the narrative reaches the middle, the slave feels an obsessive urge for freedom. Hernton finds in this desire “a rising in slave consciousness born of suffering and surviving and born of a unique inspirational experience . . .” (3). Gradually “the slave grows in courage and embarks upon escape, finally to arrive in the North—where the former slave becomes a worker, an creator, an autobiographer, a free person enlisted in the cause to liberate the sisters and brothers left behind in bondage” (3).

Alice Walker emulates this black invented art form to depict the victimization, injustice and poverty that she witnesses in daily life. The black woman lives in a society where men are aggressive and women passive. The black mothers and grand mothers were “creatures so abused and mutilated in body, so dimmed and confused by pain, that they considered themselves unworthy even of hope” (Gardens 232). This situation has resulted from the black patriarchal culture which replicates the historic gender-based relationship between men and women as well as between Whites and Blacks. Caught between such oppressive forces of racism and sexism, survival becomes a pertinent problem for the black woman. In order to survive, the black woman has to keep on “fighting against the negative image that society
projects on her” (The Black Woman 267). In an effort to heal her wounds and to restore her self-esteem that has been damaged, she has to generate the creative forces which find various modes of expression. For the illiterate black woman belonging to the early generation, the courtyard or the textile served as a text into which she could pour out all her grief and pain. The gardens and the quilts made by these mothers bear testimony to the creative imagination of the black women. In addition to these skills, the black woman possessed extraordinary gift of story telling which has inspired their more fortunate daughters to break the silence of the “mules of the world”. Many of women’s stories have never been written. Susan Griffin says:

They form an oral tradition, passed on from one generation to the next . . . Sometimes they are teaching stories. They are about having respect, about having decent values, about how to live properly, about how to survive. (Tapestries 40)

In Specifying, Susan Willis identifies the story-telling tradition as the strongest influence on the development of black women’s narratives. She explains that for the black women, history is her story which is built on labour force. Willis traces the economic and historical reasons which place women “in a better position to grasp history as a concrete experience” (Specifying 5). As such, the accumulated work of all her female forebears forms her past.

Alice Walker writes about these inspiring models in her essay “In Search of our Mother’s Gardens”. She pays homage to the foremothers who
have turned to art as an alternative to despair. She projects the efficacy of the African American woman by “phenomenologically recovering her mother’s vernacular garden and presenting it as literate poetic image” (Workings 52). In the absence of literary models, Walker ventures out to discover rejoicing, celebration and hope in her mother’s imaged garden. As Thadious Davis remarks: “That garden is her recurrent metaphor for both art and beauty, endurance and survival” (Women Writers 45-47).

Alice Walker imbibes the spirit of her mother’s radiance and skill in “[ordering the universe in the image of her personal conception of Beauty]” (Gardens 241). She resorts to writing poetry as an alternative to despair. In her journals and interviews, Walker has repeatedly mentioned that she has escaped suicidal despair solely by her art of narration. The springs of poetry had their origin in a traumatic spell consequent to a disfigurement in the eye caused by a pellet shot from her brother’s gun. Having enjoyed a childhood of adoration as the cutest child around, she felt herself mentally and physically disabled when in her partial blindness she found herself stumbling upon things and people. Walker discloses the helplessness and frustration she experienced then and the obsessive desire for self destruction in these words: “... I have day dreamed – not of fairy tales – but of falling on swords, of putting guns to my heart or head, and of slashing my wrists with a razor. For a long time I thought I was very ugly and disfigured. This made me shy and timid ...” (Gardens 244). But in the long run, it proved to be advantageous as it provided an opportunity to really see people and things from the solitary
position of an outcast. Her own mutilated state created an insight which enabled her to look at reality from a different perspective. The urge to fall upon a sword and kill herself gave way to reading stories and writing poems as an attempt to express herself. Years later looking at the scar in her mother's eye, Walker's daughter exclaimed: "Mommy, there's a world in your eye" (393). This revelation had a tremendous effect on Walker. Nancy Corson Carter makes an interesting observation which is quite relevant in this regard:

Walker's eye comprehends a compelling image that links her with her daughter and her mother's house, her people and the home they have made in an alien land. 'Home' also becomes fuller in its meaning as she connects it with the Earth itself. To be 'beautiful, whole and free' as a black woman within a dominant white culture requires such multiple disentanglements, such multiple layers of brave insight. (Critique 35)

The childhood obsession with suicide became all the more strong during her senior year at Sarah Lawrence. Her predicament, when she returned after a summer trip to Africa, healthy and brown and pregnant, landed her in a serious contemplation about death. In the face of her father's instruction that none of his daughters was to come home if she ever found herself pregnant and her mother's conception of abortion as a sin, she had no way out, but to sleep with a razor blade under her pillow. With her friend's timely intervention an abortion was made possible and this brought her back
to life and poetry. The poems in her first collection of poems entitled *Once* took shape as a result of this incessant outpouring of creative energy which marked the celebration of life. As she explains: "Writing poems is my way of celebrating with the world that I have not committed suicide the evening before" (*Gardens* 249). Writing serves as an essential part of the recuperative process and it heals her of the suicidal despair and makes her whole. This strengthens her belief that writing really helps one to heal oneself. Whereas the quilts and the gardens manifested a celebration of life for the earlier generation the young women recaptured this in the rejuvenating and life-giving power of writing. Walker acknowledges this in the preface to her collection of poems entitled *Her Blue Body*: "My life has been saved more times than I can count by this unbeckoned stranger [poetry] from my own deepest ocean and farthest shore... Through poetry I have lived to find within myself my own 'invincible sun' "(XV).

Having experienced the sustaining power of narration, the "womanist" in her takes the stance of an apostle of the Southern community that has been subjected to severe victimization. As stated in chapter 1, one point of her definition of the word "womanist" shows how it binds her to her community. For her, a womanist is one who is "committed to survival and wholeness of entire people: male and female" (*Gardens* xi). This concern is given due emphasis in her pronouncement: "I am preoccupied with the spiritual survival, the survival whole of my people. But beyond that, I am committed to exploring the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties and the triumphs of
black women” (Gardens 250). Belonging to a people “so wounded by betrayal”, Walker considers her writing as redemptive in mission. By means of her works, she tries to restore the wholeness of a “dis-eased” society that has been fragmented, mutilated and victimized. Though she belongs to a family of sharecroppers she had the good fortune to go to college. She strongly believes that an educated woman should strive to bring about a change. Hence the privilege of being an educated woman urges her to take upon her shoulders the task of relating the doubly oppressed state of the black woman. Thereby she hopes to ameliorate their condition. Like Susan Griffin she feels herself to be a kind of crucible, her mind a medium in which the many voices, spoken and unspoken belonging to their age are melted, mixed and transformed (Made From this Earth 3). She cannot aspire to be whole when everything around her is split up, “deliberately split up” (Gardens 48). The wholeness that Walker envisages is congruent to the definition of wholeness given by Paula Gunn Allen an ecologist. According to Allen,

    The natural state of existence is whole. The healing chants and ceremonies emphasise restoration of wholeness, for disease is a condition of division and separation from the harmony of the whole. Beauty is wholeness. Health is wholeness. Goodness is wholeness. (ER 247)

Walker writes to make her people beautiful, healthy and whole. As she declares in the preface to Anything We love can be Saved: “... when I am in the presence of other human beings I want to revel in their creative and
intellectual fullness, their social warmth. . . . I do not want fear of war or starvation or bodily mutilation to steal both my pleasure in them and their own birthright” (Anything XX:11). Very often this concern transcends the human world to encompass the nonhuman also. Thus she reinstates Darwin’s reductionist theory of “survival of the fittest” with the positive and flourishing dictum of “making fit for survival”. The gift of narration helps her to feel better, to get better and to make better.

Walker’s works emerge from the substance out of which all slave narratives are made—oppression and the process of liberation. Quite significantly her narration commences with the collection of poems entitled Once. By adopting as the title a word which marks the opening of many a tale, Walker emphasizes the significance of story-telling. By initializing the text with poems set in Africa, she takes her readers to the very origin of the slaves. Here she obsessively writes about the Blacks’ confrontation with several forms of violence and injustice in a White-dominated milieu. The reader comes across the racial prejudices and the psychosomatic pains emanating from this. By means of concise, anecdotal, free verse, in the manner of Japanese haiku poetry, Walker depicts various scenes of fragmentation and the struggle for attaining wholeness. Walker has admitted that she has been influenced by Zen epigrams and Japanese haiku especially while writing Once. She says:

I was delighted to learn that in three or four lines a poet can express mystery, evoke beauty and pleasure, paint a picture—and
not dissect or analyze in any way. The insects, the fish, the birds
and the apple blossoms in haiku are still whole. They have not
been turned into something else. They are allowed their own
majesty, instead of being used to emphasize the majesty of people;
usually the majesty of the poets writing. (Gardens 252)

The fragmentation in structure reflects the fragmented self of the
Africans and African Americans who have been withering under the heat of
oppression. For example the first poem “African Images” consists of
disparate stanzas spread over about forty pages. Each page is formulated by a
single stanza of four or five lines with a wide expanse of blankness around it.
There is nothing wrong in assuming that it suggests the silence enveloping
the black world which the budding writer in Walker is intent on breaking.
The poetic persona who has adopted a kikuyu clan name, “Wangari”
document various instances of deprivation and denial of the right to live.
The speaker, who introduces herself as a kikuyu woman, maintains restraint
and reserve while telling about the shooting of an elephant: “morning
mists/On the road/an Elephant/He knows/his rights” (Blue Body 11). On the
next page, there is the stanza: “A strange noise:/’Perhaps
an elephant is
eating our roof?’/In the morning/much blue’’ (12). In the four lines on the
following page, the speaker points out the irony inherent in this fear: “A tall
warrior/and at his feet/only/ Elephant bones” (13). The poem takes a sudden
shift when the persona is reminded of the Elephant Legs in a store for holding
umbrellas. Here the reader can easily notice the poet’s deep ecological
awareness. Her constant fight against killing of animals for commercial purposes finds expression in these lines. "The bone strewn banks" of the silent lake and the hornless corpse of the white rhinoceros provide yet another indication of the slaughter that takes place to satisfy the vagaries of the sophisticated humans.

There is subtle irony in the lines showing how the Blacks and Whites view each other: "'You are a Negro'? 'Yes'? 'But that is a kind of/food — isn't it— the white man used to eat you???' 'Well —'" (30). The three interrogation marks, placed adjacently, convey the various implications in posing such a question. There is clear suggestion of the greed and selfish motives of the whites. In the lines that follow, Walker portrays the picture of a little African girl running away from the poet's White friend: "Unusual things amuse us/A little African girl/Sees my white friend/And runs/She thinks he wants her/For his dinner" (31).

These two references validate the observation made by Jeffrey Coleman that "once upon a time both Africans and Europeans conceived and referred to each other as cannibals" (Critical Essays 85). To reinforce his argument, Coleman quotes the contemporary scholar Jan Nederveen's view that "the most common explanation for the accusation of cannibalism is that it served as a justification for conquest. Besides it formed an enemy image of the colonized. The primary objective was to posit Africans as savages in order to justify capturing, enslaving and colonizing them" (Critical Essays 85). The fear of the little girl who shuns the white man's presence is only a
preamble to the various depictions of intimidations and inhibitions felt by the
Blacks in their daily encounters with the whites.

Narration, which is adopted as the chief strategy for survival for
herself and for others, assumes various forms in the hands of Walker, the
grand story teller. Whereas it takes the form of poetry to sustain herself in
moments of dejection, it lends itself in the form of letters, dreams, memories,
fantasy and even ritual for the various characters she has created. Celie, the
most lovable character she has portrayed, narrates her plight through her
letters and that too to an invisible God. In a sense, Walker imparts her own
creative power of narration to Celie who finds herself choking under a
patriarchal injunction of silence. Her sense of shame pins her eyes to the
ground and the dire need for a meaningful dialogue urges her to write to God.
These letters which are quite confessional in tone, vibrate with the resonance
of personal prayers. In the midst of variform oppressive forces, the
confidential utterances to “Dear God” serve as her sustaining force.

In The Temple of My Familiar, narration is constituted mainly
through the medium of memory. Zede, the Latin American refugee and Lissie
the reincarnate goddess express their pain that is suppressed and each time an
experience is renarrated the narrators get empowered by an evolving
consciousness. Lissie has very sharp memory and she has developed her own
philosophy about this power of the mind. She tells Suwelo, the resourceful
History professor: “Some people don’t understand that it is the nature of the
eye to have seen for ever, and the nature of the mind to recall anything that
was ever known. Or that was the nature, I should say, until man started to put
things on paper" (The Temple 65). The remote past is juxtaposed with the
living present to reinforce the fact that oppression has existed always in one
form or the other. At the same time it strikes a contrast between an idyllic
past and the materialistic present.

In the case of Tashi, the tribal girl whose story is narrated in The
Secret of Joy, narration takes the form of ritual, that is the ritual of female
genital mutilation. Thus the body itself becomes the script. Her reluctance to
obey the missionaries, who force the natives to change their ways, goes to the
extent of bearing the wounds of tradition. Her protest against the colonization
of land by the Whites is expressed by scarring her body in accordance with
the Olinkan tribal practice. In Walker’s novel, By The Light of My Father’s
Smile, Susannah, the writer speaks in terms of fantasy. Her hope to bring
about reconciliation with her dead father can be realized only by means of
this narrative mode. It allows her the freedom to point out the harmful effect
of regressive parental control which has been a direct outcome of patriarchal
domination.

An exploration of the oppressive forces within the black community
reveals that they all stem from racism. The worst manifestation of this is the
evil of slavery. Throughout her works Walker severely censures the Whites
for colonizing the land, labour and body of the coloured people. Examining
the link between various oppressions, the famous Ecological Feminist Chris J
Cuomo observes: “There is no pure gender, or instance of sexism, not
coexistent with race, class, and sexuality, and accompanying oppressions and privileges" (Ecological Communities 6). Several instances of the brutality involved in slavery are explicitly stated in The Temple of My Familiar where former slaves or their descendants narrate the heart-rending memories of that dark era. Lissie whose narrative power is charged with memory relates the several ordeals the slaves had to undergo. She remembers the death of her mother who dies of vomiting and dysentery. Her mother who is in the habit of wearing spotless clothes and keeping herself clean, finds the filthy surrounding very repulsive. Lissie recalls her mother's suffering: “Her deeper sickness was over her shame at being filthy and exposed to strangers, in the embarrassed and helpless presence of her children . . . . She could not accept so much filth on and about her person” (The Temple 65). When she dies, her body is dragged by her heels and the stink is terrible. Lissie also remembers the thoroughness with which the slavers examine them before sending them to the different slave markets. She recounts:

My uncle had [the] clothes removed from us, for they were woven in the distinctive style of our tribe- our colors were yellow, red and white- and gave us plain unbleached cotton ones instead . . . . Two white men came eventually to inspect us. They looked at our ears, our genitals- you would not believe the thoroughness, or the pitiful strength in protestations of the women – our teeth, our eyes. They made us hop up and down to test our legs. Our feet were bleeding.

(The Temple 62-63)
She remembers quite vividly how the thick curls of hair are brutally cut off and the slaves are branded with hot metal. The men press the metal to the skin of buttocks or upper arm which causes severe pain. The swelling and burning continue for days. Lissie’s account reveals the horror and pity evoked by these experiences. The cruel treatment of the children is still worse. Lissie recalls:

Babies were not permitted on the slave ship, nor mothers too far advanced in pregnancy. Some of the babies were simply smashed against the ground by the captors of their mothers, some were left on the trail to die, some were sold or less usually adopted by a tribe that did not believe in or participate in the slave trade. (67)

As Lissie, her sisters and brother are sold to different planters they are separated for ever.

Walker juxtaposes Lissie’s account of slavery with the equally shocking plight of prisoners related by Zede, Carlotta’s mother. Zede is arrested for being a communist. She tells Arveyda, the rock singer who is Carlotta’s husband, how much she has suffered in her captivity. To her, the prison looks like a confiscated Indian village. The Indians have been “removed” and their rich though marginal land is planted with papaya. The prisoners are brought there to plant, care for, and exploit the trees for an export market. In the prison the women are forced to mate with the guards against their will. Jesus, Zede’s lover, is killed in the most brutal manner. Her description evokes the horror of the sight: “Jesus’ throat had been cut. They
had also removed his genitals. He had been violated in every conceivable way. There was not even a scrap of cloth to cover him" (74). In the meantime Zede is subjected to gang rape and she is utterly broken. She is bowed down by the stress of oppression, dispossession and flight.

A very poignant expression of Walker's spite against the various exploitative deeds by the Whites occurs in the poem “The Right to Life: What Can the White Man Say to the Black Woman?” where she reinforces her observations made in The Temple. The rhetoric is charged with emotion as she expresses her rage against the Whites who have colonized even the Black woman's womb by killing her children or taking them away. Walker describes:

In the barracoons and along the slave shipping coasts of Africa, for more than twenty generations, it was he who dashed our babies' brains out against the rocks. It was he who placed our children on the auction block in cities all across the Eastern half of what is now the United States, and listened to and watched them beg for their mother's arms. (Blue Body 442)

Grief wells up within her when she thinks of the black women who “were sacrificed to the profit the white man could make from harnessing their bodies and their children's bodies to the cotton gin.” She does not hesitate to make a very explicit statement of the various policies taken by the US Government:
We do not forget the forced sterilizations and forced starvations on the reservations, here as in South Africa. Nor do we forget the smallpox-infested blankets Indian children were given by the Great White Fathers of the United States Government. (443)

Walker carries on with this theme of dehumanization of the Blacks in the other works also. The poem “First They Said” is an outrageous exposition of the humiliating accusations made by the Whites against the Blacks. The stanzas keep on growing in length as the speaker adds more and more crimes to the inventory. The increase in the number of lines underscores the growing intensity of the speaker’s passion. The Whites think of the Blacks as savages, immoral, inferior and backward. Even while the Blacks are starving and their villages burned to the ground they are accused of overeating and possessing too much of the land. The narrative rhythm rises to a tempo with the sad realization that the fundamental reason for all such charges is the very existence itself of the black:

Finally they had to agree with us.

They said: You are right. It is not your savagery
Or your immorality or your racial inferiority or
Your people’s backwardness or your obstruction of
Progress or your appetite or your infestation of the land
That is at fault. No. What is at fault is your very existence itself.

(Blue Body 323)
The poem ends on a note of warning that at the slightest provocation in future the black army will strike back vigorously.

Several poems and anecdotes depict the White man’s greed which drives him to indulge in various atrocious crimes. The reference to the white man as the ‘Wasichu’ reveals the arrogant greed inherent in colonization of the land and other resources. In the poem “No one can watch the Wasichu”, Walker points out the extent to which this has gone: “No one can watch / the wasichu / anymore/ He is scalping / the earth / till she runs / into the ocean / The dust of her / flight / searing / our sight” (Blue Body 385). Wasichu in Sioux means the fat taker, but Walker uses the term to refer to the Whites who don’t hesitate to slaughter and plunder others. In The Temple, Zede speaks about the starvation among the natives whose food has been stolen from them and sold to the main land. She makes a revealing contrast between the healthy Whites who have fattened themselves on others’ food and the Blacks who are deformed. The former have sound teeth whereas the latter have rotten teeth and bad eyes. It is impossible for Walker to hold her tongue when someone ignores the ‘principle of the Manna’, that is God’s instruction to the Israelites that one should not take more than his daily share (Exod. 16: 5). She never hesitates to reveal any act of villainy or arrogant greed on the part of the whites. She reveals her obsessive hatred when she remarks: “Everywhere some people go, they wreck the land.” (Joy 37)

The reader comes across a nexus of oppressions in Possessing the Secret of Joy, which forms a sequel to The Color Purple. In these novels,
Walker directs very sharp criticism against the Whites for destroying the land in the name of progress or development. She is always up in arms against exploitation of the land by people motivated by greed and lust for power. In the latter part of Purple, through Nettie’s letters, Walker documents the White man’s disastrous ‘mission’ in the tribal village of Olinka. With the intention of converting the fertile land into rubber plantation, the rubber planters unscrupulously mutilate the environment which holds several hegemonic associations for the tribals. They disrupt the harmony of nature by cutting down the trees and digging the yam fields to build a tarmac road. These people take advantage of the ignorance and goodwill of the natives who are given the impression that the new road is meant for their good and welfare. Nettie gives a picture of this destruction in one of her letters: “The ancient, giant mahogany trees, all the trees, the game, everything of the forest was being destroyed, and the land was forced to lie flat” (Purple 144). Only much later do people understand their folly. The village is taken by force by the Whites and the village itself is gutted. There is large-scale biopiracy and theft. Their yams are destroyed and the roof-leaf trees are cut down in plenty. Thus the poor people are literally robbed of their shelter and sustenance. The reader gets a vivid description in the following passage:

In plowing under the Olinka’s yam crop and substituting canned and powdered goods, the planters destroyed what makes them resistant to Malaria . . . . Left without a sufficient supply of yams,
the people, what’s left of them – are sickening and dying at an
alarming rate. (263)

For the people yam not only provides food, but also prevents malaria. The Olinkans use the roof leaf tree for thatching their houses. When these trees are cut down in plenty, they become literally ‘homeless’. They never feel comfortable under roofs made of corrugated iron sheets supplied by the planters. The natives who used to worship the roof leaf tree feel a severe sense of loss and dispossession. Being inextricably bound to their land and culture they consider soil as the sacred mother, the very essence of their being. The devastation of the tribal village is a clear instance of the white man’s pursuit of development resulting in the ecological and cultural rupture of bonds with nature. What Vandana Shiva says in the Indian context is equally true about the Olinkans; i.e. “the culturally rooted tribal is made physically homeless by being uprooted from the soil of her/his ancestors” (Ecofeminism 98).

It is this reckless exploitation by the Whites that is dealt with at length in Possessing The Secret of Joy. The novel is a clear conceptualisation of Walker’s ecofeminist stance with the homologous relationship she maintains between the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature. The central theme of the novel; the monstrous ritual of female genital mutilation, can be read as a symbolic expression of man’s control over the female body and sexuality. In the novel, Tashi offers herself as a scapegoat by scarring her body. In order to resist the colonial powers, she decides to bear the “only
remaining definitive stamp of Olinka tradition" (Joy 61). She deliberately assumes the pose of a warrior and rides into the M’bele camp to be initiated. Walker describes how she sits on the donkey like a female warrior whose fight is intent on safeguarding their culture and traditions from being appropriated by the white imperialists. She also discloses how the White missionaries have always tried to change the traditional practices of the Olinkans. The new missionaries, even though they are Blacks, are viewed with suspicion and hostility by the villagers. As a result, the attempts made by the missionaries to make the villagers aware of the harmful effect of the rite of genital mutilation which has been practised in the village of Olinka is looked upon as yet another attempt at changing the ways of the natives. In their eagerness to resist cultural imperialism, the villagers reinforce the traditional practices. The leader’s exhortation from the prison has the effect of gospel truth: “That we must take back our land. That we must reclaim the descendants of those of our people sold into slavery throughout the world . . . that we must return to the purity of our own culture and traditions. That we must not neglect our ancient customs” (Joy 109). As a visible expression of their protest against the environmental mutilation, the men decide to bear the marks of wounds on their faces. The women who feel stronger affinity to nature, go a step further and mutilate their genitals. Thus Walker treats the theme of female initiation as an acting out of empathy, “the ageless magic” of healing, towards the colonized and exploited land. But these innocent victims of the monstrous ritual fail to understand that the leaders who insist on
keeping the traditional practices, actually use tradition as a political tool to mobilize the people against the colonizers (Warrior Marks 248). This makes clear how women are oppressed within their own culture.

A distressful fact mentioned by Walker is that the mothers who themselves have experienced the insufferable pain, are afraid to protest for fear of being killed or excommunicated. So they allow their daughters to stagger under the yoke of tradition. They watch helplessly when the young girls’ bodies are cut and tortured in the name of tradition and culture. Walker outrageously proclaims that if something is proved to be harmful, it has to be rooted out. She points out the need to differentiate between culture and torture. She says: “I maintain that culture is not child abuse, it is not battering. People customarily do these things just as they customarily enslaved people, but slavery is not culture, nor is mutilation” (Warrior Marks 270). Walker prefers to consider the word ‘culture’ in its literal sense, in terms of health and growth especially because her father was a farmer and her mother a gardener. She too likes gardening. Thus in her opinion “culture” is something in which one should thrive, the body and spirit simultaneously. Moreover, the ecocentric dimensions she attributes to this evil practice is quite explicit in her emphatic statement that “mutilated women, in Africa and elsewhere, are increasingly mirroring a mutilated world”. She continues: “For the earth to know health and happiness, this violence against women must stop. We cannot care for the environment around us, our self designated role from the beginning, if we are in excruciating pain” (Anything We Love 42).
Writers and anthropologists point out that this victimizing rite had its origin in primitive man’s dread of menstrual blood and misconceptions about woman’s bodily functions. James G. Frazer, while explaining the rites associated with puberty, describes the reactions of several societies towards woman’s monthly discharge. It was believed that women possessed dangerous mystical power at the time of menstruation, especially at the first flow of menstrual blood. For the primitive man the objective of secluding women at menstruation was to prevent the dangers that might emanate from this. The physical and psychological weaning of young girls marked the death of childhood and the birth of a new phase which was often celebrated with much festivity. Carl Jung interprets this initiation ritual as a retreat into the deepest level of original mother-child identity or ego-self identity “thus forcing him to experience a symbolic death” (Man and His Symbols 123). In Jung’s opinion, the ritual “invariably insists upon this rite of death and rebirth, which provides the novice with a rite of passage” (123). To give the impression of this death and rebirth, at the time of initiation, the woman is forced to stay in a dark and narrow cave where the sun’s rays do not reach. In Joy, in the description of the M’bele camp, into which Tashi rides, one finds a replica of such a cave. It manifests the alienation and ostracism experienced by women.

The orally transmitted myths and rites had lost their original meaning and form. The puberty rites which initially sprang from ignorance and superstition became the tool with which men exerted his control over female
sexuality. Walker who always celebrates the autonomy of female sexuality is the least tolerant of the stringent confines on woman’s sexuality. Man prefers to define female sexuality in terms of reproduction and not pleasure. As a result the “necessary womb” is retained whereas the “superfluous clitoris” is exised (Feminist Studies 47). Man offers a number of ideological justifications by way of explaining such a cruel practice. Woman is forced into the blind belief that a ritual “bathing” is necessary to make her clean. In Sexual Politics, Kate Millett observes that “primitive peoples explain the phenomenon of the female genitals in terms of a wound, sometimes reasoning that she was visited by a bird or snake and mutilated into her present condition” (47). Hence the ritual leaders referred to clitoridectomy as a healing process and not as a wound. In spite of the several explanations and justifications offered, the fact remains that such foot binding practices emerge out of man’s unconscious desire to control woman. According to feminist critics, these practices signify all forms of oppression and exploitation that women suffer everywhere at the hands of patriarchy. They consider it as an outward manifestation of negative sexual stereotyping and systematic sexual objectification by which man circumscribes woman’s aspirations and desires. Gayatri Spivak has explained clitoridectomy as “a metonymy of woman’s social and legal status” (The Post Colonial Critic 10). Tashi, the tribal girl undergoes the painful ceremony as an acting out of empathy towards the colonized and mutilated land of the Olinkans. By making effacement of clitoris an expression of protest against white colonization, Walker makes it a
visible expression of all sorts of oppression imposed upon by capitalist patriarchal system. By imposing such a monstrous ritual upon woman, patriarchy steals her right to be whole and natural. The term "half-body" used by M'Lissa is very meaningful as it signifies the mutilated state of woman.

Very often, the people who enforce the victimizing rites insist on keeping silence about these matters. Thus along with woman's sexual autonomy, the right to express her pain is cut off. She is forced to seal her lips as many of these atrocities are considered as 'Taboo'. Mary Daly, the radical American feminist comments on such silencing of the victim:

... there are strong taboos against saying/writing the truth about them, against 'naming' them. These taboos are operative both within the segments of phallocracy in which such rituals are practiced in fatherland and in other parts of the Fatherland, whose leaders cooperate in the conspiracy of silence. (Gyn/Ecology 155)

The profound silencing of the mind's imaginative and critical powers is one basic function of the sado-ritual. All sorts of oppression are followed by silencing of the victim. Adam, Tashi's husband ponders: "They've made the telling of the suffering itself taboo" (Joy 155). In Purple, also Celie is hushed by her 'Pa' after being repeatedly raped by him and her children taken away. The novel begins with the imposing voice of the patriarch: "You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy" (1). In Meridian the slave master cuts off the tongue of Louvinie, the slave, for possessing wonderful gift of story telling. The story she tells is so convincing that the
master’s child, failing to find any dividing line between fiction and reality, dies. She relates the pain of being speechless and pleads for her tongue. She is scared at the thought of the curse of her native land: “Without one’s tongue in one’s mouth or in a special spot of one’s own choosing, the singer in one’s soul was lost forever to grunt and snort through eternity like a pig . . .” (Meridian 44). But Louvinie proves that nothing can stifle the soul longing for narration. She buried the chopped off tongue which grew into a large magnolia tree which was called The Sojourner tree. Other slaves believed that “it possessed magic” because “it could talk, make music, was sacred to birds and possessed the power to obscure vision” (44). Through the story of Louvinie, Walker reinforces that any attempt to suppress the victim will turn against the oppressor with a greater degree of vehemence and power.

The monstrosity of the practice of genital mutilation looms large on taking into consideration the disastrous consequences of such an evil practice. In Warrior Marks, Dr. Henrietta Kouyate explains the medical consequences of circumcision and infibulation. Many blood vessels including the dorsal artery are located at the clitoris. Excision of this can cause profuse bleeding. The girls may get infection, even tetanus. In communal circumcision, the same knife or stone or razor is used for all. If one is a carrier of AIDS, others are likely to get it. Moreover, for the cut and traumatized woman, intercourse is very painful and there are many problems at childbirth. When a normally elastic area has been turned into a cicatrix one, women tear at the top and at the bottom during delivery. Childbirth becomes a longer process and this can
affect the health of the child (WM 295-296). Mary Daly also speaks of the
horror experienced by an infibulated woman. She describes how her legs are
tied together, immobilizing her for weeks. During this time excrement
remains in the bandage. In short there are complications which leave the
women debilitated for the rest of their lives. Daly remarks: "... the
infibulated girl is mutilated and that she can look forward to a life of repeated
encounters with 'the little knife' — the instrument of perpetual torture..."
The cutting and re-sewing goes on throughout a woman’s living death of
reproductive ‘life’ (Gyn/Ecology 157). The best manifestation is the change,
both physical and psychological that has come over Tashi in Joy. Walker
describes how the triumph and glory with which she rides into the camp soon
gives way to despair and gloom. She becomes passive and there is a dead
look in her eyes. She takes a long time to urinate and the menstrual periods
last for ten days. The smell of sore blood is so unbearable that she remains
literally buried. As the residual blood cannot flow easily, she gets painful
cramps.

The ritualistic violence upon women is juxtaposed with several other
instances of victimization and exploitation related by the multiple narrative
voices. Walker exposes various levels of appropriation. Tashi’s husband,
Adam’s interaction with the African students or rather intellectuals suffering
from AIDS reveals to the reader several dehumanizing activities of the
Whites. The contaminated polio vaccine supplied by them carried with it the
immune deficiency virus that causes syphilis. Thus an African’s body is
reduced to mere matter for the White man's scientific experiment. Walker expresses her bitterness towards this type of objectification in her outburst:

"The kind of experiment that would not have been hazarded on European or white American subjects. That they die holding this belief that an African's life is made for experiment and is expendable . . ." (Joy 235). When Tashi listens to all these accounts, she is infuriated at the passive submission to death as a result of "animal like ignorance" and acceptance. She wonders whether it is "the assigned role of the African to suffer, to die and know not why" (Joy 234).

Walker in highly reproachful tone, exposes the shameless meanness of the Whites in her description of the bondage of the African women. As most of these women were circumcised and infibulated, it evoked curiosity in the onlookers. The American doctors who were fascinated by the sewed-up women flocked to the slave auctions to examine them, as the women stood naked and defenceless on the blocks. Walker makes very suggestive references to the embarrassment felt by the women under such imperialistic male gaze. It also reveals the lack of concern and indifference of the Whites to the sad plight of these slaves. Even at that critical moment, when the women feel so helpless and miserable, the Whites are looking for an opportunity to improve their medical achievement. Amy's remark is quite relevant in this regard:

They learned to do the 'procedure' on the other enslaved women; they did this in the name of Science. They found a use for it on
white women. . . . They wrote in their medical journals that they'd finally a cure for the White woman's hysteria. (Joy 178)

Walker further extends the theme of colonization through Lisette's account of French imperialism on Algeria. She describes how the Algerians are forced to leave their country, houses and gardens. Many of them are killed by the French and several others treated worse than dogs. Many are "picked up by the French security forces in the night, grilled, imprisoned, tortured, killed" (Joy 121).

Walker maintains no reserve when she documents the white man's hostility towards the environment. She exposes how the Blacks and animals are used by the Whites for development and progress. Hartford, a young man who dies of AIDS, in his last confession to Adam reveals how the pharmaceutical company has nipped his budding dreams. The zest with which Hartford and his friends have shot down chimps for their kidneys, gradually turns into horror and disgust. Hartford gives a picturesque description of his enthusiasm when he has been offered a "position" in a factory run by the whites:

At first I was in the rainforest, hunting with the other boys. We loved our guns. We trapped and dragged back to the factory more monkeys and chimps than I'd even thought there were. I grew to identify, and sometimes mimic, chimp and monkey behavior. Monkey gestures. (Joy 247).
The male monkeys who always fight to save the captured females and children are shot down. They are not needed. The men constantly reiterate the statement that “only the females and the babies are wanted” which poses a threat to the survival of the species. When there is no need for more monkeys and chimps, the young men are employed for decapitating them. Hartford is tormented by the sight of the suffering chimps and their resemblance with human faces. He tells Adam in a whispery rasp:

The screaming of monkeys, he said musingly, . . . is really unlike the scream of the peacock which as you know is very human. But somehow, because of the chimps’ and monkeys’ faces their screaming is even more human. Everything they think, everything they fear, everything they feel, is as clear as if you’d known them all your life. (248)

In order to manufacture a vaccine to sell to the ‘whole’ world the lives of many – both human and non human – are sacrificed. Hartford painfully narrates how small boys with small knives are trained to make the slit to haul the kidneys out. Walker also makes a veiled suggestion of the cunningness with which the men in white coats hide the darkness of their crime: “The vaccine left the factory at the other end from where the monkeys and chimps were raised and slaughtered. It left the factory in small clear bottles with blinding white labels and shiry metal caps” (249). Thus it is clear that the denial of the right to live and die ‘whole’ has provoked Walker intensely and several echoes of this can be traced in her works.
In an interesting book titled *Animals Write, ... Dear Humans* Nazareno Fabbretti makes an assessment of the human beings from the animals’ perspective by means of letters supposed to be written by animals. The monkey in its letter expresses its protest against being used in experiments:

You should be ashamed of the experiments being set up by your most brazen scientists. They have already tried to mate our two species to produce a monster which one of you wanted to call the “chimpanman”. ... It’s always the same old story: we seem destined to be your “guinea pigs”, like dogs and cats, confirming your ambitions which lie somewhere between Satan and Faust.

(*Animals Write, ... 27*)

Walker also reveals how the Blacks are neglected and ignored under white American law which is parochial and segregating in her view. In the poem “Karamojongs”, she portrays a tall Karamojan whose naked body has the classic beauty of a statue, but his eyes are running sores and his pierced ears are infected. The description doesn’t conceal the irony in positing the African as healthy: “The Noble Savage/ Erect/ No shoes on his/ feet/ His pierced ears/ infected” (*Blue Body* 64). In the essay, “A Thousand Words”, Walker shares her experience which prompted the poem:

In 1965 I stood next to a fellow American traveller in northern Uganda as he took a picture of a destitute Karamojan tribesman, who was in fact, dying. The man was a refugee from ancestral
lands to the South, now expropriated by another group, and had been forced to eke out what living he could in the barren north. He wore the briefest shredded loincloth, had at most a single tooth, and his eyes were covered with flies. (LBW 99)

Walker juxtaposes this “noble savage” with a bare-bosomed woman, who at the age of twenty, looks like an old woman. Her cracked skin and nipples infested with flies evoke the picture of the battered earth, of the mutilated and exploited land that could have provided sustenance to many. Whereas this woman is a victim of poverty, the little girl whose eyes signal the onset of glaucoma is one among the many infants suffering from malnutrition. Here Walker maintains a crisp style with the subtle narration of sad facts: “How bright the little/girl’s/Eyes were!/a first sign of/Glaucoma” (70). These lines open our eyes to the bare fact that there is no law which gives due representation for the several needs of these people. She also hints at the threat of extinction faced by the Karamojongs: “The Karamojongs/Never civilized/A proud people/I think there/Are/a hundred left” (71).

Walker is equally disturbed by the withering dreams of the African Americans in a white dominated society. The title poem ‘Once” depicts the ambivalent feelings of the negroes towards the white American laws. It begins with the typical mythical American dream of owning “Green lawn/ a picket fence” and flowers. Commenting on this poem Coleman throws light on the unjust distribution of wealth implied in these lines. According to him
at the time of composition of this poem the Negro led a very poor life compared to that of the white American and the chance of owning a home with a proverbial white picket fence was highly unlikely for “Negro” families in the 1960s (Critical Essays 87). The poem is an expression of the control exerted over the personal, legal, and economic aspirations of the African Americans under Jim Crow. She thus exposes the racially repressive nature of the American legal and judicial system.

One evil system which has generated several other exploitative practices is the share cropping system. This system which is aptly termed as “debt peonage” by Susan Willis was the immediate vicious residual impact of slavery (Specify 5). Even though slavery was abolished, the landless Negroes had to depend on the Whites for their livelihood. Under this system, the Blacks had to work in the white man’s land and had no claim on the produce. Walker, who has grown up in a sharecropping family, gives a very realistic picture of the criminal exploitation inherent in this vicious practice “in which the landowner controlled land, seeds, and tools, as well as records of account”. She describes: “Sharecropping was the former slave owners’ revenge against black people for attaining their freedom” (Anything We Love 16). The “complete subjugation and outright terrorism included rape, beatings, burnings and being thrown off the land, along with the entrenched Southern custom of lynching”(16). The Whites took advantage of the resultant poverty and bankruptcy of the poor Blacks. This evil practice cast long and dark shadows in the domestic life of the Negroes. Women and
children became the indirect victims. In *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, Walker describes the nullifying effect of this system through the experience of Grange Copeland, a sharecropper and his son Brownfield. Brownfield’s craving for his father’s affection is never entertained by Mr. Grange Copeland who acted “as if talking to his son was a strain, a burdensome requirement” (5). It always unsettled him when he saw his father’s face “freeze into an untypically bland mask” at the sight of the white master, Shipley. Walker describes the thoughts passing through the mind of young Brownfield: “It was as if his father became a stone or a robot. A grim stillness settled over his eyes and he became an object, a cipher . . .” (*Life* 9). The brooding silence among the workers is another indication of the terrorizing atmosphere engendered by the mere presence of the white man. Even after returning home, these workers can feel the remote control of the white master. The inhibitions and abuse find an outlet in the abuse and curse doled upon his wife and children. Grange Copeland is never able to relax as long as he is at the mercy of the white man. Margaret, Grange’s wife, also becomes a victim of repression and suppression experienced by him. She is always rebuked by him and never receives a kind word.

Brownfield’s deprived childhood has a very adverse effect in his later life. He marries a woman of his own choice and cherishes dreams of a happy life with her. But when his dreams to go north fail and his debts shoot up, the romance and charm give way to frustration and disappointment. He realizes “how his own life was becoming a repetition of his father’s. He could not
save his children from slavery; they did not even belong to him” (Life 78).

The Blacks who have been subjected to so much abuse and victimization by the Whites turn out to be equally oppressive to his family. They imbibe the spirit of the patriarchal culture in which men are masters and women slaves. They treat their women in the most unkindly manner. Brownfield’s failure as a husband and father forces him to direct his spite against his wife, Mem who was “the kind of woman who sang while she cooked breakfast in the morning and sang when getting ready for bed at night” (72). With his crushed pride and battered ego, he puts an iron hand on Mem’s career as a school teacher. As Walker describes: “His rage and his anger and his frustration ruled” (79). He is determined to change her for the worse; in Walker’s words: “He was her Pygmalion in reverse” (80). He forced her to change her way of speaking to pull her down to the level of “poor niggers”. The worst expression of sexism takes a highly grotesque turn when he tries to exploit the vulnerability of the female body. He forces pregnancies on her which prevent her from going to work. She is dragged back to the shabby house of Uncle J. L. Finally he shoots her on Christmas eve when she returns from work cheerfully greeting him, in spite of her weariness. Ruth, her youngest daughter vividly remembers with nausea and a feeling of chill, Mem “lying faceless among a scattering of gravel in a pool of blood, which were scattered around her head like a halo, a dozen bright yellow oranges that blistered on one side from the light” (172).
In the “Afterword” of a recent edition of the novel Walker shares her experience of writing this novel:

It was an incredibly difficult novel to write, for I had to look at, and name and speak up about violence among black people in the black community at the same time that all black people (and some whites) — including me and my family—were enduring massive psychological and physical violence from white supremacists in the Southern state, particularly Mississippi. (Life 342)

She also explains that the most disturbing event in the novel, the brutal murder of Mem is based on the real murder of one Mrs. Walker. Alice Walker lays stress on the universality of violence. It is the same everywhere. That is why the woman is named “Mem”, which in French means “the same”. The major women characters in the novel – Margaret, Mem and Jossie – are abused as whores by their own men.

In The Color Purple also, the reader comes across inhibitions and intimidations set upon by patriarchal domination. Celie is repeatedly raped by her step father and her children are taken away from her. Later, Albert, a young widower marries her just to make her suffer for his own frustrations and thwarted desires. He wants to marry Shug Avery, the blues singer, but this is opposed by his father. Celie has to look after Albert’s children. He insults her even without any provocation. He looks at Celie as if he were looking at earth. When Nettie, her sister comes to stay with them, he makes an attempt to rape her. He brings home his mistress, Shug Avery, the Blues
singer. Worst of all, he hides Nettie's letters and tries to sever all bonds between the two sisters. Harpo takes after his father and tries to beat Sofia, but she pays back in the same coin and that puts an end to it.

The dominating father inhibits not only the sons, but also the daughters. For example, Jossie in The Third Life, is haunted by the cruelty of her father and she has nightmares about this. She recalls how her father illtreats her when he learns about her premarital sexual adventures and pregnancy. Her latest novel By The Light tells the story of Susannah, the younger daughter of Senor Robinson. She is crushed to pieces at the sight of her sister being punished by their father. Walker imagines that even after death, Robinson is not able to settle peace with himself. So his ghost hovers over the younger daughter with his invisible presence ready for any sort of retribution. In Senor Robinson and Jossie's father, Walker tries to figure out her own father who was not at all kind to Ruth, Alice's sister, for the simple reason that she looked like his mother who was shot dead by her former lover. Moreover he had declared that he could not tolerate sexual promiscuity on the part of his daughters. This affected her in her formative years and she had the tendency to keep a distance till his death. By The Light overtly implores a greater understanding from fathers while involving themselves with their daughters' sexual urges. The short story "The Child Who Favored Daughter" also takes up the theme of filial control which goes to the extent of cutting away the daughter's breasts for having an affair with a white boy.
Walker thus illustrates how thoughtless parental reaction can affect the development of sons and daughters.

In the collection of poems *Horses Make a Landscape Look More Beautiful*, there is a swinging back to documentation, but with an evolving consciousness. All the poems in this collection vehemently portray exploitation and victimization at various levels. As the meaning of her ancestors' lives unfolds before her she is able to unravel the different levels of oppression. The poem "Remember" casts the vivid picture of a black girl who is in a very wretched condition. The first part of the poem formulates a statement of the oppressed condition: "I am the dark/rotten toothed girl/with the wounded eye/and the melting ear" (*Blue Body* 317). Here also the structure of the poem reinforces the fragmentation that is being highlighted. The second stanza expresses her dream of wholeness and the moment of self actualization when the girl can proudly display her "blessed dark skin, repaired teeth, healing eye and hearing ears" like the imbecile who proudly displays his body in *Once*. The poem concludes with subtle hints about the two values which are instrumental in bringing about the change: "... two flowers/whose roots are twin /Justice and Hope/Hope and Justice..." (316). Infant mortality which is yet another pressing concern of the day finds expression in "A Few Sirens": "But in the world / children are lost;/whole countries of children/starved to death/before the age of five each year;..." (348).
The collection of poems *Her Blue Body Everything We Know*, which includes all the formerly published collections, epitomizes her ecological awareness and vision. Here she places herself as an apostle of inarticulate nature and speaks on its behalf. The pain Walker felt as she had to leave the middle Georgia landscape affected her tremendously and made her aware of the influence of one’s own environment. In the preface she describes: “The pain of racist oppression and its consequence, economic impoverishment drove me to the four corners of the earth in search of justice and peace, and work that affirmed my whole being” (*Blue Body* 413). Several poems in this collection reiterate her rage against the injustice and exploitation meted out by the White man against the environment and the natives. For example, in the poem “We Have A Map Of The World”, Walker underscores environmental racism which is a very common form of exploitation: “... all nuclear tests/have been/conducted on the territory/Of native peoples” (436). She offers a peep into the terrorizing strategies employed in the Vietnam War. The defoliants used at that time have far reaching disastrous consequences. This is vividly expressed in the lines: “... your cows eat/poisoned grass/that your wheat kills” (437).

Wholeness is in part a matter of resistance, of rebellion against an array of oppressive forces. In each of her works, after documenting the various repressive forces, Walker suggests strategies of resistance. These strategies consist of celebration of the black body, of nature, of female sexuality, in short, whatever has been put down to an abject position.
Sometimes a journey across the landscape can be promotive to growth and development. Walker lends her own activism to Meridian who rises up to a better consciousness by means of her activism. Very often resistance is effected through a rejection of patriarchal codes. Only rarely do hatred and killing become strategies of resistance.

Resistance takes a boisterous form in the social display of the naked male in section xi of the poem “Once”. The Black man’s audacity to swim naked at a white beach in Atlanta shows his eagerness to break the racial barriers. It is an act of resistance against the treatment of the negro as an alien in his own land. Walker reinforces the defiance of law, which favours the whites, in the casual and humorous manner in which the imbecile responds to the Judge at the trial “re: indecent exposure.” Jeffrey Coleman argues that this is an example of Walker’s use of humour in order to defy or subvert racist hegemonic notions by “putting the black body in its entirety in a position of social display and confrontation, a body which has traditionally been ‘abjected’ by ‘regulatory norms failing to qualify as fully human’.” He remarks:

Walker definitely places the subject of her poem, the half-wit, in a position to question ‘the straight-faced assumption of the rationality of the system and the belief structure’ that blackness was something to hide or be ashamed of, by having the half-wit literally confront and denounce the judge in relation to the judge’s
assumed notion concerning the beauty or validity of the African American's natural, naked human body. (Critical Essays 91)

Walker places the body itself as a site of resistance as she later does in Possessing the Secret of Joy.

Whereas it is the display of the body which effects resistance in the case of this black man, it is the discovery of her own body that helps Celie's growth in The Color Purple. Her development passes through several stages; Celie who used to be passively submissive at the beginning gradually emerges as a strong woman fighting against all oppressive forces. The personal liberation from the slave's position is attained mainly with the help of Shug who formulates a new identity for Celie. The growth can be traced in the letters she writes. The first set of letters written to an invisible God can be considered as belonging to the prelinguistic or the "imaginary stage" when she is not able to make any distinction between the self and the Other. Celie reaches the "symbolic" stage by literally passing through the "mirror phase" in which with the help of Shug she discovers her own body in the mirror. An awareness of her bodily beauty raises her self-esteem. The discovery of the hidden powers of her body results in the development of her potential as a seamstress. Her liberation becomes complete with the attainment of economic independence. Hence the title "The Color Purple" not only indicates a celebration of beauty and the pleasure of living, but also highlights how that celebration is at the core of spiritual and political growth.
Walker lays stress on the power of the female body by making it an object of worship. While Celie gives Shug a bath when the latter is sick, she touches her body with awe and reverence. Walker presents Celie’s feelings quite interestingly: “I wash her body, it feels like I’m praying. My hands tremble and my breath short” (Purple 51). Walker is always furious about distancing a woman from her own body. In Joy also, she criticizes man’s eagerness to control woman by denying her the right to knowledge of her body. While speaking about woman’s sexual autonomy, she points out that woman is not allowed to touch her body. Her own body and the functioning of the sexual organs remain a mystery to her. Chris J. Cuomo speaks about this kind of exploitation:

“...females are often alienated from their own bodily functions and processes. Woman’s health and sexuality has also become a primary site for man’s exercise of patriarchal and racist political power. (Ecological Feminism 98)

Tashi acquires knowledge of her body only after coming to America. She confides this to Miss Raye who assists Uncle Carl in treating Tashi: “My own body was a mystery to me, as was the female body, beyond the function of the breasts, to almost everyone I knew” (Joy 112). Walker believes that a woman should not be ashamed to speak about her own body. As exhorted by the French Feminist Helene Cixous, she makes woman’s body heard in her writings. Like the critic, Cherrie Moraga, Walker too emphasizes the empowering vigour of the black female body. Moraga observes:
Women of color have always known, although we have not always wanted to look at it, that our sexuality is not merely a physical response or drive, but holds a crucial relationship to our entire spiritual capacity. Patriarchal religions—whether brought to us by the colonizer’s cross and gun or emerging from our own people—have always known this. Why else would the female body be so associated with sin and disobedience? Simply put, if the spirit and sex have been linked in our oppression, they must also be linked with in the strategy toward our liberation. (Loving in the War Years 132)

By The Light which is dedicated to Eros, the goddess of love, celebrates sexuality in its wholeness. The review made by the reporter of The Denver Post in the blurb of the novel lays stress on this idea: “Walker explores the function and dysfunction of sexuality, as it relates to the growth of the human spirit”. The novel is rightly described as “a daring novel . . . straddling both the spiritual and sensual realms in a lusty hosanna of healing and redemption.” Walker’s projection of the spontaneous expressions of sex attempts to discredit the heterosexual codes set by patriarchy.

There are very clear instances of Walker’s reaction against fetishism as a highly sophisticated form of victimization. The sarcastic tone underlying “In Uganda An Early King” reveals this. The wives are made to overeat because “He liked fat wives” (Blue Body 281). In By The Light, Mac Doc, the elder daughter of Senor Robinson, is not allowed to eat to her heart’s
content so that she should remain slim. It has a very negative impact on her because she later finds herself irresistibly drawn to food, over eats and gets obese. Sometimes in Walker’s novels we come across women who consciously slim themselves to be different from the plump black women whom the black men are fond of. Brownfield accuses Mem when she becomes thin due to sickness.

Walker’s second collection of poems, *Revolutionary Petunias and Other Poems*, treats the personal experiences and impressions as representative of the collective history of the American South. The title itself suggests the invincibility of the revolutionary spirit which alone can bring about transformation. Taking into consideration the several associations the petunia plant and flowers hold for her, there is nothing wrong in considering the petunia as the symbol of survival in the midst of withering conditions. In the interview with O’Brien, Walker speaks about her mother’s petunia, which has almost become a family legend. While unraveling the parable of this petunia plant which her mother had planted, Walker states: “It never wilted, just bloomed and bloomed” (Interviews 208) Even though no trace of the plant will be visible in winter, it will be there in spring. This has always served as a symbol of beauty and endurance for “[i]t had never died. Each winter it lay dormant and dead looking, but each spring it came back more lively than before” (Interviews 208). Many passers by have collected stem cuttings of this magic plant which has stood against all oddities of weather and thirty seven years later the mother gave her daughter a cutting of the
same plant. Walker herself likes to raise them because whatever soil one puts them in, “they bloom their heads off—exactly it seemed to me, like black people tend to do” (208). She considers the whole book as a “celebration of people who will not cram themselves into any ideological or racial mold” (208). It is an exhortation to her own people that they should not allow the winter of self-contempt to wither their power of resistance.

The title poem speaks of Sammy Lou in whom Walker realizes her dream of creating “a person who engaged in a final struggle with her oppressor and won, but who in every other way was ‘incorrect’ ” (206). She is the “incredibly incorrect” rebel who is part of an ongoing revolution. She brightens the surroundings with blooming flowers and even on her way to the electric chair she doesn’t forget to instruct her children to water her petunias. Walker ardently believes in the sustaining power of plants. In the introduction to Revolutionary Petunias, she reinforces the rejuvenating power of plants and flowers: “I was saved from despair countless times by the flowers and the trees I planted” (Blue Body 153). She constantly remembers with gratitude how her mother beautified the surroundings and provided a perennial source of joy. In an interview, Walker tells Sanoff A. P. that she spent her childhood in a shabby and small house where there were ten members. But her mother used to plant flowers all around. In her own words: “So on the one hand, there was this awful system of exploitation, drudgery and broken spirits and, on the other, this incredibly sustaining natural beauty. I was shortchanged by society, but abundantly fed by nature.” (“The Craft of Survival”). This idea
finds beautiful expression in the poem “Torture”, where she states that one can withstand torture by planting a tree. Here Walker suggests planting a tree as creative reaction to torture. In the lines, we see the poet’s quest for wholeness. For her, the tree is a living paradigm of wholeness. When she advises to plant a tree to resist torture of any kind, it suggests the poet’s hope to reinstate the tree of life and thus restore wholeness.

The message that Walker imparts through her collection Good Night Willie Lee has been shaped out of “breakdown and spiritual disarray that led [her] eventually into a larger understanding of the psyche and of the world . . .” (Blue Body 239). She lays stress on the transformative power of forgiveness in the preface: “For it is change in the self, along with the ability to forgive the self and others, that frees us for the next encounter” (239). Again it is her mother’s parting words to her father that instills this new insight in her. Forgiveness is not to be mistaken as cowardly submission.

Very often Walker considers a journey across the landscape as an integral part of the process of growth. She herself undertakes such journeys whenever she feels dejected. Her constant trips to the South in quest of wholeness is an ample proof of this. She describes the moral courage she acquires by such trips in the poem “South: The Name Of My Home” which is about the search for roots. Though she is a little disillusioned by the sight of “the trees bent/ weeping” ultimately it leads to the spiritual rearmament that she is seeking. As Thadious Davis remarks: “It is an environment that is without a history of pain, but it nonetheless connects generations of Blacks to
one another to a ‘wholeness’ of a self and to the old unalterable roots, . . .” (Women Writers 45). In the preface to Horses Make a Landscape Look More Beautiful, she shares her exhilaration at her decision to move to northern California. She thinks of it as the best decision she has ever made. She goes on explaining that it enabled her for the first time to admit and express her grief over the ongoing assassination of the earth which has taken much deeper dimensions in the later years.

In The Third Life, Grange Copeland moves to the North to escape from the intimidating South. Though he finds the North equally oppressive, it turns out to be an odyssey of learning. He comes across many people, reads a lot and gathers a lot of information. When he returns to the South years later, he has changed a lot and he hopes to bring about a change in his son’s life. To his disgust, he finds Brownfield an incorrigible bully. As a corrective to his earlier roles as a ruthless misogynist husband and a heartless father, he brings up his grand daughter, Ruth. “educating” her from what he has learnt from experience. He showers all his affection on her. When he realizes that Brownfield will not hesitate to try any dirty trick to take her away from his hands, he kills his own son. Thus Walker schematizes the events of the novel in such a manner that the third life of Grange Copeland is a life of new awareness, transformation and growth. The significance that Walker attributes to the title of her first novel is self-evident because it explains the three stages in the process of growth. Only by passing through the first two
lives – the life of a slave and a life of resistance, can the hero attain final development.

In Purple also, Celie makes a trip to Memphis which empowers her spiritually and physically. Similarly Nettie becomes resourceful enough to reexamine her religious notions and belief only when she reaches the tribal village of Africa. Tashi becomes conscious of the oppressive nature of the ritual of clitoridectomy only when she comes to America. Walker promotes activism as a transformative venture to restore personal and communal wholeness. Meridian, whose maternal genealogy is empowering enough to instill courage, emerges as an activist. Her great-great-grand mother stole back her children from being sold. The great grand mother as a slave painted faces on barns across Georgia. Meridian’s grandmother had sacrificed her life to give education to her daughter and her own mother got through school and helped her brothers and sisters to be educated. Meridian, who has given up her son and aborted a second child to continue with her studies rejects the conventional idealization of motherhood. As in the case of Mem in The Third Life, conception articulates oppression for wile child and Meridian (Specifying 112).

Walker problematizes motherhood in her novels by adopting ambivalent stance; very often motherhood is forced upon woman as an attempt to domesticate her. According to Willis it may appear quite odd that the creative life-giving act of child bearing is undermined to such an extent that in Meridian, it is constantly linked to images of murder and suicide. She
adds that the death of Wile child and the suicide of Fast Mary who chopped her newborn babe to bits prefigure the emotional tension Meridian herself will experience later as a mother. Finally she succeeds in expanding the motherly care and concern to universal dimensions. Barbara Christian's comment is quite relevant in this context:

Because she feels guilt about giving up her son to others and about aborting her second pregnancy, Meridian is propelled on a search for spiritual and political health. Having sinned against biological motherhood, she becomes a mother by expanding her mind with action, which is directed towards the preservation of all life.

(“Political Content” 423)

Through Meridian's experience, Walker "extends the definition of womanhood beyond the restrictive definition of biological motherhood . . .". By extending the true meaning of mother, of cherishing life, to that of the revolutionary, Walker reexamines the spiritual and political principles of the Civil Rights Movement. She poses a very pertinent question as to whether there is any justification for killing for the sake of revolution: "Is there no place in a revolution for a person who cannot kill?" (Meridian 193). Meridian is not able to declare her willingness to kill; she is quite baffled by the "correctness" and "rightness" of things. For her, the right thing is never to kill. The culture of violence is not justifiable even if it may bring about positive social transformation. Hence Walker reaffirms the axiom: "End does not justify the means". On realizing that she cannot kill, Meridian leaves the
group of civil workers and goes back to the people to help them in life-affirming ways. Her active participation in voter registration drives and leadership in the protests against acts of discrimination— all show her zest to maintain dignity in ordinary life not only for herself but also for others.

Mem, Sofia, Celie, Lissie, Jossie—are all representatives of women who fight for survival in a hostile, black world. Through them, Walker tells the story of the suffering, pains and hardships that black women face in their daily life and their struggle to gain a meaningful place in the family and society. As a result of awakening into womanist consciousness, Mem is able to assert her right to "live in a house where it don’t rain and there’s no holes in the floor... (Life 38). She finds out a better house and signs the lease. When her husband tries to thwart her plans, she pronounces a ten-point resolution at gun’s point. She prescribes a code of conduct for her husband by introducing ten new commandments. Here, Walker offers a glimpse into her antipathy towards the ten commandments prescribed in The Old Testament by subverting the Mosaic law of the Judaeo Christians. The observation she makes in Anything We Love illustrates her attitude to the Mosaic laws:

One cannot help but feel empathy for the Jewish women of the Bible, however, who had no rights under the law of Moses — and indeed were told to stand back when he came down from the mountain with the Ten commandments, which, after all were not written for them — and were forced to share their husbands and
homes with strange, weeping women abducted from other lands.

(23)

Mem's resistance enables her to live in a 'decent' house though only for a short while. Jossie also doesn't allow herself to be broken by her father's wrath; instead, she becomes self-dependent and always strong. She starts a business in which she offers both herself and drinks to the male customers (BFC 158). She attains economic security for herself and her daughter. Thus she also joins the pageant of Walker women who valiantly fight against their situation and their oppressors.

Sofia, when she is introduced first, appears as a strong, vibrant woman who is engaged in a relentless fight against oppressive forces. She tells Celie: “All my life I had to fight. I had to fight my daddy. I had to fight my brothers. I had to fight my cousins and my uncles. A girl child ain't safe in a family of men” (Purple 42). Later the same spirit drives her to slash the Mayor’s wife and for this she is imprisoned. Lissie speaks in the same vein in The Temple. Though she manages to retain her womanhood within the family she is crushed by the racist forces outside.

The writer's concern for the Southern community encompasses the black folk language also which possesses unique vitality. Her staunch belief that “anything we love can be saved” prompts her to save the southern folk language from getting submerged. In The Color Purple, Walker tries to revive the suppressed language and attribute literary status to it by making it Celie’s medium. She has clarified her objective in adopting the southern dialect: “To
permit our language to be heard, and especially the words and speech of our old ones, is to expose the depth of the conflict between us and our oppressors and the centuries it has not at all silently raged” (LBW 63). It also brings to light “what has been done to her by a racist and sexist system” (LBW 65). So she breaks the silence of the mute black woman by resorting to a language that has been suppressed because it reveals “the cultures at variance with what the dominant white well-to-do culture perceives itself to be” (63). Alma S. Freeman comments upon Walker’s use of the Southern dialect as Celie’s medium: “By using this language in contrast to standard English, Walker affirms the value of Afro American culture . . . for it is in their language that a people’s values are expressed” (Political Content 423). Walker has acknowledged that she has given to Celie the language of her step-grandmother, Rachel. She has been very fond of this old black woman. She explains that Celie’s speech pattern and words reveal an intelligence that transforms illiterate speech into something that is beautiful and effective in conveying her sense of the world. Celie who is “created out of language” becomes stronger and more articulate and this growth manifests itself in the complexity and power her language acquires towards the end. Walker asserts her belief in the sustaining power of language when she states: “And, amazingly, it [turn of the century Southern black folk language] has sustained us more securely than the arms of angels” (65). Language is crucial to the black women’s process of becoming and the black women writers find a viable, literary language in this to tell the story of this becoming.
In addition to restoring a suppressed language, Walker discovers the anonymous black women writers and the submerged texts. An examination of black literary history reveals that the black women writers encountered a hostile critical clime which smothered female creativity. The men authors who have viewed the white man’s cruelty towards the Blacks in terms of the denial of the MANHOOD of a people have ignored, belittled and suppressed the women authors and the works they have produced. For them the world of Black literature has been a world of black men’s literature. In the pages of the widely popular male-authored texts, there are only male heroes and male protagonists. The complexity and vitality of black female experience has been fundamentally ignored. It was with the publication of Toni Cade Bambara’s anthology *The Black Woman* that women writers expressed for the first time the need for a liberation from the chattel like roles in a male dominated society. Belonging to a generation of conscientious feminists Walker is autonomous in her thinking and writing and capable of forging unprecedented break-throughs.

Walker’s greatness rests on her attempt to resurge the works of Zora “Neale Hurston, a powerful Southern writer who was eclipsed by the hostile critics and publishers. In the act of discovering Zora Neale Hurston and her works, Walker rewrites the literary history of America to give voice to the suppressed women writers over the ages. Thus she tries to dispel the clouds of anonymity and oblivion hovering over the black woman artist. Virginia Wolf’s comment about the mute and inglorious Jane Austen(s) is pathetically
true of the black women writers: "... that a highly gifted girl who had tried to use her gift for poetry would have been so thwarted and hindered by other people, so tortured and pulled asunder by her own contrary instincts, that she must have lost her health and sanity to a certainty" (A Room Of One's Own 57). Walker was quite outraged by the casual and hasty manner in which the women writers and their accomplishments were mentioned in a class on "the giants of black literature". In her essay "Looking for Zora", she says: "Jessie Fauset, Nella Larsen, Ann Petry, Paule Marshall (unequalled in intelligence, vision, craft by anyone of her generation, to put her contributions to our literature modestly), and Zora Neale Hurston were names appended, like verbal foot notes, to the illustrious all-male list that paralleled them" (Gardens 84). Walker's own experience as a teacher of black women writers at Wellesley prompts her to make a thought-provoking observation about the anonymity of the black woman writer:

There are two reasons why the black woman writer is not taken as seriously as the black male writer. One is that she’s a woman. Critics seem unusually ill-equipped to discuss and analyze the works of black women intelligently. . . . And, since black women writers are not, it would seem, very likable—until recently they were the least willing worshipers of male supremacy—comments about them tend to be cruel. (Gardens 260)

On reading critical works on Zora’s life and works Walker was for a time paralyzed with fear and confusion. She was shocked by the fact that a
woman who had risked her health, reputation and sanity to enrich black literature with priceless treasures "could be so casually pilloried and consigned to a sneering oblivion" (Gardens 86). Finally the young writer decided to fight for Zora and her work which was in all effect, a fight for the survival of the black woman writer including herself. This helped her to realize how she would like to repudiate and despise the kind of criticism that intimidated rather than instructed the young. She was quite delighted by the perfection of Zora’s collection of folk-tales Mules and Men. Zora’s critics disliked her life style which was never in conformity with the conventional pattern and therefore she was subjected to very hostile criticism, not at all taking into account the merits of her literary style. But according to Walker, “Zora was before her time, in intellectual circles, in the life style she chose” (Gardens 89). She died poor and broke as a series of misfortunes battered her spirit one after another. Walker felt so grieved that “Zora who worked so hard, was never able to make a living from her work” (90). Zora’s experience opened her eyes to the grim reality that “without money of one’s own in a capitalist society, there is no such thing as independence.” So she considered the telling of Zora’s life “a cautionary tale.” This was not a singular tragedy and Walker’s bitterness is very sharp when she rails against this:

In her dependency, it should be remembered, Zora was not alone—because it is quite true that America does not support or honor us as human beings, let alone as Blacks, women and artists. We have taken help where it was offered because we are committed to
what we do and the survival of our work. Zora was committed to the survival of her people’s cultural heritage as well. (91)

It is this commitment and concern for survival ‘whole’ that Walker emulates so poignantly in her works.

Walker emphasizes the need to retain and rework the works of the great artists in her statement: ‘We are a people. A people do not throw their geniuses away. And if they are thrown away it is our duty as artists and witnesses for the future to collect them again for the sake of our children, and if necessary, bone by bone’ (Gardens 92). Considering herself as the spiritual daughter of Zora, Walker extends this commitment to survival not only of cultural heritage but the whole universe itself.

The several collections of poems which precede each work of fiction serve as her source of empowerment which is essential for her own survival. She empowers herself to empower others around her because the black woman cannot think of wholeness without relating herself to the health of her community. In order to impart her wholeness to the community she creates men and women belonging to different strata in society and equips them with the spiritual energy to withstand the oppressive forces. The characters pass through several phases of trials and tribulation to attain finally a desirable change. All her narratives which are set in the South, document the several stifling forces and the fight for survival.

Alice Walker’s redemptive mission tends to be more and more active in recent years. She is bent upon saving the universe from utter peril. Her
anti-nuclear campaigns and protest rallies prove her integrity as a writer who is at the same time an activist. She has emerged as a fighter for the causes in which she believes. In *Anything We Love* she gives vent to her feelings and experiences as an activist. In this seminal book she acknowledges that she has inherited her belief in activism from her “great-great-great-grand mother May Poole”, a woman of strong spirit who lived enslaved in the North American South. Walker’s own mother was a mother to all the children around and she considered every child as precious. There was no discrimination of any kind on the basis of size, colour, shape of head or degree of intelligence. As for her father, he possessed a wonderful sense of humour, which undermined the racist nonsense. He had a story for every occasion and it was he who taught her that “it is possible for the word to become sharper than the sword” (XIV).

In the preface to *Anything*, Walker proclaims: “My activism — cultural, political, spiritual is rooted in my love of nature and my delight in human beings. It is when people are at peace, content, ‘full’, that they are most likely to meet my expectation…” (XXI). There is an echo of the same idea in the statement: “Only when we flow with and into the universe, comes the natural activism of wanting to survive, to be happy, to enjoy one another and Life, and to laugh” (*Anything We Love* 26). So she takes up the protection of the universe as her major concern which finds the best expression in *Living By The Word*. She says that she cannot be happy when earth itself is the nigger of the world. Her activism to save the earth is
punctuated by the recurring exhortation: “[I]t is the soil we need in order to survive, in order to thrive” (Anything 53). She thinks of activism as her muse. She musters up courage from her close relationship with people engaged in changing the world. In Joy, Walker asserts in very bold letters: “RESISTANCE IS THE SECRET OF JOY.” By means of narration she exposes the oppressive forces encountered in everyday life and with the same power of narration she equips herself for resistance. Like her mother Walker too enjoys being strong and capable and strives to bring about “change personal” and “change political”. By taking up creativity as resistance, she tries to promote the joy of survival.