Chapter Five

Conclusion

Before concluding this study of Alice Walker's fiction the two dominant aspects of her as a literary artist mentioned in the topic statement — feminist and artist — may be looked into based on the findings arrived at in the previous chapters. As an artist she acknowledges that art arises from suffering and sadness. It is magical, curative and transformative serving to bring in change and introduce reform. It is not merely decorative but functional and effective. Accepting continuity in art Walker insists on the need for literary models. The fragmented lives of some of Walker's women characters are made to fall into definite patterns, which thereby evolve into wholesome structures resembling the making of a quilt. So also Walker's art is made up of mixed genres, forms and traditions.

An artist, according to Walker, has to cater to the needs of the soul of her people helping to keep alive their spirituality. To the black woman artist the Southern Black Country is a rich heritage with its resistance to oppression through creativity. Art is a part of everyday activities and through it a woman can find fulfillment by giving expression to her creativity. Moreover it helps her realize and develop her self.
Walker’s feminist outlook is conveyed through her term ‘womanist.’ Besides the racial connotation implied in Walker’s equation of the term with black feminist, Walker’s feminist ideology conveyed through her term has certain wholesome aspects. According to it women are to be whole in the sense of being complete as well as sacred. What is noteworthy is that a feminist’s attitude towards men in general does not affect her concern for her father, brothers and sons. And she is connected not only to the community but also to the world.

Bent on changing the stereotype image of the black woman, Walker stresses her liberation obtained through self-realization and resistance. The black woman has to gain sexual and economic freedom, and engage herself in creative activities. She needs to be spiritual and must realize the value of her heritage. Defying the sex roles determined by patriarchy, she comes out of her domestic sphere and enters man’s domain.

Walker conveys through her fiction how motherhood and childbearing affect a woman’s endeavour to obtain self-fulfillment by means of her creative work. At the same time Walker does not fail to appreciate familial affection, happiness and love. Walker’s women characters attempt to change the institutions of home, family, religion and tradition, and not try to overthrow them. They fight sexism and racism. Their outwardly irreverent behaviour in fact marks the goodness beneath.
An artist with a rich sensibility, Walker shares the pain of those women who suffer due to clitoridectomy. She is quick to expose religion that is used to serve patriarchal interests to the detriment of women’s happiness. The misgivings of critics about Walker’s delineation of male characters can be explained when her fiction is considered primarily as being woman-centered with the focus on women, not men. A remarkable aspect that points to her greatness as an artist is the harmony she achieves between her vision and art. Art is the medium by means of which her womanist concept takes shape and form.

How intimate art is to Walker is obvious in her acknowledgement that, as seen earlier, she writes poetry to celebrate that she has not committed suicide. The sufferings she underwent due to unwanted pregnancy while she was in college and the thought of suicide accompanying them lie beneath her poetic creation. Like Langston Hughes, Walker wrote poems including happy ones out of “an accumulation of sadness” (Gardens 250). About another tragic incident in her life — one of her eyes becoming blind because of a gunshot from one of her brothers and the doctor’s comment that the other eye may turn blind too — Walker writes: “The shock of that possibility — and gratitude for over twenty-five years of sight — sends me literally to my knees. Poem after poem comes — which is perhaps how poets pray” (391).
In the Meridian Walker writes about the creativity of the slave girl Louvinie who enthralls children with her tales. Hearing one of her horror stories, a seven-year old Saxon, who is weak-hearted, dies. As a punishment her tongue is cut off and buried on the campus of Saxon college under a magnolia tree which later comes to be called the Sojourner. Out of the personal tragedy of a creative girl there arises a creative tree full of meaning and significance to the blacks: “Other slaves believed it possessed magic. They claimed the tree could talk, make music, was sacred to birds and possessed the power to obscure vision. Once in its branches a hiding slave could not be seen” [Meridian:34].

The great-grandmother of Meridian’s mother Mrs. Hill paints figures of animals or birds or trees on barns and at the centre of the painted figures she draws “a small contorted face” (121). The humiliating sufferings of slavery lie beneath her creative art. About suffering and the creative process Eric Neumann writes:

In this suffering which the creative man must experience in his unremitting struggle with the unconscious and himself, the ascending transformation that constitutes his individuation process assimilates all the flaws, defeats, failures, hardships, misery, and sickness of human life.[Art and The Creative Unconscious: 195]
By externalizing her feelings and thoughts through her letters Celie preserves her sanity and life. Celie's growth from an insignificant, ignorant girl meekly accepting the injustice heaped on her to a confident, mature woman who has realized her self and attained wholeness parallels her development as a writer. King-Kok Cheung, in this regard, says: “Celie... evolves with her writing—from a little girl baffled by what is happening to her to a self-aware and understanding woman, from a passive recorder of unstructured facts to a conscious artist” PMLA 103: 2 (Mar. 1988) 170).

In one of her early letters Celie records facts as follows: “He act like he can’t stand me no more. Say I’m evil an always up to no good. He took my other little baby, a boy this time” (The Color Purple 4). But later when she writes about her reaction to Shug’s love for a boy, her expression becomes artistic. She acquires the skill of writing epigrammatically: “... love can’t be halted just cause some people moan and groan” (277). At time she turns poetic: “Dear God. Dear star, dear trees, dear sky, dear people. Dear Everything. Dear God” (293) [This quotation bears repetition]. As King-Kok Cheung points out, “The woman who was ‘too dumb’ to learn now creates poetry” (PMLA 103: 2 (Mar. 1988) 171).

Unlike Mrs. Jerome in “Her Sweet Jerome” who goes down rapidly along a destructive path from a semblance of order to disorder, chaos, madness and finally death, Celie, with the help of her art of writing,
progresses from disorder and chaos to order and harmony. That is the curative power of art, which Celie and her creator Walker find in their lives: “I think writing really helps you heal yourself. I think if you write long enough you will be a healthy person. That is, if you write what you need to write, as opposed to what will make money, or what will make fame” (Walker qtd. in Alice Walker 27-28).

As Celie progresses in her life the godhead as well changes in her perception. The godhead represented by a white male God disappoints her and she welcomes and accepts a new understanding of the nature of God as revealed in the salutation of her last letter. As Wendy Wall points out God has become pluralistic and interchangeable to her. What is of greater significance is that God does not show Himself before Celie as being different now. Celie has acquired the ability to give a new form to God. Wendy Wall writes: “She can give God a new form, shaped to her own contours; this allows her and God to ‘make love just fine’” (Critical Perspectives 267).

In giving a new form to God as she does with her own self, Celie proves to be creative. Eric Neumann brings out this aspect of the creative person: “The creative man experiences both the god-head and himself as changing; as willing transformation in creation” (Art and the Creative Unconscious 197).
Celie's understanding of God helps her in finding a harmonious relationship not only with God but also with others, stars and trees and sky. Theologians like Bruce C. Birch and Larry L. Ramussen vouchsafe the same: “To know God is to discern the harmonious order for which we were created: persons to God; persons to each other; and persons to the rest of nature” (qtd. in *Notes on Contemporary Literature* 14: 2 (Sept. 1984) 2). With God being, as pointed out by John T. Hiers, ‘continuous creation’, (2) Celie’s harmonious relationship with God and the Universe shows that Celie has entered the creative process of God. John T. Hiers points out: “Indeed, according to Christian theology, one may participate in creation continually, for it is not a static, historical event; it is the vital, ongoing, organic process of meaningful life” (2). At first Celie’s God is white and male who “threaten lightning, floods and earthquakes” (*The Color Purple* 204). But Celie resolves to “enter into the creation” (207) and her God becomes, as pointed out by John T. Hiers, “representative of the Christian deity of creation and love” *Notes on Contemporary Literature* 14: 4 (Sept. 1984) 3).

The *Temple of My Familiar* begins with a tribute to art: “In the old country in South America, Carlotta’s grandmother, Zede, had been a seamstress, but really more of a sewing magician. She was the creator of clothing, especially capes, made of feathers” (*The Temple of My Familiar* 3). The artist is a magician whose magical art serves to transform the ordinary and the common. Arveyda’s music works like
magic on Zede who, hearing his music, cries and "could come just listening to it" (23). His music is curative and spiritual. While playing guitar or flute, his face is that of a "deeply spiritual person" (24). It is no wonder then that his music has a healing power: "Arveyda and his music were medicine, and, seeing or hearing him, people knew it" (24).

Zede makes capes with feathers, and the capes are worn by dancers, musicians and priests at village festivals marked by gaiety and elevation of spirit. What is routine and mundane becomes something different and cheerful. Art here, in the form of capes, contributes to the change. About the transformative power of art Eric Neumann says: "... an essential part of all religion, art, and customs sprang originally from this dark phenomenon of creative unity in the human soul. Primitive man regarded this creativity of the psyche as magic, and rightly so, for it transforms reality and will always do so" (Art and the Creative Unconscious 203). Zede's feathered headdresses are "almost too resplendent for the gray, foggy city" (The Temple of My Familiar 6). It is symbolic of the endeavour of the black woman artist to oppose and change the social norms of a male-dominated society. Clara Juncker says:

This feminine 'chaosmos' functions as a joyous subversion of masculine logic and order. The feathered artwork of the two Zedes, for example, surfaces at festivals and parades as

Lissie’s description of her familiar is an artistic attempt to restore the self’s original wholeness. The familiar is part bird, part fish and part reptile signifying the whole self’s oneness with all creatures. Its nature is that of the unified and free self that is alive. Lissie describes it as being graceful and clever in its movements, and mischievous and humorous in its expression. Such a live state of wholeness and freedom is contrasted with the alienated and barren self when the familiar flies away due to Lissie’s pride and distraction. In a brief chapter, with the help of the familiar, an artefact, serving as a symbol, Lissie is able to present the central idea of the novel that is concerned with the universal being or existence: “... Walker moves into The Temple of My Familiar and creates a salutary vision, which points toward a monistic idealism in which humans, animals, and the whole ecological order coexist in a unique dynamic of pancosmic symbiosis” (Ikenna Dieke African-American Review 26: 3 (Fall 1992) 507).

In Celie’s transformation art plays a significant role. Her choice of the needle instead of the razor, thanks to Shug’s influence, presents a conspicuous difference to her and the people around her. Art brings
about change in individuals as well as in society. Even a very sensitive matter like racism in America gets influenced by it. In *The Temple of My Familiar* and “Nineteen Fifty-five”, Walker shows how music can serve to bridge the gap between whites and blacks. Pointing out that the whites were isolated and had forgotten how to laugh, dance, sing and be wild, Lessie says that “They haunted black people’s dance halls and churches, trying to ‘pick up’ what they’d closed off in themselves” (*The Temple of My Familiar* 371). Janis Toplin, a white woman admired by Lissie, was drawn towards the black singer Bessie Smith: “She knew Bessie Smith was her momma, and she sang her guts out trying to tear open that closed door between them” (371). Trying to understand the song of Gracie Mae, a blues composer and singer, Traynor who is a white rock’n’roll star comes closer to himself and Gracie Mae. As Maria V. Johnson points out: “In “Nineteen Fifty-five”, as in Temple Walker explores the idea that ‘human beings want, above all else, to love each other freely regardless of tribe’ and recognizes musicians’ efforts to bridge the gap. (*African American Review* 30: 2 (Summer 1996) 234).

The contrast in “Everyday Use” between the attitudes of the sisters Dee and Maggie to the quilts made by their grandmother and mother serves to bring out the contrast between two attitudes to art: art to be merely admired and appreciated, and art that becomes a part of one’s being. Dee appreciates grandma’s quilts and wants to hang them whereas Maggie will “put them to everyday use” (*In Love and Trouble* 57).
The one who puts the quilts to everyday use has imbibed the essence of quilt-making. When their mother Mrs. Johnson says that she wants the quilts to be used, she echoes Walker’s attitude to art that is determined by its functional value rather than its decorative one. Barbara Christian comments: “Alice Walker’s works are quilts — bits and pieces of used material rescued from oblivion for everyday use. She takes seemingly ragged edges and arranges them into works of functional though terrifying beauty” (Critical Perspectives 50).

Writing in a vein that reminds the reader of T.S.Eliot’s “Tradition and Individual Talent”, Walker stresses the importance of models to an artist and the interconnectedness of artists and their works, which is to be brought out in any appreciation of art. Walker writes:

What is always needed in the appreciation of art, or life, is the larger perspective. Connections made, or at least attempted, where none existed before, the straining to encompass in one’s glance at the varied world the common thread ... a fearlessness of growth, of search, of looking, that enlarges the private and the public world. (Gardens 5)

With such a rich awareness of the importance of relating a work of art to ‘the varied world’, Walker cannot but be conscious of her own place in the field of literary art and her contribution to it. About her experience in writing “The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff” Walker says: “I had that
wonderful feeling writers get sometimes, not very often, of being with a
great many people, ancient spirits, all very happy to see me consulting
and acknowledging them, and eager to let me know, through the joy of
their presence, that, indeed, I am not alone" (Gardens 13).

She acknowledges Hurston, Toomer, Colette, Anais Nin, Tillie
Olson and Virginia Woolf as her models. She admires Kate Chopin, the
Brontes, Simon de Beauvoir and Dori’s Lessing.

One of the primary concerns of Walker as an artist is to maintain
the spiritual continuity of her people. Meridian is troubled by the need of
the revolutionaries to kill and her inability to join them in killing. She is
afraid of her people losing their spirituality. So she deems it her duty to
help preserve the soul of her people by singing to them songs from
memory. While dealing with Black Revolution, Walker is keen to
safeguard the essential spirituality of her people that may otherwise be
eroded by the harsh feelings and violence, which go with revolutions. So
without discarding the traditional Christian Church and worship, which
forms a part of her people’s lives, Walker signifies on it.

In the Black Church Meridian finds the melody of a song familiar
but the words are different. The martial melody is new. The priest talks
not about God but about social activism. On a stained-glass window in
the church there is not the picture of Christ with a lamb but of a blues
singer with a guitar in one hand and a sword dripping blood in the other.
It has become a transformed Church and to the black people 'church' means something different now. It is no longer "Baptist, Methodist, or whatnot, but rather communal spirit, togetherness, righteous convergence" (Meridian 204). They want to maintain their spiritual continuity as they go through revolution and transformation: "... understand this," they were saying, "the church... the music, the form of worship that has always sustained us, the kind of ritual you share with us, these are the way to transformation that we know. We want to take this with us as far as we can" (204). The signifying of the church and worship, and of Martin Luther King by the minister whose voice, youth, dress and sermon resemble those of King have the purpose of, as pointed out by Felipe Smith in his essay "Alice Walker's Redemptive Art", keeping alive the past and preparing for the future.

The texture and fabric of Walker's fiction is made up of "the essence of all life" (Gardens 21) that Walker found in the Southern Black Country life. The racial discrimination, the religion that was an antidote against bitterness, the interdependency, the generosity, the 'sense of community', 'the solidarity and sharing', 'the rituals of one's growing up', 'the clarity of vision', the darker side of the life in the South and, above all, "a compassion for the earth, a trust in humanity beyond our knowledge of evil, and an abiding love of justice" (21) all go to make the substance of Walker's art.
The underlying racial question in The Third Life of Grange Copeland, the religious spirit that serves as a buttress of the soul of a community threatened by the harshness and violence of revolution in Meridian, the warmth and love brought about by interdependency in “To Hell With Dying”, the generosity in “Everyday Use” of Maggie who asks her mother to give grandmother’s quilts to her sister Dee, the sense of community that reverberates in The Color Purple, Meridian’s solidarity and sharing with the poor, ignorant blacks whom she visits, the darker side of the domestic life of the blacks as seen in the rape of Celie and in Brownfield’s conduct, and the love for all, peace and harmony which Celie attains all testify Walker’s indebtedness to the South for providing her fictional art with its substance.

The South as a rich source of literary inspiration is a fact that Walker shares with two of her models, Hurston and Toomer. The success of Toomer’s novel Cane, which Walker admires very much, is attributed to “Toomer’s passionate identification with the people of Georgia” (Rudolph P. Byrd MELUS 17:4(Winter 1991-1992) 43) (The charm and appeal of Their Eyes Were Watching God) arise from Hurston’s attachment to the black life of Florida. These writers have “a sense of place” which binds them to a literary tradition. Walker tells how, while she was searching for facts about the craft of voodoo as practised in the nineteenth-century by Southern blacks, she found Zora Hurston: “who went to Barnard to learn how to study what she really wanted to learn:
the ways of her own people, and what ancient rituals, customs, and beliefs had made them unique....And having found that Zora (like a golden key to a storehouse of varied treasure), I was hooked (Gardens 12).

The resistance of the blacks to oppression through creativity, the preservation of black identity by means of their expression, transcending black culture to create an alternate one, the importance of community as well as individual worth, the redefinition of Christianity, the concept of God as spirit and the importance of ritual contribute to, according to Mary Ann Wilson, the spirituality of Janie, Meridian and Celie. The affinity among characters reflects the affinity between their creators Hurston and Walker whom Mary Ann Wilson calls “spiritual sisters” (Alice Walker and Zora Neale Hurston 57).

Toomer is another literary artist of the South who has much influenced Walker as an artist. Both Walker’s Meridian and Toomer’s Cane, according to Rudolph B. Byrd, share the following features: the anecdotal narrative style, with a collection of narratives varying in length, the division of the novel into three sections with a ‘South, North, South’ movement and the novels’ organization in the form of a circle. Meridian is shown to be similar to the women in Cane. At the same time Byrd points out that while both Walker and Toomer are concerned with spiritually thwarted woman, Walker goes a step ahead in presenting a solution which Toomer does not attempt at. Walker writes about how Toomer
viewed black women: “In the still heat of the post-Reconstruction South, this is how they seemed to Jean Toomer: exquisite butterflies trapped in an evil honey, toiling away their lives in an era, a century, that did not acknowledge them, except as ‘the mule of the world’ (Gardens 232). Walker is determined to change the dominant image of the black woman as ‘the mule of the world’ and so she presents triumphant women like Meridian, Celie and Shug who come out with successful solutions to their thwarted lives.

Transcending racial difference, Walker reveals what she finds appealing in Flannery O’Connor who is a Southern white Catholic. “But essential O’Connor is not about race at all... it is ‘about’ prophets and prophecy, ‘about’ revelation, and ‘about’ the impact of supernatural grace on human beings who don’t have a chance of spiritual growth without it” (Gardens 53). An utterance of O’Connor that is a favourite of Walker’s is about fiction: “It is the business of fiction to embody mystery through manners, and mystery is a great embarrassment to the modern mind” (qtd. in Gardens 55). In the growth of Celie from a very insignificant and suffering girl to a woman with a vision, success and happiness, Celie’s relationship with and concept of God play a very important role. Celie begins her letter-writing addressing God and her last letter is also addressed to God. From the idea of God being white, male and static, Celie moves on to a new understanding of Him as being genderless, all-pervasive and within oneself. The God she finally accepts with Shug’s
influence is not threatening, but loving all. Through Celie's changing relationship with God, Walker delineates her spiritual growth.

O'Connor is equally concerned with the redemption of her characters through spiritual growth. But her treatment of it is, as pointed out by Victoria Duckworth, different: "For O'Connor, redemption seems to mean "losing oneself", i.e. being humbled, while for Walker, redemption seems to mean finding and asserting oneself" (The Flannery O'Connor Bulletin 15 (1986) 51-52). Hazel Motes in Wise Blood blinds himself to get a new vision. Writing about O'Connor, Walker remarks: "The magic, the wit, and the mystery of Flannery O'Connor I know I will always love, I also know the meaning of expression 'Take what you can use and let rest rot'" (Gardens 59).

The artistic features, which Walker appreciates in the works of other artists tend to colour her own art while at the same time she keeps her vision free and independent. About her term 'womanist' Walker writes: "I simply feel that naming our experience after own own fashion (as well as rejecting whatever does not seem to suit) is the least we can do — and in this society may well be our only tangible sign of personal freedom" (Gardens 82). According to her this makes Rebecca Jackson an 'original' and 'a gift of power in herself' (Gardens 82). This applies to Walker herself whose endeavour to express her vision transcend form, genre and tradition.
In *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, Walker acknowledges her matrilineal heritage and says: "... so many of the stories that I write, that we all write, are my mother's stories" (*Gardens* 240). "The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff" is, according to Walker, based on her mother's experience at the time of the Depression in America. In *Meridian*, an autobiographical novel, Walker's mother is a character. Besides the stories, the matrilineal heritage includes the manner of telling stories, the artistic decoration of houses with flowers, painting pictures, singing songs and writing poems. Walker extends the artistic heritage she gets from her mother still further and says: "For her, so hindered and intruded upon in so many ways, being an artist has still been a daily part of her life. This ability to hold on, even in very simple ways, is work black women have done for a very long time" (*Gardens* 242). Thus the 'ability to hold on' that Walker's women in fiction like Shug, Celie, Meridian and Sophia cling to in spite of adversities is a vital part of matrilineal heritage.

Dee in "Everyday Use" and Rannie Toomer in "Strong Horse Tea" are not aware of the value of their own people and heritage. When Aunt Sarah earlier advises her to give the boy some home remedies, she shouted: "We don't need none of your witch's remedies..." (89).

Ironically it is to Aunt Sarah and her home that Rannie Toomer turns to later, but it is too late. Realization of the value of heritage is
essential for the black woman in the identification of self and attainment of wholeness. Rannie Toomer alienates herself from the black community to which she belongs, and looks forward for help and identification from the white world that treats her as an alien. What is significant in Walker’s glorification of matrilineage in her essays is the underlying quest for continuity and tradition. Being alienated from the male-dominated literary tradition, Walker, like Hurston, finds her women-centered literary identity in matrilineage.

At the same time motherhood is often discarded. Celie’s children are brought up by her sister Nettie; Meridian gives away her son for adoption and prefers service for her community to motherhood; and Shug has no thought of motherhood. Dianne F. Sadoff says: “... while celebrating literary matrilineage in her essays, Walker subverts that celebration on the margins of her own fictional texts” Signs 11: 1 (Autumn 1985) 22. To liberate themselves women have to confront social norms and traditions. Meridian acts contray to socially accepted notions of marriage and motherhood by ending her marriage with Eddie and offering her son for adoption. But Mrs. Hill, Meridian’s mother, adheres strictly to the established tradition of motherhood and so to her a mother who gives away her child should be a monster.

To reiterate the need of a woman to free herself from the burdens of her family to enable herself to bloom, Walker juxtaposes Meridian’s
story with that of Nelda, Meridian’s playmate and schoolmate, whose fall “grew out of her meek acceptance of her family’s burdens” (Meridian 84). But unlike Mrs. Hill who gladly accepted the burdens, Nelda regrets her ignorance about the need to free herself from them. Thus Walker presents three types of women through Mrs. Hill, Nelda and Meridian. One is proud of her acceptance of family burdens; one succumbs to them out of ignorance; and the third daringly frees herself from them.

Not only Walker but Hurston, Toni Morrison, and many contemporary black women writers distance motherhood in their writings. According to Dianne F. Sadoff, the reason for it is the fact that the black woman writer is “doubly culturally jeopardized by gender and race” (Signs 11: 1 (Autumn 1985) 18). As a womanist or black feminist, Walker does not fail to express her misgivings about the traditional view of motherhood in her fictional texts.

Molly Hite responds to Dianne F. Sadoff’s findings of failed motherhood in Walker’s fiction saying that it is not failure but redefinition: “… the issue is less one of the failure of mothering than of a redefinition… In The Color Purple, children create mothers by circulating among women who in other contexts are daughters, sisters, friends, wives and lovers” (Novel 23: 3 (Spring 1989) 271).

Celie’s children grow under the care of Corrine and Nettie; Squeak takes care of Sofia’s children; and Sofia looks after Squeak’s daughter.
Moreover Celie’s sexual relationship with Shug is spoken in terms of the contact between mother and child. In Meridian Walker writes of Truman becoming maternal in feelings. Like church, and religion, motherhood also gets redefined by Walker with mothering being “presented as a wholly relational activity” (Molly Hite Novel 22: 3 (Spring 1989) 271).

Walker admits that as a writer she “was terrified of having children” (Gardens 362). At the same time she admires Buchi Emecheta who has dedicated her book Second Class Citizen to her children:

To my dear Children,

Florence, Sylvester, Jake, Christy and Alice,

without whose sweet background noises this book would not have been written. (qtd. in Gardens 67)

Again, in the essay with a significant title “A Writer Because of, Not in Spite of, Her Children”, Walker appreciates Emecheta for, like an African mother working with her child strapped to her back, Emecheta “integrates the profession of writer into the cultural concept of mother/worker that she retains from Ibo society” (Gardens 69).

Walker acknowledges how her daughter Rebecca helped her self in becoming free and whole. Simon de Beauvoir explains in her book how it can become a possibility: “Through the child she is supposed to find self-realization sexually and socially; through child-bearing, then, the institution of marriage gets its meaning and attains its purpose” (The
Second Sex, 483). When someone asked Walker whether women artists should have children, Walker replied that they should have children but only one “Because with one you can move... with more than one you’re a sitting duck” (Gardens 363).

The Color Purple ends with much familial affection, love, joy, and warmth. It is a family reunion and Celie meets after a very long time her children Olivia and Adam, and her sister Nettie. While in Africa the children are well taken care of by the missionary Samuel and his wife Corrine, and by Nettie. Nettie writes to Celie that Olivia and Adam “are being brought up in love, Christian Charity and awareness of God” (The Color Purple 139). Such a nice picture of the value of children with all the joy and emotional fulfillment offered by them adds to the wholesome appeal of the novel. About the birth of her daughter Rebecca, Walker says that it “joined me to a body of experience and a depth of commitment to my own life” (Gardens 369).

The view of a child in its relation to its mother is totally different in Meridian in which Meridian considers the birth of her son as one that leads her to slavery making her think of murdering him. The chapter that is ironically titled as “The Happy Mother” ends with the reason for Meridian’s hatred for the children: “And so it was that one day in the middle of April in 1960 Meridian Hill became aware of the past and present of the larger world” (Meridian 67). For a woman who wants to
free herself from those aspects of a tradition which tend to confine her within the home burdened with her duties to her husband and children, and to enter ‘the larger world’ dominated by men, children seem to be a tool of tradition to trap her. Thoughts of the movement of blacks, the house used by them and its destruction by bombs alternate with her thoughts of her child culminating in her awareness of the larger world.

The difference between the pictures of children’s significance in The Color Purple and Meridian corresponds with their differing objectives. While one is primarily concerned with change and transformation within the black community, the other enters a larger domain wherein racial matters are predominant in determining the lives and relationships of people. Walker accepts this dichotomy and says: ‘For those of us who both love and fear The Child — because of the work we do — but who would be lovers only, if we could, I propose and defend a plan of life that encourages one child of one’s own, which I consider a meaningful — some might say necessary — digression within the work(s)” (Gardens 362).

It is the oppressive elements in the social order that Walker’s women fight against. That home, family, God and tradition are used to perpetuate the subjugation of women is what Celie, Meridian, Shug and Sofia question. It is significant that The Color Purple ends with a family reunion because it serves to highlight the pleasant familial feelings
and thoughts. The last chapter begins with Celie thanking God for bringing her sister and children home. In one of her letters to Celie, Nettie expresses the joy of living as a family that she has in the company of the missionaries Corrine and Samuel and the children with them: “I dread parting from them because in the short time we’ve been together they’ve been like family to me. Like family might have been, I mean” (The Color Purple 135). Such a joy is found in the reunion of family members at the end of the novel. But the family and home presented at the end is very different from the picture of them in the novel’s beginning. Patriarchy is overthrown, and love and harmony replace distrust and disorder.

The concept of God also has undergone change. The God to whom Celie now writes is not the traditional western God who is male and white but One who is equated with stars, trees, sky, people, and everything. Thus Walker’s women aim at changing the institutions of home, family, religion and tradition, and not at overthrowing them. About The Color Purple Priscilla L. Walton says:

Since the novel attacks those bastions of society — family, religion, and marriage — but also offers a rejuvenation of them in its final pages, it evidently suggests that society itself is not what Walker questions and rejects but rather the
limitations that are imposed upon it and make it closed and restrictive. (ARIEL 21: 2 (April 1990) 71-72)

Celie raises her voice against sexual oppression by first writing to God. This act of self-expression is intended to preserve her sanity in the face of the brutal onslaught of sexual abuse perpetrated by a man who she believes is her father. The protest through her voice in the form of letters to God and Nettie gathers strength enabling her to discard those elements that oppress her and welcome those that help to liberate her sexually. The notion of female subordination, the adherence to a strict heterosexual relationship and the acceptance of God being male and white are given up and instead the independence of women from men, the value of lesbian relationship and the belief of God being neither 'he' nor 'she' but 'it' are taken in by her. Celie helps to bring about a fundamental change in the community she lives in bringing down the oppressive elements in the social order and replacing in their place an alternate value system that frees women from men's domination and stresses female bonding and female entrepreneurship.

The ending of The Color Purple which many critics describe as a fairy-tale ending presents, as pointed out by Priscilla L. Walton, Walker's vision of an ideal community or a 'womanist' world. According to Priscilla L. Walton it is a 'humanist' as well as a 'womanist' utopia because it offers a reunification of humanity as a whole" (72). She further says: “The
new society is not a closed order; it is open to all..." (71). Man represented by Mr._______ and the white woman in the character of Eleanor Jane are included in this society. Thus the novel indicates woman’s power that can change the old social order and usher in a daringly new one.

Sofia breaks the stereotype image of woman as being one who is submissive to her husband whom she obeys implicitly bearing silently the humiliation meted out to her at home. Sofia on the contrary is equal to man in many respects. When Harpo’s girlfriend Squeak objects to Harpo’s dancing with Sofia and slaps Sofia across her head, the latter “ball up her fist, draw back, and knock two of Squeak’s side teeth out” (The Color Purple 87). In spirit as well as in body she does not bow before man but keeps her independence. Harpo complains to his father: “... I tell her one thing, she do another. Never do what I say. Always back talk” (37).

Besides resisting sexual oppression at home, Sofia does not brook racial oppression in the world outside. Lauren Berlant says: “... Sofia is the first woman Celie knows who refuses to accede to both the patriarchal and the racist demand that the black woman demonstrate her abjection to her oppressors” (Critical Perspectives 219). She is not what a woman with five children is expected to be according to prevalent social norms. It is this social attitude that Harpo reveals when he
questions her for being at a jukejoint at night to hear Shug sing. She tells Harpo: “A woman need a little fun, once in a while...” (The Color Purple 86). When Harpo says that she should be at home, Sofia tells him: “This is my home. Though I think it go better as a jukejoint” (86).

Walker presents Sofia as a wife and mother very different from Mrs.Hill in Meridian whose life is one of sacrifice for the sake of her family: “Her mother’s life was sacrifice. A blind, enduring, stumbling— though with dignity (as much was possible under the circumstances)— through life” (Meridian 71).

The blues singer Shug in The Color Purple is introduced as a woman considered nasty, and improper by her own parents and the townspeople. She is terribly sick and the priest “take her condition for his text—He talk about a strumpet in short skirts, smoking cigarettes, drinking gin. Singing for money and taking other women mens [sic]. Talk bout slut, hussy, heifer and streetcleaner” (The Color Purple 46).

But this woman artist having liberated herself helps Celie in her liberation. Her role is similar to the liberating role of the trickster-artist in Walker’s fiction: “… through fluidity of form and irreverent behaviour, Walker’s trickster-artist violates symbolic and cultural codes and thus embodies what Ellison designates the liberating ‘joke of the trickster’” (Clara Juncker American Studies in Scandinavia 24: 1 (1992) 40-41). Celie’s sexual awareness and her delight in her own body, her freeing
herself from the clutches of male domination in the form of her husband Mr. _______, her economic independence by stitching and selling pants, and in short her attainment of wholeness are made possible by her acquaintance with the ‘strumpet in short skirts’, Shug. She teaches Celie about God being internal, the feminist doctrine of the need for woman to be independent of man, and the life-giving power of creative art. Celie takes up the needle to sew in place of the razor she had in her hand to slit her husband’s throat. Pointing out that Shug represents Hurston, Molly Hite observes: “.. Walker dramatizes Hurston’s literary role as the undoer of inessential and divisive hierarchies. In casting Hurston as Shug, she revises theories of influence as they apply to black women” (Novel 22: 2 (Spring 1989) 273).

Celie, who is also an artist as a writer of letters, acquires this kind of outwardly irreverent behaviour which in fact masks the wholesome character beneath. Talking with Sofia and Harpo about smoking reefer, she shocks her hearers when she replies to Harpo’s question whether she smokes reefer: “Do I look like a fool? I ask. I smoke when I want to talk to God. I smoke when I want to make love. Lately I feel like me and God make love just fine anyhow. Whether I smoke reefer or not” (The Color Purple 227). Her oneness with God underlies her answer, which seems to be improper and provoking.
Lissie in *The Temple of My Familiar* tells Suwelo: “I was never a gentle person. Maybe in the lifetimes I don’t recall, but in all the ones I do recall I was a fighter, someone who started trouble” (*The Temple of My Familiar* 53-54). Hal tells Suwelo that Lissie who “was never an angel” (42) was mean and ruthless: “... she would tell lies on people just to laugh at the confusion she made” (42). At the same time he says that he “could usually get her to show her good side” (42).

Deeply pained to see the slack and dull faces of caged lions in zoos, Lessie talks about their original qualities of nobility, ‘impatience with inferiors’ (371), and grace — qualities which she finds in herself. She says: “Though I myself had the body of a woman, I could still see my lion inside” (371). The lion inside her is presented through a series of five paintings of lions. In the last one that Suwelo takes with him, he sees “Miss Lissie’s dare-to-be-everything lion eyes” (417) and a “shiny red high-heeled slipper” (417). These details signify, in the words of Clara Juncker, the womanist art that is “daring, flamboyant, elegant— and dangerous” (*American Studies in Scandinavia* 24: 1 (1992) 49). Hal wonders at Lissie’s energy: “Where did it come from? This particular concentrated form of energy that was Lissie?” (*The Temple of My Familiar* 44).

In a Whitmanesque manner Lissie speaks of her containing “everybody and everything” (372), a quality which according to Arveyda
the musician is an essential prerequisite for an artist to be alive: “… if you are at all alive as an artist, you are somewhere else, other than where you were, almost constantly” (382). Clara Juncker gives expression to this idea of art paradoxically when she writes: “… the non-essence of black feminine creativity accordingly includes dynamic motion” (American Studies in Scandinavia 24: 1 (1992) 41). Thus Lissie who is described as one who started trouble proves to be a symbol of dynamic black feminine creativity.

Like her women characters, Walker herself shocks the reader into awareness. The detailed description of Celie’s rape in the beginning of The Color Purple, the creation of the brutal and inhuman character of Brownfield in The Third Life of Grange Copeland and the portrayal of the horrific practice of female genital mutilation in Possessing the Secret of Joy are meant to provoke serious thought in the minds of readers about sexism, domestic violence, racism, individual responsibility and the cruelty of a practice that is continued even in modern times.

The language that Walker makes use of is at times blunt and irreverent: “Why any women give a shit what people think is a mystery to me” (The Color Purple 208). When Shug describes to Celie the boy called Germaine whom Shug loves, Celie who is in love with Shug expresses her feeling of displeasure in the following words: “By the time she finish talking about his neat little dancing feet and get back to his honey
brown curly hair, I feel like shit” (255). Celie’s language may be irreverent at times but Walker moulds her into a wholesome woman loving everybody and everything, and makes the novel itself emerge as a wholesome one proclaiming the message of love and harmony. Walker shares with the women artists in her fiction the quality of being daringly creative as symbolized by the self-portrait of the lion with the red slipper. They are daringly irreverent because art to them is a liberating force. Maria Lauret writes:

American feminist fiction of the 1970s and 1980s was a liberating literature, a female body of texts which sought to liberate both women and writing from the constraints of masculinist double standards in literature and in life. It threw its bra in the trash-can of conventional femininity and refused to corset itself in prevailing notions of literariness. (Liberating Literature 1)

Walker gives expression to such a spirit of defiance and liberation in her essay “Writing The Color Purple”. She says that the thought that The Color Purple would be a historical novel made her chuckle because “my ‘history’ starts not with the taking of lands, or the births, battles, and deaths of Great Men, but with one woman asking another for her underwear” (Gardens 355-356) [This quotation bears repetition].
The bitter experience that Walker had at the age of eight when one of her eyes was blinded by a shot from the BB gun of one of her brothers, underlies, according to Walker as told by her in her documentary text *Warrior Marks*, her social awakening and endeavour to expose the secrets of the blinding of women all over the world. Her probing of the female genital mutilation or women's sexual blinding in Africa marks the beginning of her social endeavour to uncover the blindness that afflicts women. In the video's opening vignette Walker narrates: "Like the Pupil of an Eye: Genital Mutilation and the Sexual Blinding of Women" (qtd. in *Contemporary Literary Criticism* 103: 421). And she admits the pain involved in the exposure: "I know how painful exposure is. It is something I've had to face every day of my life, beginning with my first look in the mirror each morning" (421).

It is a painful and revealing exposure of a social evil inflicted on black women that Walker undertakes in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* and with Pratibha Parmar, in the film *Warrior Marks*. This identification of her pain with that of black women who are genitally mutilated enables Walker to identify herself with the protagonist Tashi in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. Angeletta K.M. Gourdine writes: “Walker’s fiction, then, is undergirded by a great fiction: Tashi is Walker’s memory” (*African-American Review* 30: 2, 240)
When Walker became a “consciously feminist adult” (qtd. in Contemporary Literary Criticism 103: 421) she came to identify the blinding of her right eye as “a patriarchal wound” (421). Angeletta K. M. Gourdine calls it Walker’s “first experience with male aggression” African American Review 30: 2, 239). Female genital mutilation is one of the evils of patriarchy. Defining patriarchy Rosemary Radford Ruether says:

Patriarchy means, above all the subordination of women’s bodies, sexuality, and reproduction to male ownership and control. Rape, wife beating, sexual harassment... the denial of female initiation and control over sexual relations—all are ramifications of the fundamental nature of patriarchy, the expropriation of woman as body by man. (Sexism and God-Talk 228)

In Possessing the Secret of Joy Walker presents the sexual subjugation of women by man through religious imagery with the patriarchal God having sexual intercourse with woman after cutting down the rising clitoris which to Him looked masculine. The elders of the village talk about God being wise in creating the tsunga who performed female circumcision with her tools—“sharpened stone and bag of thorns...needle and thread” (Possessing the Secret of Joy 222). The identification of God with the male figure is explicitly conveyed in the
following part of the conversation among the elders in which God’s preference for a tight vagina is stated:

Number two: .... He liked it tight.
Number three: God likes to feel big
Number four: What man does not? (222)

They talk about woman being Queen and God’s gift to man. The denial of sexual freedom and independence to the Queen is symbolized by the clipping of her wings by God because “left to herself the Queen would fly” (221). Woman’s sexual independence arouses man’s anxiety about the continuation of his sexual domination over woman and so one of the elders asks if the Queen is permitted to fly away “where would we be?” (221). It is the elders’ conception that woman’s body is to be used for their interests: “Let us eat this food, and drink to the Queen who is beautiful, and whose body has been given us to be our sustenance forever” (222).

In her review of the book Warrior Marks, Judy Mann states the reason for the practice of female genital mutilation:

Pretexts marshalled to defend the practice range from religion and hygiene to cultural traditions. But the true reason this humiliating, dangerous practice continues is to ensure that women will remain virgins until marriage, and to maintain control over women by destroying their ability to
enjoy sex. Mutilated women are turned into sexual vessels for men, many of whom believe the procedure enhances their own enjoyment. *(Contemporary Literary Criticism* 103: 418-419)

In *Possessing the Secret of Joy* God and religion are drawn in by the village elders to sanctify their irreligious and impious attitude in their treatment of women giving rise to Raye’s outburst about religion being an excuse for man’s conduct towards woman. Rosemary Radford Ruether brings out man’s use of the religious system to keep woman under his subjugation: “Male monotheism reinforces the social hierarchy of patriarchal rule through its religious system.... God is modeled after the patriarchal ruling class.... Women as wives now become symbolically repressed as the dependent servant class” *(Sexism and God-Talk* 53). The social institution of religion comes under sharp scrutiny in Walker’s works. In *The Color Purple* the tradition of imaging God through one gender alone is found fault with. Walker’s women like Shug, Celie and Tashi act against the forces of traditional religion which tend to suppress women and promote sexism.

Much harsh criticism directed against Walker’s fiction is about her portrayal of black men. The cruel, violent and heartless Brownfield, Celie’s rape in her house by her stepfather, the life of Grange Copeland before his redemption, and Albert’s inhuman treatment of Celie present
the darker side of black families wherein the males tend to be violent and cruel. Philip M. Royster comments:

Alice Walker's third novel, The Color Purple is fueling controversy in many black American communities.... It appears that Walker's depiction of violent black men who physically and psychologically abuse their wives and children is one of the poles of the controversy. (Black American Literature Forum 20: 4 (Winter 1986) 347)

The screening of the film The Color Purple met with much opposition from the blacks. In The Same River Twice Walker denies the charge that she hates black men. Giving a list of black men on whom she has relied upon as seen in her works, she says that the black male spirit with its fierce emotion, tender heart and love of freedom is within herself. As she states in In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens, Walker does not want to romanticize the Southern black country that gives the Southern black writer a heritage of love as well as hate. Writing about black folklore in Living By the Word, Walker says that the tales are painful but "true reflections" of blacks who need to change their behaviour: "We need simply to try to change our own feelings and our own behaviour so that we don’t have to burden future generations with those same afflictions. There's a lot of self-criticism in the folklore, for
instance, and things that are really, sometimes, unsettling." (32). J. Charles Washington expresses a similar view:

Like most Black artists concerned about freeing Black people from their past mistakes, she too believes that ‘the truth shall set you free’. In contrast to many Black writers who are reluctant to criticize Black males, the ‘forbidden’ Walker exposes the role Black men, both the positive and negative types, have played in the oppression of Black women.

(Obsidian II 3: 1 (Spring 1988) 28-29)

Washington makes a study of the black male characters Ruel in “Really, Doesn’t Crime Pay?” and Mr. Sweet in “To Hell With Dying” to show how these men stand as Walker’s positive black male images. But Washington concludes his study of Ruel saying that through Ruel Walker shows how even “basically good men” unwillingly contribute to the failure of the relationship between black men and women. And his study of Mr. Sweet ends significantly with the closing words form the text: “The man on the... bed... had been my first love” (In Love and Trouble 138). Being true to the nature of Walker’s fiction that is woman-centred, in this short story as well the focus is on the woman narrator and her relationship with Mr. Sweet, and not on the man himself. Walker states her commitment to the cause of the black
woman:

I am preoccupied with the spiritual survival, the survival whole of my people. But, beyond that, I am committed to exploring the oppressions, the loyalties and the triumphs of black women. In the *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, ostensibly about a man and his son, it is the women and how they are treated that colors everything. (Gardens 250-251)

In “Really, Doesn’t Crime Pay?” Walker is more concerned with the portrayal of the failure of a woman to channel her creativity into positive action rather than with the male characters involved—her husband Ruel or her lover Mordeccai. It is Walker’s concern for the black women that gives rise to her womanism or black feminism. At the same time her study of black women becomes a study of women in general because her concern for the black woman rests on things which have enduring and universal value. Coming under American feminist fiction, Walker’s works proclaim the liberation of women.

Explaining her womanist concept Walker says that it affirms “connectedness to the entire community and the world, rather than separation” (Gardens 81). What some critics refer to as the fairytale ending of *The Color Purple* is nevertheless Walker’s way of giving form and shape to her womanism: “The womanist utopia of the conclusion” is
according to Priscilla L. Walton, humanist as well as womanist because
"it offers a revivification of humanity as a whole" (ARIEL 21: 2, 72). Besides Celie being free and whole, people around her grow with her, and on July 14, the day of American independence, there is the reunion of family members who have also become free from pests constraints and are so happy. Family being the nucleus of a civilized community, by presenting a wholesome family Walker envisages a free and happy community. Madhu Dubey writes about Walker's 'womanist vision' in The Third Life of Grange Copeland: “Employing Ruth’s point of view, the end of the novel supplements Grange’s conception of a nationalist community joined by hatred... with a womanist vision of community inspired by love and forgiveness. (Black Women Novelists 115)

Meridian works for the community with a womanist perspective. It is the essential womanist in her that prevents her from joining the revolutionaries in resorting to killing. She resolves to carry out the womanist mission of preserving cultural heritage and the soul of her people by singing songs from memory. Thus it is through art that the womanist mission is to be accomplished.

The works of Walker a gifted artist and prolific writer, need to be probed further to bring out their rich thematic and stylistic contribution. Her treatment of religion is an aspect to be looked into. Walker fights against the institution of patriarchal religion but upholds spirituality. A
study of the question of race and colour in Walker's art can bring forth a wealth of details concerning racial harmony. Her use of genres, forms and traditions, and her artistic endeavour to bring together form and meaning are very much original and daring. It is an illuminative field for study. A study of her characterization of men that has been much criticized can throw more light on not only the relationship between the sexes but also on the role of an artist. Walker's works are rich in detail and expression encouraging more and more analyses of them from different perspectives, which obviously is a definite sign of a great artist.