Chapter 3

The Quilt of Oeuvre

All things are connected

Like the blood

Which unites one family . . .

(Ted Perry [Inspired by Chief Seattle] )

An ecological paradigm as advocated by Fritjof Capra recognizes the fundamental interdependence and interconnectedness of all phenomena *(The Web 6).* The whole universe is viewed as a wide web of relations and events, a “complex interweaving of living and non living systems within a single web” *(The Web 209).* In *Uncommon Wisdom,* Capra states how he has been stimulated by Werner Heisenberg, one of the giants of Modern Physics. While describing and analyzing the unique dilemma encountered by physicists in the early decades of the twentieth century, Heisenberg describes how an exploration of the structure of atoms and subatomic phenomena revealed a strange and unexpected reality. Those physicists could no longer think about the world as “a machine made up of a multitude of separate objects, but rather as an indivisible whole, a net work of relationships that included the human observer in an essential way” (15). Heisenberg realized that many of the paradoxes and apparent contradictions were due to “the dual nature of subatomic matter which appears sometimes as particles, sometimes as waves”. He pointed out the limitations of classical concepts in precise
mathematical forms which later came to be known as the “Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle”. Capra feels that “at the most fundamental level the uncertainty principle is a measure of the unity and interrelatedness of the universe” (18). It led to the conclusion that the “world is not a collection of separate objects, but rather appears as a web of relations between the various parts of a universal whole” (18). Capra maintains that in nature there is no above nor below and there are no hierarchies. There are only “living systems nesting within other living systems” (The Web 28). He explains that if the basic pattern of life is a network pattern, the relationships among the members of an ecological community are nonlinear, involving multiple feedback loops (290). A close examination of the living systems reveals that the pattern of organization common to all living systems is that of a network. The network which forms the basic pattern of life evolves from non linear or cyclical processes prevalent in an ecological community. Because ecological communities maintain network patterns they have the capacity to regulate themselves and organize themselves, which is a key characteristic of Gaia.

Realizing the limitations of the mechanistic worldview of Newtonian physics, Capra stresses the need to go beyond this. In the process of effecting a change from the mechanistic to the ecological paradigm, the fundamental tension occurs between the parts and the whole. Capra explains: “The emphasis on the parts has been called mechanistic, reductionist or atomistic; the emphasis on the whole holistic, organismic, or ecological” (The Web 17). The holistic perspective has become known as ‘systemic’ and the way of
thinking it implies is “systems thinking.” Capra uses the words “ecological” and “systemic” almost synonymously. He offers a detailed description of systems thinking and systemic view in *The Turning Point*. According to him, the systems view looks at the world in terms of relationships and integration. In his words: “Systems are integrated wholes whose properties cannot be reduced to those of smaller units; the systems approach emphasizes basic principles of organization” (*The TP* 286). Systems thinking is not different from process thinking in which form gets associated with process, interrelation with interaction and opposites are unified through oscillation. This new thinking was developed by organismic biologists out of Wolfgang Goethe’s concept of the moving order of nature which too emphasizes connectedness or relationships. Goethe considered every creature as a patterned gradation of one great harmonious whole. The systems approach promotes contextual thinking which holds that the properties of the parts can be understood only when it is placed in the context of a larger whole. This cosmic symbiosis with its profound philosophical implications constitutes the underlying principle of environmental thinking which challenges Cartesian Dualism. Descartes considers thinking as the essential being of humanity which in a way places humanity outside the order of nature whereas symbiosis shows the tendency of different organisms to live in association with one another.

In formulating the new paradigm Capra was considerably influenced by Gregory Bateson who declared that “relationship should be the basis of all
definitions”. Bateson’s primary aim was to discover the principles of organization in all the phenomena he observed — a pattern which connects. Bateson believed that stories provided a language of relationships. In his definition a story is an “aggregate of formal relations scattered in time”.

Capra explains how Bateson sought to develop a web of formal relations through a collection of stories (Wisdom 81). Taking insights from this, Capra suggested systems theory as the framework and model for the new concept and approaches in other disciplines.

Accordingly critics who approach literature from an ecological perspective place thrust on connections and not separatism. For instance, Sueellen Campbell in the essay “The Land and Language of Desire,” thinks of a common premise for poststructuralism and ecology so that these two can react to each other without scorn and incomprehension. She contends that both theorists and ecologists are at core revolutionary. She explains: “They stand in opposition to traditional authority, which they question and then reject. All of them begin by criticizing the dominant structures of western culture and the vast abuses they have spawned” (ER 127). Campbell then speaks about two basic tactics common to both theory and ecology, for revealing the flaws of old ideas and building new ones. Both follow the polemical approach of overturning old hierarchies and devaluing the once dominant and conferring value to the weak. For instance, feminists prefer feminine values and nonlinear thought to masculine values and linear thoughts. Similarly nature writers speak in favour of aboriginal cultures
which according to them are superior to western culture. The second tactic common to both theory and ecology is the way in which they question and condemn the concepts on which old hierarchies are built. Many of these hierarchies have been proved to be artificial and biased and hence there is the need to restructure them.

Both theory and ecology agree that perceptions are always subjective and the reader or the viewer is always actively involved. The shared critique of the idea of objectivity is based on relativity theory and quantum mechanics. By way of illustration Campbell quotes the words of Gary Zukav: “According to quantum mechanics, there is no such thing as objectivity. We cannot eliminate ourselves from the picture. We are a part of nature, and when we study nature there is no way around the fact that nature is studying itself” (qtd. in ER 129). Literary theory stresses that all readings are “situated” and that the reader creates meaning in relation to his social, political, economic, cultural, and personal circumstances. Similarly an understanding of the land depends on what one knows, imagines and how one is disposed. Being part of larger systems, human beings should come to an understanding that “the world is a complicated web of relations between the various parts of the whole” (The Tao 71). In the light of these inferences, Campbell arrives at the most comprehensive and the most important shared premise that both poststructuralism and ecological theory “criticize the traditional sense of a separate, independent, authoritative center of value or meaning and how they substitute the idea of networks” (ER 131). Theory and
ecology agree that there is no such thing as a self-enclosed, private piece of property, neither an animal nor a person, nor a text nor a piece of land. Campbell traces the source of this idea back to Ferdinand de Saussure’s theory on Linguistics which stresses that meaning in language is created by relationship – by way of similarity, contiguity, difference and so on – and not by any direct association between a word and its meaning.

Campbell further draws attention to the fact that in a general sense, the concept of intertextuality developed from this “sense of networks”. She explains that “in the works of such influential theorists as Harold Bloom and Julia Kristeva, texts (and authors) are seen as thoroughly connected to other texts . . . in very complicated and often hidden ways—so thoroughly that no text contains all of its meaning” (132). Theory sees everything as textuality, “as networks of signifying systems of all kinds” (133). Campbell illustrates this with reference to Foucault, Lacan and Derrida. She says:

Foucault sees an idea like madness as a text; Lacan sees a human being as a text; Derrida argues that everything is a text in the sense that everything signifies something else. (ER 133)

If these thoughts are considered in the light of Barry Commoner’s statement of the first law of ecology that “everything is connected to everything else,” the concept of networks gains stronger reinforcement. Laying stress on this, William Rueckert says that the law is common to all ecologists and all ecological visions. This emphasizes the need to see even
the smallest, remotest part in relation to a very large whole. Kate Soper observes:

... the principle tenet of the ecofeminist position... is the critique of dualism, of the antagonistic subject/object split which is at the root of patriarchal epistemologies and at the root of the oppression of women and nature. Ecofeminists try to see and act through and beyond dualism. The consequence of this is that they conceptualize life on earth not in terms of hierarchies, but as interconnected webs. (What Is Nature? 52)

An intensive analysis of Walker’s works reveals an ecological awareness as the guiding principle in the structural gradation of her works. She follows the principle of organization in structuring her works. Ikenna Dieke in “Womanist as Monistic Idealist” explains how

imbued with ecological thinking, womanist instincts, and multicultural vision, Walker goes beyond the intellective culture of binary oppositions to construct a unique egalitarian womanist cosmology...to recycle the heritage of an alternate world view — wholesome, and to somehow reclaim her own self-evident ecological insight that we are all a part of, and not apart from each other, the other sex, and the Earth (Gaia) with its richly diverse denizens —humans and non humans alike. Thus for Alice Walker, artistic creativity is nothing but a deliberate act of giving form to a
vision of the underlying or hidden links in the great universal
chain of being. (Critical Essays 128)

The best manifestation of the network of relations is the quilt which is
a highly relevant motif of the African American aesthetic tradition that
favours extensive experimentation in search for novelty. The word “quilt” is
derived from Latin “culcita” meaning “mattress” or “cushion”. A quilt is
made up of two layers of fabric sewn together over an interlining of cotton or
other soft material, usually in a pattern of stitches.

The practice of quilting is so ancient that nobody knows the exact time
or manner of its origin. It was brought to America from England and Africa
because of the harsh climate and the scarcity of cloth in the colonies. Quilts
constituted an essential part of the household goods that the colonists carried
along with them in their journey to the New World. Alfred Allan Lewis
speaks about a renewed interest in the quilts among the early colonists,
because of the need for warmth and an innate craving for beauty. It is quite
interesting to note that an indigenously American design appeared first in
quilt making, though it was the result of life struggle during the early years
on the continent. There were no fabrics except the ones brought from the old
country. The quilts began to wear out due to constant use and they had to be
repaired with bits of fabric from old clothes or from other quilts that could
not be mended. This resulted in the original patchwork quilt which gained
immediate popularity (Mountain Artisans 1). Hence there is nothing wrong
in assuming that quilting originated as a practical and economic necessity in
the latter part of the nineteenth century when ready-made bedding was not available. Elaine Showalter describes that in the cold New England and prairie winter one needed at least five thick quilts to protect oneself from the biting cold. All American girls were taught to piece and quilt by applying principles of geometrical structure and organization. Quilting has been a feature of embroidery in the form of raised work. Many of the quilts and counter panes made in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries excel in genuine artistic design as well as exquisite workmanship. There were different types of quilts namely the log cabin quilt, the album quilt, the crazy quilt etc. and the well-known patterns were the Star, the Sun, or Rose.

Fig. 1. Eight-sided Star
Fig. 2. Simple Star, A Block Patchwork

The immense aesthetic vitality of American quilt-making was enriched by other design traditions; for instance, black woman in the South adapted design elements such as bright colours, large figures, multiple patterns,
asymmetry and improvisation from West African textiles. As a result of improvisation, many new and distinctive designs appeared in the African-American quilt tradition (Sister's Choice 145).

The social institutions of quilting helped to develop bonds between women. Elaine Showalter dwells upon this point in the following passage: “At the quilting bee women celebrated a birth or an engagement . . . Quilting bees were also places where women came together to exchange information, learn new skills, and discuss political issues . . . ”(Sister’s Choice 148). The bonding activities of quilting had great appeal to the Americans trying to come together after the trauma of several forms of exploitation. Both communal quilts and collective literary histories represent the endurance of American traditions. Showalter explains that the quilt emerged as a dominant metaphor in post-war America replacing the metaphor of the melting pot. This metaphor acknowledged ethnic difference, heterogeneity and multiplicity, and helped to recognize the racial, cultural and gender identities of the hitherto invisible and inaudible marginal groups. In their article “Patches”, Houston Baker and Charlotte Pierce-Baker describe: “A patch work quilt, laboriously and affectionately crafted from bits of worn overalls, shredded uniforms, tattered petticoats, and outgrown dresses, stands as a signal instance of a patterned wholeness in the African diaspora” (Critical Perspectives 309).

Conditions of slavery, oppression of women, the practical need for warmth and beauty and for a cultural form that did not require literacy
accounted for the growth and spread of this skill. In the midst of hardships forced upon them by an unyielding terrain, they tried to keep up their pride and independence. The urge to create a collective past and a quest for old values and traditions arose out of a sense of loss and a desire to reacquire something that had been lost in the process of becoming a mechanized nation. As many of the women could not read or write until present times, it was by means of the old crafts that they fulfilled the need to make a personal statement.

In such circumstances one cannot overlook the meaningful connection between quiltmaking and the story-telling tradition. It has already been mentioned that Gregory Bateson sought to develop a web of formal relations by means of a collection of stories. The history of the black woman brings home the fact that lack of literacy forced them to immortalize their stories in the form of gardens and quilts. So some stories have been stitched into quilts, or planted in gardens. Very often, the South African women spoke of the quilt as a “book of many stories done up together, and many people can read it all at the same time” (Tapestries 70).

Quilting served as a means by which the creativity of the black woman was kept alive in the days of slavery. It vitalized the black women when they were demoralized and de-humanized. Like Philomel’s tapestry in Greek Mythology, the black woman’s quilt turned out to be an expression of wronged womanhood. But this aesthetic domain of women has been submerged by the masterpieces of male-created art history; the quilts made
by women were inexorably dismissed as meaningless and unimportant and failed to occupy space along with the artistic pieces on museum walls. As a result of the recent interest shown in the quilt, it emerged as a dominant expressive mode for the marginalized woman writer to break the silence of the doubly marginalized black woman. Elaine Hedges writes about the rediscovery and celebration of women's traditional textile work as an interesting development in contemporary feminist thinking (Tradition 338).

Due to the renewed interest shown towards women's art after the women's movement in the late 1960s, piecing and quilting underwent an aesthetic revival. Piecing turned out to be a metaphor for a female aesthetic for sisterhood and for a politics of survival, a metaphor for the decentred structure of a woman's text which breaks hierarchical structures; there is no kind of ranking or subordination in the verbal quilt of the feminist text.

Hedges mentions in this context that for Adrienne Rich the textile imagery provided a way of communicating a sense of women's power and potential: "In The Dream of a Common Language this imagery — especially the imagery associated with quilts, the piecing together of salvaged remnants to create a new pattern of connections, an integrated whole — eventually provides the elements, . . . for a new transformative vision" (qtd. in “The Needle or the Pin” 351). The literary quilt 'offers a new map of a changing America, an America whose literature and culture must be replotted and remapped' (Sister’s Choice 175).
Mary Daly also associates spinning with creativity in her radical book *Gyn/Ecology*. She juggles with the various meanings of the word “spin” and makes very radical observations. As the word “spinster” is derived from “spin”, Daly says: “Spinsters spin and weave, mending and creating unity of consciousness . . .” (386). Referring to Merriam-Webster’s etymological explanation of the word’s connection with the Latin term “sponte” meaning “of one’s free will, voluntarily”, Daly comes to the conclusion that spinning “implies spontaneous movement, the free creativity that springs from integrity of be-ing” (389). She adds that the first definition of the verb “spin”, that is “to draw and twist thread: make yarn or thread from fiber”, brings to mind the image of “spinning a yarn” which according to Daly is “a creative enterprise of mind and imagination” which makes survival possible (389).

The black woman’s relation to history is primarily a relationship to mother and grandmother. In the words of Susan Willis: “For the black woman, history is a bridge defined along motherlines. It begins with a woman’s particular genealogy and fans out to include all the female cultural heroes, . . .” (Specifying 6). Alice Walker who constantly draws inspiration from her matrilineal heritage adopts the quilt-like pattern as the matrix of her oeuvre, both in structure and subject. For Walker, piecing and quilting represent the aesthetic heritage of Afro-American and the model for ‘womanist’ writing of reconciliation and connection. She reveals the importance of the quilt as a major form of creative expression in her powerful essay, “In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens”. Pondering upon the creative
spirit of the black women, Walker draws attention to a quilt which hangs in the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. She describes:

In fanciful, inspired and yet simple and identifiable figures, it portrays the story of Crucifixion. It is considered rare, beyond price. Though it follows no known pattern of quiltmaking, and though it is made of bits and pieces of worthless rags, it is obviously the work of a person of powerful imagination and deep spiritual feeling. Below this quilt I saw a note that says it was made by 'an anonymous Black woman in Alabama, a hundred years ago'. If we could locate this 'anonymous' black woman from Alabama, she would turn out to be one of our grandmothers—an artist who left her mark in the only materials she could afford, and in the only medium her position in society allowed her to use.

(Gardens 239)

From this, Walker comes to the conclusion that the mothers and grandmothers have handed on the creative spark to the younger generations. She realizes that the stories that the black women write are their mothers' stories. She admits that while absorbing her mother's stories, Walker has also absorbed the manner in which her mother spoke. Her mother excelled herself as an artist not only in the manner of telling stories, but also in her talent for quilt making and wonderful skill in gardening. Josephine Donovan describes how Walker looks at her mother's garden as a work of art which helps her to realize that "being an artist has still been a daily part of her life". Donovan
comes to the conclusion that here Walker emphasizes “an aesthetic theory where art remained embedded in and arose out of conversation with the contingent everyday world” (Aesthetics 64). She believes that art is not transcendent, but rather part of the moral process.

It is quite interesting to observe that in the structural gradation of her works, Alice Walker adopts the technique of quilt making. Elaine Showalter’s description of the different stages involved in making a quilt is equally applicable to the narrative techniques adopted by Walker. In Showalter’s words:

Making a patch-work quilt involves four different stages of artistic composition. The quilt-maker first selects her colors and fabrics, traditionally using neglected clothing or household material with emotional association; and cuts out small, geometrically-shaped pieces. These fragments are then “pieced” or joined together in a particular pattern to form a larger square unit called a ‘patch’ or ‘block’. The patches are joined together into an overall pattern, usually a traditional one with a name that indicates its regional, political or spiritual meaning. Finally, the entire fabric is stitched to a padding and heavy backing with a variety of large-scale embroidery motifs. (Sister’s Choice 149)

The first step which constitutes the selection of colours and old bits of fabrics can be discerned in Walker’s attempt to incorporate myths and folktales and the stories told by the biological and literary mothers. Neglected and
forgotten black writers and artists of the past—Rebecca Jackson, Zora Neale
Hurston, Flannery O'Connor, Dessy Woods, Bill Wahpepah, Joe Harris—all
fill the “blocks” with poems, curse prayers, folk-tales, stories, songs and
other expressions of traditional value. In her narrative quilt, a multi-racial,
multi-cultural pageant of narrators form the different strands by which several
scrap's of his (her) stories are woven together.

Walker herself has stated the complementary relationship between
quilt making and writing, while explaining the forces behind the composition
of The Color Purple. She discloses that she withdrew from the public sphere
to a silent, creative space of her own. She gave up all public lectures and took
residence in the quiet of a town in northern California, and started making a
quilt. Elaine Hedges makes a comment in this connection which highlights
the mutual influence of the two:

The quilting and sewing that are essential to the plot and themes,
the moral and aesthetic drama, of Purple emerge, as actual work
out of the realities of the lives of southern, and particularly rural,
black women, for whom such sewing and activity has existed in an
unbroken continuum since the time of slavery. And from this
perspective Walker's novel is her fullest artistic acknowledgement
of her creative connection to earlier black women, . . . Celie is the
direct descendant of those earlier generations of women for whom
sewing and quilting meant psychic survival. (“The Needle” 354)
In *The Color Purple*, the story unfolds through the letters written by Celie to God, Nettie’s letters to Celie and Celie’s letters to Nettie. The letters are short, discrete units of discontinuous prose like the bits of fabric that are stitched together to form larger blocks. Nettie’s letters are marked by overtones of African life; the victimization of the black woman in the South and the brutal victimization of women in the African village of Olinka are juxtaposed to form the two layers of the quilt. Elizabeth Fifer comments that the letters skillfully reinvent and reenvision the events by shuffling their chronological order and juxtaposing different conversations that seem as if they might have happened simultaneously . . . the pieces of past action that led to the character’s present solutions. The letters themselves, . . . encompass and interconnect all the characters in two alternating voices. The American and the African history are woven together to reinscribe the story of the black woman. (*Contemporary American Women Writers* 156)

Thus Walker breaks the narrative at times forcing the reader to move back in time with Nettie’s letters. The story is developed through constant proapses and analepses. Elaine Showalter considers *The Color Purple* as a “narrative quilt pieced from the spectrum of literary and cultural texts which Walker has inherited” (*Choice* 20). She adds: “Like the alternating letters of Celie and Nettie which make up the text, the novel incorporates pieces from historical and literary sources, . . . The novel is in part an act of homage to Zora Neale Hurston, but Walker also invokes Harriet Boecher Stowe and
Flannery O’Connor” (21). Priscilla Leder also thinks along the same line when she remarks: “Like a skillfully crafted quilt, The Color Purple incorporates recognizable pieces of American literary traditions into its own pattern” (Critical Essays 141). Walker not only incorporates and reinterprets the past, but also sets the novel in the past to trace the source of masochistic violence back to the days of slavery and sharecropping.

Susan Willis identifies a “four-page formula” in the writings of contemporary black women which is very true of Walker’s works. She explains that under such a formula, “most of the novels seem to be compiled out of short pieces of writing” (Specifying 14). The characters and situations seem to be given as pieces lifted out of some much larger narrative continuity (14). It has already been mentioned in the previous chapter that Walker starts her narration with the title “Once”. The word indicates a specific “chronos” lifted out of the infinite. In The Color Purple also, the letter-writing format easily conforms to the brief form. The letters, especially the ones written by Celie are short and hence fit into this four-page pattern. The novel, Meridian, in spite of the seemingly narrative totality, comprises short anecdotes. The contention here is that the four-page formula that Susan Willis speaks of is equally relevant of the quilt aesthetic. Just as pieces or scraps from a larger dress or cloth are cut out and pieced together in varying patterns, anecdotes, letters, stories and reminiscences are lifted out to make a large quilt narrative. Moreover Willis feels that the four-page formula, which embodies the storytelling tradition establishes a teller-listener relationship between the author
and the reader. She points out how story-telling in the American South is different from the tradition that evolved under European feudalism. There is no sort of hierarchy set by a story-telling master, instead “everyone in the Southern black community participates in story-telling and story-listening” (Specifying 15). No story teller occupies a privileged position; only history and the cultural tradition are privileged. The teller and the text are the same. Likewise the quilt also dismantles all sorts of hierarchies; it symbolizes hybridity where no culture is superseded by another one. All the pieces are of equal importance in a quilt.

Renee Lorraine in “A Gynecentric Aesthetic” draws attention to the principles of matriarchal aesthetic given by Gottner Abendroth: “The matriarchal art transcends the traditional artistic mode of communication which consists of maker/product/perceiver. It is a process in which virtually everyone in society participates collectively . . .” (Aesthetics 37). Yet another principle of matriarchal art is that it cannot be divided into genres, and breaks down the division between art and theory, art and life. The value system of matriarchal art is based on life and love. The erotic is the dominant force. Lorraine says: “The continuation of life as a cycle of rebirths is its primary principle. . . A sense of community, motherliness and sisterly love are the basic rules . . .” (Aesthetics 51). In The Color Purple, Celie the writer becomes the reader halfway through the novel. Nettie also changes roles from that of a teller to a listener. Walker thus breaks the traditional epistolary form in which only one writer inscribes all the letters. In Joy also, the narrators are
listeners as well. Tashi, while telling her story, listens to the others and this widens her vision. In The Temple, it is not the academist Suwelo with his resourcefulness and knowledge who is the sole narrator, but the old couple, Hal and Lissie, who have imbibed the cultural traditions of an ongoing American history. They tell stories of their everyday experience which is another unique feature of the Southern community. Willis says about this: “Having evolved in an oral agrarian culture, this [story-telling] partakes of the rhythm of daily life” (15). In the same manner, the quilt also represents the dailiness of women’s lives in the American South. Walker highlights this in her short story “Everyday Use” (Love and Trouble), which deals with an old quilt kept by Mrs. Johnson. Josephine Donovan makes clear how each one of the family members regards the quilt. Dee, the sophisticated daughter looks at it as “autotelic art object that has prize commodity value” and “something to be hung on the wall” (Aesthetics 64). Mrs. Johnson on the other hand, sees it as an object of everyday use, one that is infused with personal and family value. She therefore decides to give it to the younger daughter, Maggie, who appreciates its family history and plans to use it on her bed. Donovan remarks:

Thus, Walker implicitly rejects in this story the idea of art as a discrete masterpiece to be isolated from the real world—

Rather, she proposes an art that is embedded in the everyday, that is infused with personal and local history and whose interest lies in these so-called adventitious matters. (Aesthetics 64)
Besides adopting a quilt-pattern for the structural development of her works, Walker maintains a link between earlier texts and the present ones. She proclaims in *Gardens*: “I believe that the truth about any subject comes only when all the sides of the story are put together, and all their different meanings make one new one. Each writer writes the missing parts to the other writer’s story” (49). David Cowart in the article, “Heritage and Deracination in ‘Everyday Use’”, points out that Walker in her own literary art, seems to convey “a belief in the idea of a living, intertextual tradition, a passing on of values as well as skills” (*Critical Essays* 28). In his opinion, she projects herself as a “sensitive artist of the African American experience” by drawing a parallel between quilts and her own art of fiction. The quilts which are expressions of American rural life, are “palpably intertextual, inasmuch as they contain literal scraps of past lives” (28). Cowart adds: “Walker weaves in stories like this [“Everyday Use”] a simple, yet heteroglossic text on patterns set by a literary tradition extending into communities black and white; American and international” (28). One can easily detect in her works the intertextual presence of a number of writers like Tolstoy, Garcia Marquez, Flannery O’Connor, Elechi Ahmadi, Bessie Head, Jean Toomer and especially Zora Neale Hurston. Cowart states: “Like any other writer, any other user of language, Walker “pieces” her literary quilts out of all that she has previously read or heard” (*Critical Essays* 28).

In the act of discovering Zora Neale Hurston as her literary foremother, Walker establishes the joyous ancestral chain of continuity. Alice
Walker is full of appreciation and praise for Zora’s work on account of the racial health, a sense of black people as complete, complex, “undiminished” human beings, a sense that is lacking in so much black writing and literature. Alice Walker tries to expand these elements in her own works. While examining the literary kinship between Hurston and Walker, Alice Fannin states that the wellspring of their similarities is the South with “its land and seasons as a backdrop for the life described in their most important novels and the richness of black life and traditions—the laughter, the language and the folklore” (Common Bond, 45). Fannin identifies very conspicuous similarities in the theme of the major works of these two writers. She says that Jannie Crawford in Hurston’s Their Eyes were Watching God and Celie in The Color Purple share certain commonalities. Both characterize the typical plight of the black woman as the mule of the world. Hurston describes:

So de white man throw down de dead and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don’t tote it. He hand it to his woman folk. De nigger woman is de mule of the world so fur as Ah can see. (Eyes 29).

Instead of pinning down the identity of the black woman to such a wretched state, both the writers are eager to liberate their women. They take their protagonists on a “quest that is psychological, and most importantly, spiritual – and to a lesser degree, even cosmological and ontological” (Common Bond 46). Janie and Celie set upon an “exploration of self as part
of the universe and the universe as part of the self.” (46). In Fannin’s words, “Each comes to recognize that she is a unique entity in the plenitude of Creation and that her place, however finite, is an integral part of a mysterious and wonder working process that created, and is always creating and recreating, an infinite universe” (46). Fannin adds that for each woman, psychic survival depends on “the vision of the self as a wondrous part of a Creation that itself ‘wondrously and fearfully’ made” (46).

There is a thread of continuity running through Walker’s own works. This is manifested in the arrangement of her works in a cyclical manner as against a linear pattern. An individual work or a particular context sometimes fails to signify; a multi-contextual analysis – both intertextual and intratexxtual becomes necessary to locate the signified. A particular text or context becomes meaningful only on analyzing the whole corpus of her literary output. The signs defer meaning to such an extent that an individual sign, especially a fragment of a dream or fantasy or folk-tale ends up as a nonsignifier. They must be taken out of their immediate context and placed in other ones. The signs are all interconnected, they being projections of the writer’s collective unconscious. The text is never finite or closed; an intertextual link among the pieces is maintained to highlight the idea that all the texts are connected to one another. Barbara Christian’s comment about Alice Walker’s works stresses the interconnection brought about by her: “Walker’s writings are a continuing whole; for her writing is a healing process as well as a communing with various audiences—human and
nonhuman, in the past as well as the present” (“Conservations” 9). Christian is of opinion that the interrelatedness among her works is “integral to what she calls ‘living by the word’”. She observes: “To live by the word is to be on a continuing journey exploring oneself as part of the universe, the universe as part of oneself where one knows ‘everything is a living being’” (Women’s Review 9). It is such a connectedness that Walker emphasizes in her words: “I am Nicaraguan; I am Salvadoran; I am Grenadian; I am Caribbean; and I am Central American” (LBW 176). She believes that she is able to see herself when she looks at those people.

Michael J. McDowell in the article, “The Bakhtinian Road to Ecological Insight” evaluates Bakhtin’s theories “as the literary equivalent to ecology, the science of relationships” (ER 372). Bakhtin considers the diological form, one in which multiple voices or points of view interact as the ideal form to represent reality. McDowell also recognizes the intertextual quality of dialogism as “one aspect of Bakhtin’s larger idea of alterity” (ER 375). This idea is similar to the systemic or contextual thinking which guides Walker in framing her works. Like Bakhtin, Walker believes that “the number of interactions between entities is infinite, which enables a polyphony of interacting voices within any given text” (372). The three major novels by Walker – The Color Purple, The Temple of My Familiar and Possessing the Secret of Joy – are schematized accordingly, “creating the effect of a kind of dialogue among different points of view, which gives value to a variety of ideological positions” (372). These novels interact upon one
another on multiple levels and they can rightly be considered as a trilogy. The characters from one novel are carried forward to subsequent ones; they appear either as flesh and blood characters or make their presence vivid through memories of others. Sometimes peripheral characters in a novel acquire importance and are thrust into the limelight in the later ones. Brian McHale observes: “There are a number of ways of foregrounding this [the] intertextual space and integrating in the text’s structure, but none is more effective than the device of “borrowing a character from another text” (Postmodernist Fiction 57). Walker makes use of this effective device when she brings back characters from her own earlier texts. The major characters are revived and reintegrated into a new fictional world—a sort of recycling of “retour-de-personages”—in the manner of piecing together the recycled scraps. The effect of continuity is maintained by means of this transmigration of characters from one fictional universe to another. Thus Walker maintains a meaningful relatedness among these texts.

In the second novel in the trilogy The Temple, Walker shows her excellent craftsmanship by maintaining a link with The Color Purple. But Walker problematizes genealogy. In this novel published in 1986, one character is Fanny, Celie’s grand daughter whereas in the 1992 novel, Possessing the Secret of Joy, the focus is on the second generation. An isolated event or character is placed in the context of a larger whole whereby it acquires deeper dimensions. Walker adopts improvisational techniques as in Jazz music in a superb manner. The characters are just introduced first in
the manner of selecting the fabrics and cutting out the “pieces”. Later the cut-out blocks or square pieces are filled with embroidery patterns as each character-narrator supplements more and more details about them. The interlining of the pieces takes place as a meaningful relationship is traced among the characters; subsequent appearance of each character results in building a kinship that binds him/her with other characters in a unique manner. Walker is resourceful enough to connect them with those of the earlier novel, *The Color Purple*. Much is heard about Mama Celie and Mama Shug, and also the idea of Christianity which is only vaguely referred to in *The Color Purple*. Carlotta’s visit to Fanny’s massage parlour and her friendship with her helps Arveyda to a knowledge of his own past by means of “the Gospel according to Shug”. By bringing back the persons and events of an earlier text, Walker foregrounds an intertextual link. According to Bonny Braendlin, *The Temple* positions “the identity stories of five young intellectuals in several contexts – race, sex and class prejudice; the 1980s preoccupation with sex, rock music and New Age beliefs; African myth and diaspora history and the African American woman’s faith in matriarchal power and wisdom” (“Pastiche” 52). The novel introduces four main characters who encounter midlife crises. Suwelo is enamoured of the dominant culture history that he teaches, but fails as a husband and lover. His wife Fanny quite disillusioned, gives up her profession as college teacher and becomes a “masterly masseur”. Carlotta with whose story the novel begins.
feels betrayed by her husband, Arveyda and her own mother Zede, who have an infatuation for each other.

The narrative structure of this novel is very much like the 'album quilt', which was a dominant genre of female craft in the 1830s and 1840s. Showalter says: “Album quilts are composed of pieced or appliquéd squares that are entirely different, even if their construction has been carefully planned and orchestrated by a simple quilter” (Sister's Choice 151).

In *The Temple*, the resourceful author, in the manner of a single quilter, composes appliquéd squares with the experiences of different characters, belonging to different ethnic groups, coming into contact with one another in a unique manner. There are also squares dealing with Spanish colonial
experiences of Zede, and the story of Mary Jane Haverstock “the radical Caucasian commando-turned-humanitarian” (“Pastiche” 53). The most colorful squares are those dealing with the reincarnated story-teller, Lissie. Her stories range from the prehistoric past to the present. The narrative quilt made of memories, dreams, fantasy and history creates the effect similar to that of the album quilt, as if each square were a page in a remembrance book.

In the words of Dieke, “Walker through the recollective monologues of her characters, develops creative uses of memory in order to express the feeling of duration and to recapture the sense of a unified self” (Critical Essays 130). The reader gets knowledge of nearly forgotten South American and African slavery in the recent past, stories of female power from the lost “dream memory” of “the very ancient past,” the tales of ancient matriarchs in the jungles of Africa and South America—both usurped by patriarchal religions and the violent wrenching of natives from their homelands. The myths and legends antedating Greco-Roman and Judaeo-Christian traditions lend charm and colour to the quilt. Walker makes an attempt to reconnect the past with the present in order to renew eclipsed values by weaving “fantastic tales of a Utopian pre-history when men and women lived apart in respect for one another’s privacy and uniqueness but cooperatively and in harmony with one another, as well as with their cousins, the jungle beasts” (“Pastiche” 54). Ikenna Dieke explains that the six major parts punctuated by diverse vignettes project the iconographic narrative movement. The carefully selected mythico-iconic images convey the underlying metaphysical meaning of each
story which is none other than “a serious quest, . . . for the demonstrable values of oneness, wholeness and unity” (Critical Essays 129). Walker reinforces her idea of connectedness with the past in her observation: “I learn that the writer’s pen is a microphone held up to the mouths of ancestors and even stones of long ago” (LBW 170).

Possessing the Secret of Joy, which is the last in the trilogy deals with the tragic victimization of Tashi, a tribal girl who is just a peripheral character in The Color Purple. The novel is “a recent exposition of the variant cultural practices of ‘female circumcisions’ or ‘female genital mutilation’ among particular African peoples” (African Identities 110). Walker’s narrative pattern is like that of a communal quilt woven by the quilt bee which consists of multiple narrative voices belonging to a multi racial, bisexual pageant of character-narrators. As the friendship quilts are signed square by square by the quilt makers, in Joy, each character narrator writes [signs] his/her name before beginning the discourse piece. It is a unique device which makes the novel a polyphonic one. Bakhtin describes a polyphonic text as one in which “the character and the narrator exist on the same plane, the latter does not take precedence over the former but has equal right to speak” (Introducing Bakhtin 112). Walker also maintains the equality of utterance that makes the novel a democratic one which is yet another characteristic of a polyvocal novel.

The narrative “presents a dialogue between the west and Africa through the interaction of American, African and European characters” as
Kadiatu Kanneh remarks (African Identities 110). He continues: “The text insists on a collective female experience, possible through empathy, and given coherence through the wider and supposedly universal lens of anthropology and psychoanalysis” (110). Tashi’s traumatic suffering is not isolated or separate; it is juxtaposed with victimization of women belonging to various cultures and communities. A torturing tradition is analyzed from different perspectives and the narrative transcends the borders of the African village to merge with the universe at large. Walker weaves into the novel several vital concerns; the African tribal girl is no longer invisible or inaudible. Her silence is broker to form a chorus along with the other narrative voices.

Walker herself has described her novel Meridian as a “collage” or “a crazy-quilt story . . . that can jump back and forth in time, work on many different levels, and one that can include myth” (Black Women Writers 176). The crazy quilt flourished during the 1880s and 1890s and reflected a more cosmopolitan awareness. Madhu Dubey remarks: “a capacious, highly flexible form, the crazy quilt offers Walker a womanist medium that thoroughly scrambles the reading codes of Black Aesthetic ideology” (Nationalist Aesthetic 126). The narrative strategy used here marks an attempt to disrupt coherence as manifested by the picture of the crazy quilt on the next page:
In the opening pages of the narrative, there is a clear instance of exploitation of the female body—the exhibition of the mummified body of Marilene O’Shay by her husband for money. This commercialized version of an old Egyptian practice signifies the devaluation of womanhood in the materialist society. Though this short scrap is not directly related to the main story, it forms a framework for the whole narrative which speaks about victimization at various levels. The narrative then shifts back to the days of
the Civil Rights Movement, which evokes ambivalent feelings in Meridian. She has no sympathy for the rioters who mistake violence for revolution. These narrative pieces are shaped from the personal experiences of the writer who herself was an activist in the movement.

But Walker takes a radical step in the treatment of African American history. The historical events are viewed and reflected upon from a personal perspective. Walker makes a subtext of history by placing it in the margins; the violence of the 1960s, a decade of political assassinations, is depicted by a mere recitation of the names of the martyrs. Immediately the narrative focus shifts to Meridian's specific response to the funeral of Kennedy. Historical events are presented so as to "constitute a displacement of the larger public history by a privatized version of historical events" (Race, Gender and Desire 141). Meridian is the skein by which the separate narrative pieces are stitched together to form the gestalt. Maureen T. Reddy, while analyzing the structure of the novel remarks:

Meridian incorporates metaphors for its own structure, in the sojourner tree and in Anne Marion's photograph of the tree-stump's concentric circles. The living tree like the novel is named for a woman and has hidden roots and numerous branches, all organically connected and unified by the trunk. Once cut down, the tree refuses to die—a tiny branch grows from its stump—and its stump reveals not a linear history, but a history better represented by circles within circles. (Narrating Mothers 227)
Such an “organic, cyclic view of history rooted in Native American and African conceptions of nature, life and death”, projects the ecological stance Walker has taken.

The intertextual link among the different genres of her literary output is another clear manifestation of this quilt aesthetic. Very often the larger works turn out to be thematic expansions of her smaller “pieces”. A thought or an idea expressed first in the form of a poem or an essay is developed and improved to be the text of the fictional works at a later stage. Many of the revolutionary ideas which are articulated in the collection of poems entitled Revolutionary Petunias are unified in the novel, Meridian. The thematic link between Once and the first collection of short stories In Love and Trouble has been traced by Thadious Davis who considers Walker’s poetry as the subtext underneath the texts (27). Veiled references turn out to be highly suggestive when the two texts are read simultaneously. He observes that all the stories in Walker’s first collection of short stories, In Love, reconfigure the emotional nexus of Once. Similarly many of the concerns expressed in Living by the Word are recaptured in The Temple and her Earthling Poems. Possessing the Secret of Joy can be considered as a “script” for Warrior Marks, which chronicles the various experiences she had as executive producer and co-creator of the documentary on genital mutilation.

Walker further negates the idea of separateness by toppling all canonical categorizations and creating a fusion of genre. It is difficult to confine many of her literary pieces into any distinctive generic form as such.
The essays—both autobiographical and general—acquire fictional status with the novelizing touch. Many of the essays in Living by the Word read like stories: “Everything is a Human Being” and “The Universe Responds” are good examples of fictionalized facts. “Am I Blue” is another story which is an expression of her sympathy and affection for the non-human friends. She follows her own style of versification; for example, the poem “Mornings/of an Impossible Love” (Earthling Poems 118) consists of five short stanzas printed on five separate pages which is very much in tune with the “four-page formula” mentioned earlier. Another poem “My Heart has Reopened to You” (411) has a hybrid form—the first part is like a poetic essay and in the latter part the same sensibility is recreated in poetic form. Another marvellous piece is “The Right to Life: What Can the White Man Say to the Black Woman?”—a powerful enumeration of the white man’s crime with a reinforcing query functioning as refrain and the “poem” is structured like conversational prose. Walker speaks very much in favour of this kind of generic fusion. She says:

I like those of my short stories that show the plastic, shaping, almost painting quality of words. In “Roselily” and “The Child Who Favours Daughter” the prose is poetry, or, prose and poetry run together to add a new dimension to the language. But the most that I would say about where I am trying to go is this: I am trying to arrive at that place where black music already is; to arrive at
that unself-conscious sense of collective oneness; that naturalness, that (even when anguished) grace. (Gardens 263-264)

In the essays, she makes creative use of memory and imagination so that there is no drab monotony. Herein lies the writer's conscious attempt to repudiate the codes of canonical genre set by the literary fathers.

*Meridian* exemplifies the fusion of genre by incorporating myths, legends and historical facts. As pointed out in “History and Genealogy”, the mythical stories of the Wild Child and The Sojourner Tree are placed within the framework of a narrative grounded in realism (*Race, Gender* 140). The sexual abuse of Wild Child and the enforced silence of Louvinie are juxtaposed to suggest the twin oppression implicit in the nightingale legend. A reworking of this is found in *The Color Purple* when Celie is subjected to patriarchal injunction of silence by the man who raped her. In *Joy* also, Walker rallies against the silence imposed upon the victims of ritual mutilation in the guise of taboo. The writer places herself in a missionary position when she speaks for the black woman, the animals and the trees to save the universe from total annihilation.

Besides providing a structural mould, the quilt also serves as a major thematic motif. Piecing the quilt is emblematic of the bonding of women, which has been a recurrent theme in African American women's literature. Women come together as in a quilt bee, to listen to one another, to heal one another and rediscover and re-create. In *The Color Purple* the bonding between Shug and Celie marks a turning point in the latter's life. It also helps
Shug to develop an awareness of the brave endurance of the black woman. Celie's instruction to Harpo to beat his wife, Sofia, breaks the skein of affection between Celie and Sofia. This brews up a stormy scene in which Sofia returns Celie's curtains and a banter, giving outlet to her suppressed feelings of spite and hatred towards men. Celie tries to reason with her by explaining how she is able to control herself when she gets mad with Mr.—:

"This life soon be over, I say. Heaven last all ways" (Purple 44). To this, Sofia retorts: "You ought to bash Mr.—head open, she say. Think bout heaven later" (44). Hearing this, Celie laughs and Sofia joins. A reaffirmation of this reunion comes to effect when the two women start working on the quilt. Just as the cozy quilt offers comfortable sleep, this patching up of personal bond and the messed up curtains create the effect of a friendship quilt which helps Celie to sleep comfortably. The quilt also serves as a tool of therapeutic memory in the case of Corrine who suspects Nettie as the mother of Adam and Olivia. Nettie's attempt to remind her of her meeting with Celie is by means of an old quilt in which Corrine had used pieces from the outgrown dresses of Olivia. Corrine had met Celie at the dry goods store where she had bought the clothes for those dresses. The flowered square and the chequered bird kindle memory of the past which dissolves the clouds of suspicion and Corrine dies peacefully.

The short story entitled 'Everyday Use' which has already been mentioned, deals with the quilt as a thematic motif as early as 1973. Dee, the daughter "who has held life always in the palm of one hand", rifles out two
quilts from an old trunk. The description of the quilt reveals its clear
association with the past:

They [the quilts] had been pieced by grandma Dee and then Big
Dee and me had Hung them on the quilt frames on the front porch
and quilted them . . . In both of them were scraps of dresses
Grandma Dee had worn fifty and more years ago. Bits and pieces
of grandpa Jarrell’s paisley shirts. And one teeny faded blue piece,
Penny match box, that was from great grandpa Ezra’s uniform that
he wore in the Civil war. (Love and Trouble 56)

The piecing together of old scraps signifies an act of linking history, memory
and art for survival and not just for ornamentation. As David Cowart has
observed: “The quilts that Wangero [the African name adopted by Dee]
covets link her generation to prior generations, and thus they represent the
larger African American past” (Critical Essays 21). It is part of the
inheritance maternally handed down to posterity. These quilts bear the pain
and suffering the black women have undergone through the years of
enslavement. They have been hidden inside a trunk as if signifying the
invisibility of their makers. Now that Wangero has exposed it, the mother
feels that instead of hanging it as a decorative piece, the quilt must be put to
everyday use. It implies that the black woman’s history that has been
distorted or obscured so far must be brought to light.

Dee’s claim for the quilts is ironical. She takes pride in the fact that
she has outgrown the ghettos and severed the ties of kinship. The
sophisticated girl suddenly becoming aware of the artistic charm of antique pieces in a postmodern milieu returns to possess them. But the mother knows that only Maggie, who possesses qualities of love and willingness to sacrifice can keep such splendid manifestation of cultural heritage: “Only by remaining in touch with a proximate history and an immediate cultural reality one can lay claim to the quilts and or hope to produce the authentic art they represent” (21).

Instead of concentrating on a single isolated individual or experience, Walker brings together a plurality of experiences and a multitude of personae. Karen J. Warren makes clear the ecofeminist vision in her statement that important connections exist between the treatment of women, people of color and the underclass on one hand and the treatment of nonhuman nature on the other (Ecofeminism 5). Walker takes an ecofeminist stance when she draws parallelism between several forms of exploitation and oppression. Ikenna Dieke calls it the ubiquity of pain which results from the lyric cry of a sundered, stunted black feminine self (Critical Essays 5).

An examination of the trajectory of pain will take the reader back to the personal pain experienced by the writer at the age of eight. The pain and agony caused by her visual mutilation and the sense of neglect and alienation engendered by this, had gone deep down into her unconscious psyche. As she explains in The Warrior Marks: “It was never really explained to me, nor was there sufficient comfort given to me as a child. And I see this mirrored in the rather callous ways that girls are taken to be mutilated . . . She is the only one
crying . . .” (267). The pain of the crying child never escapes her. Whenever she witnesses any sort of victimization the pain that lurks in her unconscious mind comes to the surface. This facilitates her to see the ways in which women are rather routinely exploited and victimized almost everywhere in the world. Thus the woman’s story—whether it is of Celie or Tashi or Lissie or Zede—is on a continuum of the writer’s personal pain which is further related to the Earth and all its people. In this “commitment to see past a concern for the individual, or even communities of women, to more global concerns” one can easily discern a transcendence of personal pain to the political, social or ecological (The Christian Century 1037).

Though this ubiquity of pain finds expression in many of her works, it echoes most powerfully in Joy and Warrior Marks. The ritualistic violence on the female body, an instance of interior colonization, signifies all forms of oppression and exploitation that women suffer everywhere and at all times. In Joy Walker foregrounds this universality of pain resulting from patriarchal oppression by relating Tashi’s experience with that of the other women. The homogeneous experiences of several women are juxtaposed to emphasize the severity of their condition. The death of Dura due to haemorrhage causes inexpressible sorrow in the mind of her sister, Tashi. This forms a huge boulder in her throat which rolls off only years later when she confides her pain and suffering to M’Zee and Miss Raye. Torabe, who drowns herself to death rather than returning to her husband, and Aiysha who got scared at the sight of “small, sharp instruments her anxious mother had arranged
underneath a napkin on a low seating cushion that rested beside a bridal bed”

have a host of parallels in the women interviewed by Walker and Pratibha for

their documentary, Warrior Marks. As Lisette recognizes in Joy, the reader
too is able to detect the connection between mutilation and enslavement that
is at the root of the domination of women in the world (139).

Victimization assumes new masks in contemporary society where the
natural is pathologized. As far as women are concerned the medicalization of
reproduction takes the place of oppressive rites. The “tsunga’s” place is
occupied by professional experts who “circumcise” women using advanced
surgical instruments. The doctor’s clinic turns out to be another “M’bele
camp” where woman’s body is reduced to mere matter. Building on Merriam-
Webster’s definition of the verb “to doctor” as “to conceal the real state or
quality of by deceptive alteration (as with chemicals),” Mary Daly states that
the “purpose and intent of gynecology was/is not healing in a deep sense, but
violent enforcement of the sexual caste system” (Gyn/Ecology 227). Thus
one is in constant fear of the “man with the knife.” The devaluation of
woman is conceptually related to the devaluation of the natural environment
and its members. The remark made by Gloria Steinem throws light on the
chain of exploitation:

Female genital mutilation is a demonstration of patriarchy at its
worst, a metaphor for the psychic mutilation that women suffer
everywhere at the hands of their male oppressors. Just as African
patriarchs have fashioned a brutal practice that would ensure the
virginity of their brides, the spirit killing regimes of male
dominance in the west rob women of their reproductive rights by
seeking to outlaw abortion, by insisting on unnecessary
mastectomies and caesarian births, by demanding a kind of
subservience that kills the rebellious high spiritedness of little girls
and so on. (National Review 49)

Tashi undergoes the initiation ceremony as a conscious attempt to protest
against white colonization. Thus the personal becomes the social and
ecological.

Walker maintains a homologous relationship between the oppression
of women and the exploitation of nature. Documenting several instances of
exploitation she warns against the danger inherent in the blind pursuit for
development and progress. The native Olinkans are robbed of their land and
culture. Woman is deprived of freedom and the right to own her body, the
black men are forced to serve as guinea pigs in the white man’s laboratories.

Walker extends the theme of colonization by relating the French imperialism
on Algeria. 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. Thus the cosmic unity is made
explicit by linking together a diversity of experiences. The narrators not only
recount their painful experiences, but also listen to similar experiences of
others with meaningful empathy. Thus ‘Uncle Carl’, who is the fictional
prototype of Carl Jung in the process of healing Tashi, realizes that the true essence of healing lies in the identification with the one who suffers:

They [Adam and Tashi] in their indescribable suffering are bringing me home to something in myself I am finding myself in them. A self I have often felt only half-way at home on the European continent. In my European skin. An ancient self that thirsts for knowledge of the experiences of its ancient kin. Needs this knowledge, and the feelings that come with it, to be whole. A self that is horrified at what was done to Evelyn, but recognizes it as something done to me. A truly universal self. (Joy 81)

It is the same feeling of oneness that Miss Raye feels when she suffers pain caused by gum mutilation. She considers it as an instance of empathy. A host of fellow sufferers are linked together who heal one another by means of the ageless magic of the acting out of empathy.

It is essential for the healing of a sick world to mend the divisions of human experiences. It is equally important to realize that humans are of a piece, made up of thousands of intricate interconnections constituting an indescribable continuum. Marilyn French says: “Not only is each of us a complex network whose workings we barely understand, but each of us is connected to other people and ideas and things in equally complex ways” (Aesthetics 72). The quilt aesthetic conceptualizes the need for a language to describe interconnection, in the place of a language based on fabricated dichotomies. It suggests that things are connected as well as divided. In the
manner of a typical feminist work, Walker's art focuses "on groups, community, people as part of a context and helps to remind us of a reality alternative to the western tradition of individualistic, alienated man, lonely in a hostile, aggressive world" (73).

Walker believes that as a writer she must work towards a larger perspective. In her view, this can be effected by making connections or at least trying to make connections ex nihilo and an attempt to discern a common thread which unifies the immense diversity. She hopes to structure the common thread by means of generations; in other words, she values the inspiration and the strength black generations have given to her writings. By adopting the quilt as the matrix of her oeuvre, Walker reinforces that female experience shows a pluralistic reality made up of connection, flow, interrelation, and therefore equality. The interlocutory and dialogic nature of her writings reflects the kind of relationship she hopes to maintain with the others. It also suggests an internal dialogue with the plural aspects of self that constitute the basic feature of black female subjectivity. The quilts also bear testimony of the "mute and inglorious" generations of women with whom Walker holds an intimate kinship. She hopes that thus she would be able to share the creative energy which has flowed through women like Harriet Brent Jacobs, Zora Neale Hurston, Margaret Walker and her own mother.