Chapter Three

Woman’s Place and Role in the Social Structure

In Walker’s fiction social institutions often stand exposed in their failure to safeguard the dignity and life of black women. *The Color Purple* opens with a graphic description of the rape of the young girl Celie at home by her stepfather. In “The Child Who Favored Daughter” the man beats her daughter for her love of a white man and the next morning, when he sees her with her breasts bare as her blouse wet with rain has slipped off, he is “burning with unnamable desire” (*In Love and Trouble* 45), and in agony he cuts off her breasts. Both in *The Color Purple* and “The Child Who Favored Daughter,” the cruelty to women is perpetrated inside the woman’s home — home that is regarded as the nucleus of a civilized society. And the perpetrators of the crimes are the very men who as heads of the families are supposed to protect the women in their households. Home and familial relationship with man at the top as represented in Walker’s fiction is far removed from its positive image as a custodian of civilized behaviour. Talking about ideology in *The Color Purple* Bell Hooks says:

Patriarchy is exposed and denounced as a social structure supporting and condoning male domination of women, specifically represented as black male domination of black women. (*Critical Perspectives* 285)
In her essay “Tiptoeing Through Taboo” Trudier Harris points out how black American writers like Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison, James Baldwin and Alice Walker present incest in their works without confronting the subject openly and boldly. According to Harris while black writers in general are unwilling to treat the subject, Walker’s story of “The Child Who Favored Daughter” is “intriguing” (Modern Fiction Studies 28: 3 (Autumn 1982) 495). To understand this, one has to take into consideration the entire gamut of Walker’s writings, which reveal her urge to expose the social norms and bodies which are male-dominated and made to serve male interests.

No other explanation can be more satisfying than what Walker herself gives. Pointing out that women of colour have to do much work of a feminist nature, Walker specifies the work and lists among other things the following tasks: “From the stopping of pornography, child slavery, forced prostitution, and molestation of minors in the home and in Times Square to the defense of women beaten and raped each Saturday night the world over, by their husbands (Gardens 379). Minors are without protection in Times Square as well as in homes, and women are raped not by strangers but by their husbands. The exposure of the misuse of social institutions like home and marriage with man dominating and showing cruelty and violence to women is a constant endeavour that Walker involves herself in.
Saturday night is the usual time for Brownfield in The Third Life of Grange Copeland to have his weekly fight with his wife Mem. Coming home drunk, he abuses her and beats her making her bleed while their young daughters sit in the next room crying and trembling, and comforting one another. He beats and kicks the children even when he is sober and they hate him. So harsh and cruel is his conduct that Daphne the eldest daughter tells her sister Ornette that she will take the butcher knife from the table and kill him.

Walker's chief concern in The Third Life of Grange Copeland is not the life and death of Brownfield but the helplessness and suffering of the black woman and her children in their home with the man who is supposed to love and protect them torturing them and trying to destroy their lives.

The black woman has to undergo the humiliation and suffering of being doubly marginalized with the cruel treatment meted out to her by her black husband and with her miserable condition in the white-dominated society that ignores or looks down upon her. What his black wife Celie means to Albert is conveyed in his own words: "Who you think you is? he says.... Look at you. You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. Goddam, he says, you nothing at all" [The Color Purple, 213].

That the wife has to obey and serve her husband is the attitude that both Albert and his son Harpo have. Complaining about his wife
Sofia to Celie, Harpo says: “I want her to do what I say, like you do for Pa…. The wife spose to mind” (66).

In “Her Sweet Jerome,” Jerome is anything but sweet to his wife. His callous and almost inhuman treatment of his wife smacks of utter negligence on the part of a husband of his wife’s feelings. He meets with others for the cause of revolution but at home he has no concern for his wife. One day in her anxiety when she bursts into the room where they meet in order to find out whether her husband loves any other woman, Jerome does not pay any attention to her at all but instead begins reciting poetry. The man remains unconcerned when his wife, because of his love for him, becomes mad and finally burns herself to death. As pointed out by Anne Z. Michelson, there is “contemptuous ignoring of her” (Reaching Out: Sensibility and Order in Recent American Fiction by Women 157) by Jerome.

So one of the chief things which a woman has to do to keep herself alive and whole is to stand up against sexism. In The Color Purple Sofia proves to be such a type of woman. Like his father, Harpo is of the firm view that at home man should be on top. Sofia tells Celie: “I don’t like to go to bed with him no more…. Once he got on top of me I think about how that’s where he always want to be” (The Color Purple 69).

While Celie in the beginning silently and uncomplainingly puts up with a similar experience in her relationship with Albert, Sofia is not
ready to give in. She gets tired of Harpo because “All he think about since us married is how to make me mind. He don’t want a wife, he want a dog” (68). So she decides to leave him for a while and, taking her children with her, live with her sister Odessa.

Initially Celie responds to her husband’s beating by meekly accepting her fate in a conventional manner: “But he my husband. I shrug my shoulders. This life soon be over, I say. Heaven last all ways” (44). But Sofia’s reaction to it is different. It marks a woman’s fight against sexism: “You ought to bash Mr. _______ head open, she say. Think bout heaven later” (44). Celie does learn to stand up against the sexist behaviour of her husband. Shug’s help in bringing about a sexual awakening in Celie leads to her awareness of her self and its worth. Reesman and Powe point out the strength that a woman gains by realizing her self’s worth:

Denied ownership of material wealth, denied ownership of their own bodies, women were and are forced inward to face their own interior selves, where ownership of their own spirits cannot be denied.... Through spiritualism, women were and are able to turn their inner strength into an external force. (The Oxford Companion to Women’s Writing in the United States 838)
In Celie's journey towards selfhood, besides Shug's assistance, her way of speaking out through letters puts her on the right track. Ruth D. Weston comments:

It is only when Celie can externalize her anger, can dare to express herself in spite of the fact that her father has forbidden her to speak, that she begins her journey toward selfhood by writing a revised self, by literally touching pen to paper to release her creativity energy. *Weber Studies* 9: 2 (Spring-Summer 1992) 53

Thus in her struggle against a sexist husband, Celie takes up the subtle and more powerful weapon of one's creativity. Art thus enables her to grow and fight evil.

Getting strengthened Celie moves forward in her battle against gross sexism on the part of her husband. What she undertakes in this direction is great and wholesome serving not only her own interest as an independent woman but also the cause of womanhood in general in that it can be a good model for a woman to face sexism and triumph over it. Celie's stand is strong, firm, effective, and enduring being based on self-knowledge and economic independence gained through her entrepreneurship. By stitching pants and selling them with people employed under her, Celie not only earns to keep herself financially independent but also gets fulfilment in life with her body, mind and spirit.
engaged in the creative process of making pants. This endeavour brings her the delight of watching people happily wearing her products.

The possibility of woman being independent financially and self-sufficient, and thereby having control over herself and others is explored by Walker in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* through the character of Mem who against heavy odds earns by working as a teacher and a housekeeper. Getting a job in town gives her independence to decide on her family’s welfare: “Browning, I got me a job in town,” Mem said... “You coming with us or no” she asked, without much caring in her voice. “If you is,” she went on, “you got to get a job and pull your weight. If you don’t we are going on ahead anyhow” (Copeland 89). Though Mem ultimately fails to capitalize on her financial independence, her getting a job in town brings her a home in the city with four rooms and an indoor toilet, and the power to decide on matters concerning her family’s interest. Though her liberation is short-lived, it does serve to highlight the possibility of women defining themselves by gaining economic independence. Simon de Beauvoir points out the relation between employment and woman’s liberty: “It is through gainful employment that woman has traversed most of the distance that separated her from the male; and nothing else can guarantee her liberty in practice” (The Second Sex 679).
In the cultural tradition of black people it is customary for women to be active, working and earning for the family. Walker sings about the active black women of her mother’s generation in the following lines:

They were women then  
My mama’s generation  
Husky of voice — Stout of  
Step  
With fists as well as  
Hands  
How they battered down  
Doors  
And ironed  
Starched white  
Shirts  
How they led  
Armies  
Headragged generals  
Across mined  
Fields  
Booby-trapped  
Kitchens  
To discover books  
Desks
A place for us. (Gardens 242)

Walker is able to achieve the twin purpose of making a woman whole and of highlighting the rich potentiality of black women by picturing successful women who earn success by bringing out their underlying potentiality. They engage themselves in some worthwhile activity that is rewarding physically, economically, psychologically and spiritually. In The Color Purple the two successful women Shug and Celie stand on their own and prove to be their own masters with the former singing at operas and the latter stitching pants and selling them.

Contrasting black women with women who are “useless except as baby machines” (Meridian 105), Meridian says:

On the other hand black women were always imitating Harriet Tubman — escaping to something unheard of. One of her sister’s friends had become, somehow, a sergeant in the army.... A couple of girls her brother knew had gone away broke and came back, years later, as a doctor and a school teacher. ... They left home scared, poor black girls and came back (some of them) successful secretaries and typists. (105-106)

(... Black women do not lag behind men in doing difficult physical work. Nettie writes to Celie about Olinka women in Africa who “spend all their time in the fields, tending their crops” (The Color Purple 179). Some
of Walker's women engaged themselves in rigorous physical activities usually associated with men. Barbara Christian writes: "... the black woman was also seen as different from the white woman in her capacity to do man's work" (Black Women Novelists 7).

Sofia in The Color Purple not only fights physically with her husband Harpo but also delights in doing a man's job. Celie describes her working on the roof: "I see Sofia dragging a ladder and then lean it up against the house. She wearing a old pair of Harpo pants. Got her head tied up in a headrag. She clam up the ladder to the roof, begin to hammer in nails. Sound echo cross the yard like shots" (The Color Purple 64). Mrs. Johnson in "Everyday Use" is a similar type of woman. She is androgynous and can do the jobs which are conventionally allocated to man. In the feminist point of view the story makes a firm imprint in establishing the individuality and the wholeness of a woman who is in no way inferior to man both physically and mentally.

She carries out with ease the manly job of killing and cleaning a hog or killing a bull calf and having the meat hung up. She works outside all day breaking ice for water. And the rest and contentment she enjoys is also manly. Having "a dip of snuff" she and her daughter Maggie simply sit and enjoy. Commenting on this Houston Baker and Charlotte Pierce-Baker write: "They dip snuff in the manner of African confreneres sharing cola nuts" (Critical Perspectives 316).
Such a robust image of women that Walker gives upssets the idea of man’s physical superiority over women and thereby serves to oppose sexism and the patriarchal order of things. Writing about the history of the feminist movement, Betty Friedan points out the need to defy ‘the feminine mystique’ and sex roles as defined by the male-dominated society:

They had to shatter, violently if necessary, the decorative Dresden figurine that represented the ideal woman of the last century. They had to prove that woman was not a passive, empty mirror, not a frilly, useless decoration, not a mindless animal, not a thing to be disposed of by others, incapable of a voice in her own existence... (The Feminine Mystique 81)

But Margaret Mead advocates the acceptance of sex differences as a healthy social aspect:

Are not sex differences exceedingly valuable, one of the resources of our human nature that every society has used but no society has as yet begun to use to the full. Women, the Family, and Freedom 429)

She contends that both the sexes have different gifts and the use of them can contribute to bring in a better world:
If we once accept the premise that we can build a better world by using the different gifts of each sex, we shall have two kinds of freedom, freedom to use untrapped gifts of each sex, and freedom to admit freely and cultivate in each their special superiorities. (Women, the Family and Freedom 430)

On the other hand the Walker woman does not accept society’s sexual distinctions. To get her identity as a human with the freedom to grow, woman has to break the barriers set by man and society. Some of Walker’s women turn violent at one time or another in this endeavour. Arising from her unwillingness to give in to Harpo’s sexist attitude, Sofia’s physical fights with him show the use of physical force by woman in combating man’s domination. Celie stands behind Albert’s chair threateningly with his razor open but is prevented by Shug from doing anything rash. Anyhow the situation shows how violent a woman can become towards her sexist husband.

Rue1 in “Really, Doesn’t Crime Pay?” marries Myrma because, in spite of her brown skin, she looks like a Frenchwoman. He wants her to beget his babies but discourages her expression of her creativity through writing stories. And Myrna tries to murder him with one of his chain saws. In The Third Life of Grange Copeland, Mem wields the gun over Brownfield making him plead for her mercy. Though Walker’s women do not succeed in their fight against sexism through physical force or
violence, through such situations Walker is able to give vent to the physical resistance of women suffering under sexism thereby shattering the image of woman as one of passivity.

At the same time the image of woman as being physically weaker than man helps to perpetuate man’s domination. In The Third Life of Grange Copeland Walker shows how Browning effectively uses marriage and childbearing to keep his wife subservient to him: “He held himself back and, even when... still making babies, he planned ahead. Planting a seed to grow that would bring her down in weakness and dependence and to her ultimate destruction (Copeland 103). Mem who is not aware of his evil design succumbs to his plan. Making a study of what Shulemith Firestone described as “biological family” Hester Eisenstein concludes: “Only with the abolition of woman’s physical and psychological responsibility for the reproduction of the species could women’s liberation be accomplished” (Contemporary Feminist Thought 17). But Margaret Mead argues that women can achieve superiority by sublimating their traditional roles:

We may equally find that women, through the learning involved in maternity which once experienced can be taught more easily to all women, even childless women, than to men, have a special superiority in those human sciences which involve that type of understanding which until it is
analyzed is called intuition. (Women, the Family, and Freedom 431)

Myrna in "Really, Doesn't Crime Pay?" wants to liberate herself from the traditional role of a woman as a wife who stays at home keeping herself attractive for her husband and begetting his babies. While her husband Ruel wants her to play this role, Myrna's wish is to express her creativity through writing stories. And she avoids childbearing by taking pills without her husband's knowledge. Meridian gives her son away for adoption in order to liberate herself and Celie as well grows as a woman without the encumbrance of children since her children are removed from her. Rejection of the domesticity of woman and the flowering of "agwu" or the personal spirit of woman underlie the path of women from bondage to freedom. In the fight against sexism, women have to shed their dependence on man sexually, economically and spiritually. Celie's liberation starts with her sexual awareness that draws her away from man to woman, from her husband Albert to her mentor Shug. In The Temple of My Familiar Fanny's sexuality dies when she begins to understand man's oppression of women. Celie, as well, has a similar experience. Celie's description of how she feels when Albert makes love to her makes Shug exclaim: "You make it sound like he going to the toilet on you" (The Color Purple 81). According to Shug Celie is still a virgin.
Celie becomes sexually alive through her lesbian relationship with Shug. Commenting on Stephen Gordon in Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness*, Zimmerman says: “Life with a woman restores the wholeness she had lost by trying to live a so-called normal life with a man” *The Safe Sea of Women* 42-43). In the company of Shug Celie attains wholeness which she missed in her life with Albert. Fanny’s sexuality gets revived when she learns from the women in her “consciousness-raising group” (*The Temple of My Familiar* 386) how to masturbate. It brings her sexual freedom from man: “Suddenly she’d found herself free. Sexually free, for the first time in her life” (386).

The sexual freedom that comes through masturbation is symbolically conveyed in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* through the statuette of a small smiling girl with one hand on her genitals. Speaking about the statuette M’ Lissa who is a *tsunga* (circumciser) says: “But it seemed too powerful for me to ever again compare to myself. And so, I never again touched myself. If I had, then at least I would have known the experience that the work of the *tsunga* was trying to prevent” (*Possessing the Secret of Joy* 205).

It is the patriarchal society that makes the *tsunga* desex women in order to deny them sexual freedom. Pointing out Walker’s reference to Barker-Benfield’s *The Horrors of the Half-Known Life: Male Attitudes Towards Women and Sexuality in Nineteenth Century America* Stephen
Souris comments: “Barker-Benfield’s book is a fascinating account of how women were systematically deprived of control over their reproductive organs and how they became the victims of male manipulation and dominance” (College Language Association Journal 40:4 (June 1997) 426). Tashi who is executed on the charge of murdering M’ Lissa the tsunga tells Olivia that she did not kill M’ Lissa and further says: “It is for not killing her — in the name of the suffering she caused — that I am guilty.... Because women are cowards” (Possessing the Secret of Joy 239). So Walker’s message is clear. Women have to rise up in courage against the attempt of the patriarchal world to desex them making them lose this sexual freedom and thereby perpetuating male domination.

The traditional opinion of woman’s place being at home as opposed to that of man which lies out of domestic spheres repeatedly comes under attack in Walker’s works. While Walker points out the tragic consequence for women in meekly accepting the traditional role in the lives of women like Mrs. Jerome and Roselily, at the same time pictures in the progress of her characters like Celie, Meridian and Shug the triumphant woman who, breaking the traditional barriers, enters the so-called man’s domain of social and cultural activity Bettie Friedan asks: “Love and children and home are good, but they are not the whole world.... Why should women accept this picture of a half-life, instead of a share in the whole of human destiny?” (The Feminine Mystique 67).
Accepting the challenge Meridian leaves home and child to work for the black community. And Celie gets freed from home, husband and children to shape her own destiny. Giving up the gentle image of a housewife and a mother, and taking part in activities outside home, women liberate themselves from the tyranny of sexism, and tend to live a whole life.

The writing of letters by Celie, Myrna’s preference for writing stories to the role of a housewife and mother, Meridian’s devotion to the black community’s cause and tradition and Shug’s singing all mark the spiritual quest of these characters and how they cater to it. They are all spiritually alive and independent thereby being able to overthrow the harmful effects of sexism. They have a vision to work for and a goal to arrive at, and the journey itself becomes life-giving and meaningful. Albert can keep Celie down physically but not her spirit which she pours out in her letters. It helps her put up with her sufferings, grow up and ultimately liberate herself. Linda Abbandonato writes:

Trapped in a grindlock of racist, sexist, and heterosexist oppressions, Celie struggles toward linguistic self-definition .... Celie’s struggle to create a self through language, to break free from the network of class, racial, sexual and gender ideologies to which she is subjected, represents the
woman's story in an innovative way. Critical Perspectives 297)

In "The Lover" Walker presents a successful and happy woman free from sexist oppression. Instead she has a loving husband and a doting lover. This woman does not give up the traditional role of a housewife and a mother which is at the same time not the prime motive force in her life. Her husband wanted a child and she gave him one (one only) because she liked and admired him. Being a poet now she is now in an artists' colony where she has an affair with Ellis who writes novels and poems. In spite of such preoccupations she flies home where she spends two days. She does not give up her feelings for "her husband although she has a lover in Ellis. After spending an evening with Ellis, she dreams of her husband making love to her on the kitchen floor at home" (You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down 39). Her relationship with men is very pleasant to her as she has the love of both her husband and lover at the same time. Her relationship with the two men is just the opposite of Myrna’s relationship with her husband Ruel and lover Mordecai in In Love and Trouble. Ruel prohibits the writing of stories by Myrna and Mordecai exploits Myrna’s creativity for his own interest. He gets her story published with his name as its author.

On the contrary the husband in "The Lover" shows "the utmost understanding and respect" (You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down 31)
for his wife’s work as a poet. At the colony she accomplishes her job of completing a book of poems with jazz arrangements whereas the work of her lover suffers. Thus it is the woman and not the man who gains in their relationship. Behind such a picture of a successful and happy woman, there is the importance of her work that dominates the story. She is at one with her work: “It was as if she worked only for herself, for her own enjoyment (or salvation) and was — whether working or simply thinking of working — calm abut it” (35).

It is significant that Walker uses the word ‘salvation’ because it denotes the importance that Walker attaches to work in woman’s life. Obviously, it marks her spiritual quest. Bell Hooks points out in “Reading and Resistance: The Color Purple” how spiritual quest helps the characters in The Color Purple to become fully self-realized. When there is self-realization in woman there is her freedom from man and his oppression.

For the black man, the humiliation and sufferings he has to put up with at the hands of the white majority is no excuse for him to vent his bitter feelings on his hapless wife. Grange Copeland makes this clear to his son Brownfield. When Brownfield agrees with Josie’s statement that the whites are “the cause for all the dirt we have to swallow” (Copeland 207), Grange points out “the danger of putting all
the blame on somebody else for the mess you make out of your life" (207) and asks significantly: "We got our own souls, don't we?" (207).

Walker is straightforward and daring in exposing the sexist treatment meted out to the black women at home and for this she incurs the wrath of many men of her community. As already pointed out, Trudier Harris goes to the extent of saying that The Color Purple serves the purpose of the white racist in validating his ideas about the black community. Walker writes:

"Of all the accusations, it was hardest to tolerate the charge that I hated black men" (The Same River Twice 6). After giving a list of the names of the black men who are close to her in spirit because of the qualities of the black male spirit they have — fierce emotions, tender heart and love of freedom — she firmly rejects the black sexist male:

I was not guided or accompanied by the spirit of black men who embarrass and oppress us, or by those of assorted “gangsta” rappers for whom the humiliation and subjugation of woman is the preferred expression of masculinity: I feel no regret for this. (The Same River Twice 7)

Walker who does not flinch in exposing sexism in the black community, dramatizes and reveals the inhuman nature of racism as well in her works. Many of her women resist it in one form or another. In
The Color Purple Sofia refuses to accept the black woman's role of being a maid to the white woman and has to face torturous consequences. Offended by Sofia's haughty refusal to be his wife's maid, the Mayor slaps her. Sofia who knocks him down is beaten by the police and put in jail. In Sofia's case is seen the effect of racism as pointed out by Betty Ann Bergland: "Isolating and alienating people, racism produces much of the societal violence directed at individuals and groups" (The Oxford Companion to Women's Writing in the United States 735). Celie describes how brutally Sofia has been attacked:

They crack her skull, they crack her ribs. They tear her nose loose on one side. They blind her in one eye. She swolled from head to foot. Her tongue the size of my arm, it stick out tween her teef like a piece of rubber. She can't talk. And she just about the colour of a eggplant. (The Color Purple 91-92)

Such a situation arises due to the basic nature of racism. Whitney M. Young, Jr. says: "Racism is the assumption of superiority and the arrogance that goes with it" (Beyond Racism 73). It is with such an assumption that Mrs. Millie, the Mayor's wife, asks Sofia to play the stereotype role of mammy in her house. Sophia's "hell no" to that offer brings her a violent reprisal from the white power.
Religion which is supposed to counter racism does in fact serve to perpetuate it as in the case of the old black woman in “The Welcome Table” who is thrown out of the white church. The white women in the church look at her with contempt and make their men throw her out. Outside the church she meets Jesus to whom she complains in words which reveal the racial barrier between the whites and the blacks: “Finally she started telling him about how many years she had cooked for them, cleaned for them, nursed them.... She told him indignantly about how they had grabbed her... and how they had tossed her out of his church” (In Love and Trouble 85-86).

What she has done for them is not as relevant as the colour of her skin that prevents her from being allowed to join them in praying to God. Barbara Christian writes that the old woman “exposes the tradition of black and white familial ties as nothing more than form” Contemporary Literary Criticism 103: 362). Daringly she breaks a Southern convention and as a consequence suffers the humiliation of being thrown out, but spiritually triumphs in seeking and walking with Jesus. While the white congregation tries to find God within the framework of the white Southern conventions, the old black woman tries and succeeds in finding Him outside the convention which she breaks.

Repeatedly in many of her stories Walker presents in one way or another the need for black women to break conventions in order to be free
and whole. The reward of their endeavour varies according to the level of their success in this regard. Thus Celie in *The Color Purple* presents herself as an ideal model. Both Mrs. Kemhuff and the old woman in “The Welcome Table” have to give up their lives in this struggle whereas Celie triumphs physically, mentally and spiritually, and lives in enjoy the fruits of her labour.

In “The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff” Walker depicts the sufferings of a black woman and her family during the Depression when the government gave food stamps to starving people to supply them with fat, corn meal and red beans. There are two lines of people at the counter—one whites and the other blacks. And Mrs. Hannah Kemhuff speaks about bacon and grits being given in addition to meal to the whites.

Besides these racial discriminations what is more painful is the ruin of a poor black family brought about by the callous and indifferent treatment meted out to them by the white woman Mrs. Holley at the counter where the food articles are supplied. Seeing them well-dressed she refuses to give them any of the articles. The subservient living of the blacks gets revealed when Walker writes that the dresses which Mrs. Hannah Kemhuff and her children were wearing were given to her sister by the whites for whom she was working. Owing to the callousness of the white woman, Mrs. Hannah Kemhuff loses her husband who deserts the family, her children die and she becomes ill and dies. This story is based
on an experience of Walker’s mother during the Depression in which she was rebuffed by a white woman while she was trying to get government food. Anne Z. Michelson comments that this story “evokes the relations between the races” (Reaching Out: Sensitivity and Order in Recent American Fiction by Women 157).

To the People in general Mrs. Holley is a “pillar of the community and her church” (In Love and Trouble 79) having concern for the poor and needy. She takes interest in the poor coloured children during Christmastime and employs in her farm people in need. And she has negro friends. According to Tante Rosie, Mrs. Holley has earned the reputation of being “an example of Christian Charity and a beacon force of brotherly love” (78). This ironic praise is a part of the subtle narrative that penetrates Mrs. Holley’s social mask and reveals what her real attitude towards the blacks is.

Mrs. Kemhuff succeeds in taking revenge on her enemy Mrs. Holley with the help of Tante Rose and her “nigger magic,” black witchcraft. Kashinath Raveer says that the story illustrates the inter-dependence of black people, especially the black women who are doubly victimized:

“The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff” and “Strong Horse Tea” illustrate Walker’s idea that black people, like Maggie and her mother, must depend on each other. They should create
their black sisterhood for mutual survival. (Black Feminist Consciousness 162)

The coming together of black women is made intimate and strong in The Color Purple in which Celie and Shug strike up a firm lesbian relationship that is beneficial to both. In another respect as well The Color Purple shows Walker as a more mature artist than in “The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff.” Celie’s response to the illtreatment meted out to her by her husband Albert is positive and constructive. She becomes a woman of better awareness, and she realizes, identifies and defines her self, thereby becoming self-sufficient in body, mind and spirit. She turns to be a successful entrepreneur with people under her employment. On the contrary, Mrs. Kemhuff’s response takes the form of bitter revenge resulting in the downfall and death of her enemy, and even this is achieved only after the death of Mrs. Kemhuff herself. Thus it is a long way from “The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff” to The Color Purple that Walker has taken to blossom into a great artist.”

Mrs. Holly reveals through her words and actions the lack of respect in her for the blacks and their lives. She contemnptuously speaks of ‘nigger magic’. She is able to recall the faces of black people only through the colour of their skin — how black they are. She does not recognize the separate identities of black individuals whose finer sentiments and individual needs go unheeded by her resulting in her
callousness. So with scant thought she dismisses Mrs. Hannah’s request for food thereby ruining a black family. Similarly, though she calls Caroline, a young black girl, her friend, she uses the word ‘nigger’ contemptuously when Caroline is with her thereby revealing her insensitivity to the feelings of both Caroline and Tante Rosie as well as her condescending attitude to the blacks.

How strong a hold that racist feelings, which are cruel and destructive, have on people, both the whites and the blacks, is brought out in two painful situations—one in The Third Life of Grange Copeland and the other in In Love and Trouble. In the Central Park in New York where Grange is begging, a white woman prefers to get drowned in a pond rather than be saved by a black man. She “grabbed his hand but let go when she felt it was his hand” (Copeland 152). It is racial hatred on the part of both that results in the pregnant woman’s death. Grange too is not free from blame because although he could have saved her, he did not do so due to her contempt for him. About this incident Robert James Butler comments: “... his withdrawal of human sympathy from people is a clear index of how Grange has been emotionally damaged by the racist society in which he lives” (Contemporary Literary Criticism 103: 417).

In “The Child Who Favored Daughter” the man recollects with pain how he suffered in spirit when his sister fell in love with the white man
for whom he worked. Barbara Christian comments on what it means to the black man: “In committing the most damnable act for a black woman, falling in love with a white man, the Child who favored Daughter sorely touches the vulnerability of the black man who has felt the whips of racism” (359).

Walker shows how explosive interracial love affairs are in the black community in the poem “Ballad of the Brown Girl”:

the next morning
her slender
neck broken
her note short
and of cryptic
collegiate
make —

Just

“Question —
did ever brown
daughter to black
father a white
baby
take—? (Once 73)
Racial feelings and sufferings affect familial relationship deeply: “He ... cried many nights on his bed, for she had chosen to give her love to the very man in whose cruel, hot, and lonely fields he, her brother worked. Not treated as man, scarcely as well as a poor man treats his beast” (In Love and Trouble 38). With such a treatment meted out by the white man it is not surprising that the family members consider the girl’s act as a ‘betrayal’ and so treats her cruelly tying her on the bed and flinging her food to her. Finally she escapes only to be found impaled on a steel-spike fence post near her house.

A black woman’s love for a white man thus brings immense sufferings to herself as well as to her family. In the story the situation gets repeated with the man’s daughter like his sister being in love with a white man prompting her father to call her contemptuously “white man’s slut!” (41). The intimate father-daughter relationship ends in a horrible manner because of the deep-rooted bitterness and hatred which govern the relationship between the whites and the blacks. In fury and agony he cuts off her breasts and throws them to dogs. But it is pathetic to watch him later sitting in his chair and facing the road with the school bus.
coming along without his daughter. Barbara Christian points out how both racism and sexism work in consort against the black girl in this story:

"The Child Who Favored Daughter" lyrically analyzes two constraints of convention which, when fused, are uniquely opposed to the growth of black woman. For it merges the impact of racism, not only on society but on the person, with the threat woman's sexuality represents to patriarchal man.

(Contemporary Literary Criticism 103: 361)

The black woman has to resist and liberate herself from such opposing forces in order to live freely and fully. Sophia's violent reaction to racist tendencies lands herself in much physical and mental suffering with her health affected and freedom curtailed being put in prison. As pointed out by Linda Seizer "Sophia's dramatic public battles with white men" (African American Review 29: 1 (Spring 1995), 73) serve to dramatize issues of race and colour. But the futility of violent opposition to racism becomes clear soon with Sophia agreeing to be Miss Mille's maid in order to save herself from being in prison.

Resorting to violence in combating racism is an issue that very much troubles Meridian who devotes her life for the black cause. While discussing with Truman the subject of killing for the sake of revolution Meridian answers Truman's question whether she would kill others for a
just cause: “Never alone.... Besides revolution would not begin, do you think, with an act of murder — wars might begin in that way — but with teaching [Meridian 192]. Making the blacks become aware of the power of their votes is a part of her method of carrying on the revolution against racism. Greil Marcus sums up Meridian’s contribution to the revolution:

Back in the South after the meeting in New York, she works alone persuading people, one at a time, to register to vote, organizing neighbourhoods around local issues, and staging symbolic protests, which she calls, wonderfully, her “performances”. (Critical Perspectives 14)

At the same time Greil Marcus points out that Meridian does not resolve her dilemma about killing others for a just cause and instead arrives at only a “final ambiguity” (15) the resolution of which is passed on to the novel’s other characters and “perhaps to the reader as well” (15).

At the church ceremony in memory of a slain black young man active in the revolution, the sight of the dead man’s father is pathetic. After his son’s murder he is insane half the time. With his wife and other children already dead, he feels his life empty and does not allow anybody to be close to him. Instead he lives alone with “his memories and ghosts” (Meridian 201). At the church it is pathetic to watch him stand red-eyed, lost in his memories and confusion, and utter the words “My son died” (202). And Meridian makes a promise: “… she made a promise to the red-
-eyed man herself: that yes, indeed she would kill, before she allowed anybody to murder his son again" (204).

But this promise does not remain constant. She realizes that she does not belong to that category of revolutionaries who resort to killing for the sake of revolution. Instead she expresses her resolve to help in preserving the rich cultural heritage of the blacks which may get obscured by revolution and bloodshed. She will sing for the revolutionaries songs from memory and help them preserve their souls. Greil Marcus comments: "If the question of murder is a question of knowledge, and if experience is knowledge, then inherent in Meridian's genealogy and in the legends to which she has attached herself is a knowledge she cannot match" [Critical Perspectives, 13].

Meridian realizes that the musical tradition of the black people is of much value in the preservation of their soul especially when they undergo change as seen in the church she visits. She remembers the melody of the song sung there but not its words which are new. Prayer now means work for the black community. Martial music — "death-defying music" (Meridian 199) fills the church. The preacher talks about the black community and not about God: "God was not mentioned, except as a reference" (200).

The "ah-mens" are uttered in a firm tone of protest and not of resignation or despair. On the stained-glass window there is no longer
the picture of Christ with a lamb but that of the blues singer B.B. King with a guitar in one hand and a sword dripping with blood in the other. It is a militant Church accepting the idea of killing in retaliation without giving up its traditional piety “communal spirit, togetherness, righteous convergence” (204). As Vernessa C. White points out “The concept of revolution does not imply denial of the past.... Walker emphasizes the past to stress that revolution is indeed an evolutionary process that is built upon the incidents of the past” (Afro-American and East German Fiction 108-109).

At the same time the church is subjected to change in the light of the revolution. In the words of Deborah E. McDowell Meridian reexamines “the function of the black church in the social and political struggle” (Critical Perspectives 169). Through Meridian Walker achieves a remarkable reconciliation of opposing values — religious piety with its traditional music and togetherness, and the black revolution with its militancy and determination to strike back. Arunima Ray writes:

... Meridian rediscovers the power of the black past, accepts it and draws strength from its vital traditions, most notably the symbiotic musical and religious traditions. Concomitant with the rediscovery of the black musical tradition is her rediscovery of its counterpart — the black church. (Indian Journal of American Studies 23: 2 (Sum. 1993) 64)
Walker’s concern for the spirit and soul of the race which may be ignored in the violent struggle for racial protection is seen in the following words: “Only in a church surrounded by the righteous guardians of the people’s memories could she ever approach the concept of retaliatory murder. Only among the pious could this idea both comfort and uplift” Meridian 205).

This reconciliation of the contending forces is symbolically conveyed through the picture on the stained-glass window in the church — the picture of a singer with a guitar in one hand and a sword dripping with blood in the other. The chapter “Camara” in Meridian makes it clear that the militant struggle of the blacks with their resolve to kill in order to defend themselves should not be allowed to wipe away the traditional respect of the spirit and the soul which get conveyed through traditional music and song. Meridian thinks:

... perhaps it will be my part to walk behind the real revolutionaries — those who know they must spill blood in order to help the poor and the black and therefore go right ahead — and when they stop to wash off the blood and find their throats too choked with the smell of murdered flesh to sing, I will come forward and sing from memory songs they will need once more to hear. (Meridian 205)
Thus defining her role in the fight against racism, Meridian points out the inability on the part of the revolutionaries to sing which marks a grave threat to the soul of the black community: “For it is the song of the people, transformed by the experience of each generation, that holds them together, and if any part of it is lost the people suffer and are without soul” (205-206).

Meridian is more concerned about the soul than about the body of her people and she fears that her people’s soul may get crushed in their violent reaction against racism. Realizing the inherent antagonism between killing and preservation of the soul, Meridian chooses the latter for herself while at the same time resolving to help prevent the revolutionaries who kill from losing their soul. The remarkable aspect of Meridian’s thoughts is her concern for her people’s soul that should not become a victim of racial hatred and violence. Michael Cooke in this connection, writes:

The lodestar and balancing agent of Meridian is “peace,” not in the usage concurrent with the later stages of the Civil Rights Movement, but in the sense of composure of spirit in an honorable reconciliation to the environment. Critical Perspectives 151-152)

And Meridian finds that the tool most suited for her to use as a woman in this endeavour is the rich cultural heritage of her people. A
woman who breaks tradition and liberates herself from the oppressive norms of a sexist and racist society needs, as pointed out by Deborah E. McDowell, "an alternate value system" (174) in order to save herself from "existential alienation" (174). The system that Walker prefers is that found in the cultural heritage of the blacks as exemplified in the life of the black community in the South. Asserting this Walker writes: "No one could wish for a more advantageous heritage than that bequeathed to the black writer in the South: a compassion for the earth, a trust in humanity beyond our knowledge of evil, and an abiding love of justice" (Gardens 21). It is such a heritage that Meridian, the liberated woman, reveals in her life. Her love of justice turns her into a crusader fighting for the oppressed, suffering and ignorant black people. At the same time the evil she confronts does not blunt her love for and trust in humanity.

A very remarkable woman who does not give in to the inhumanities, pain and sufferings brought about by racism and slavery, but fights these social evils not through violent protests but creative art that soothes and heals is the great-grandmother of Mrs. Hill, Meridian's mother, who paints decorations on barns and thereby earns money with which she buys freedom for herself, her husband and her children. She becomes famous and throughout the state barns bloom with the figures painted by her. But the money and fame do not blind her to the hard and bitter experience that she and other blacks have to go through. What lies at the core of her heart gets revealed in the form of "a small contorted
face" (Meridian 121) that is somehow drawn in each of her paintings. It is her trademark.

Being an artist she is able to translate the sufferings of innumerable slaves like her into art, and a situation that can give rise to bitterness, hatred, and violence in many a black person, instead, is turned to advantage by her by bringing in creativity that does not ignore the inherent evil in the situation but highlights its inhumanity pointedly and effectively. Thus this woman artist is very much like her creator Alice Walker who gives expression to her creativity never forgetting the underlying feelings, passions and visions of a people who have undergone intense suffering.

"The Welcome Table" which is dedicated to the gospel singer Clara Ward exemplifies the spirit of looking upto Jesus in the midst of racial suffering and humiliation, and trying to overcome the existent evil of racism with His help. The old woman is true to the spiritual with which the story begins:

I'm going to sit at the welcome table
Shout my troubles over
Walk and talk with Jesus
Tell God how you treat me
One of these days!
(In Love and Trouble 81)
She tells God how she is treated and God’s response is true to type. He looks at her kindly and gives her “one of his beautiful smiles” (86). She is happy walking with Jesus along the highway but she falls dead along the road. The old woman places her trust in God and finds deliverance from the unpleasant effects of the social evil of segregation in spirit while bodily she dies.

On the other hand Irene and Anastasia in “Source sit in a desegregated bar in Alaska drinking and talking. They enjoy their rights with the removal of segregation in this physical world, which the old woman in In Love and Trouble fails to achieve. Anastasia’s father is one “whose intense inner turmoil and heaviness of spirit caused an instant recoiling” (You Can’t Keep a Good Woman Down 148) But he writes about God’s love, grace and forgiveness, and appreciates his daughter’s recourse to “the path of obedience” (148). This prompts Irene to think of religious hypocrisy: “Obedience... Peace Everlasting! Holy shit! (148).

Walker is critical of the hypocrisy in religion as practised by the whites and it is this religious deception that dominates “The Welcome Table.” According to Walker in “The Diary of an African Nun” Christianity is dealt with as “an imperialist tool used against Africa” Gardens 266]. In the struggle against both racism and sexism Walker’s successful women like Meridian, Celie and Shug question the image of God as being white and male. On the other hand the old woman in “The Welcome
Table" accepts and meets Jesus who, except for the absence of a sheep in his arms, looks exactly like the picture of him she has taken from the Bible of a white lady she was working for. And her struggle against racism ends in her death. As pointed out by Anne Z. Mickelson she strikes the reader as “one of the old, lonely ones whom society has forgotten” (Reaching Out 157). The institution of religion fails to counter racism successfully because in fact it is made to serve the perpetuation of racism.

Contrary to Celie’s response to sexism or that of Meridian, Hannah Kemhuff’s reaction against the injustice meted out to her through Mrs Holley is negative and destructive resulting in her own downfall and that of Mrs. Holley. She says: “I do not care to be cured... I can survive as long as I need with the bitterness that has laid everyday in my soul” (In Love and Trouble 67). While Celie and Meridian realize and develop their selves thereby fortifying themselves and face the evils of sexism and racism directly and boldly, Hannah Kemhuff on the other hand takes recourse to hatred, ill-will and revenge. Wendy S. Proffitt points out in her thesis the importance that Walker gives to the overcoming of hatred and the introduction of love in human relationships:

She wants to demonstrate that Celie needed to bond with a woman in order to overcome hatred of men and their dominance. Until Celie learns what love is (and this love is
not necessarily referring to sex), she cannot overcome her low self-image and look at the world and herself objectively. ("The Universality of Their Women: Morrison, Walker and Naylor" 53)

Walker points out the harmful nature of hatred in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* wherein Grange is told that "Hatred is bad for a man's mind" (Copeland 155). Hannah Kemhuff seeks revenge as the title itself suggests, and it is fulfilled only after her death.

Meridian enters a larger sphere of political activity — the fight for the cause of black Americans. Maria Lauret says that in *Meridian* Walker "presents the story of a young black woman's progress from an utterly marginal and pathological existence to political and personal agency. *Meridian* takes the politics of Civil Rights as one of its central themes" (Liberating Literature: Feminist Fiction in America 124).

Meridian goes from house to house with Truman asking the black Americans to register to vote and in the process gains a deeper insight into the lives of blacks which are at times highly disturbing as in the case of the man who finds his livelihood in selling newspapers gathered from garbage cans and trash heaps for use in fireplaces. He lives in a house that freezes in winter and is full of flies in spring; he cannot afford good medical treatment to his dying wife or even shoes for his boy. This man who is in economic distress and is blinded by his suffering to other
things which may lead to his deliverance is helped by Meridian to come out of his ignorance by means of her action of trying to lessen the pain that hurts him most — the pain of poverty. Instead of arguing with him on the utility of votes, Meridian goes out and returns with two bags of food. Soon the man comes and writes his name for registering to vote. Thus one finds in Meridian both devotion to the immediate cause she works for and the underlying love for her people who motivate her.

Through Meridian’s career Walker brings out two facts concerning women and black people in America. One is that a woman takes a political role usually taken by men, and shows to the world how a woman can be effective in this role as well as realize her identity and purpose in life, which makes her a whole woman. The other is that as Meridian goes along with Truman seeking black people to register for voting, the lives of the people get revealed and a picture of the blacks in America evolves with a political activist like Meridian leading them towards liberation.

Maria Lauret comments:

... the story of Meridian, who saves herself from suicide by becoming politically involved, entails the story of how Civil Rights engendered Black self-affirmation and later the Woman’s Movement — the two constitutive elements of a gendered Black Consciousness which Walker has termed
Thus it becomes clear that Walker’s concern about black womanhood includes the consciousness of the well-being of the whole black community. It is precisely a sort of a pilgrimage that Meridian undertakes taking Truman along with her and meeting alienated blacks sick in body and mind. In this pilgrimage she discovers that while economic depravation is one of the factors responsible for the woes of blacks, isolation with the consequent ignorance and retrogression is another. The two old lonely sisters Miss Margaret Treasure and Miss Lucille Treasure live in isolation without seeing any one else for years. Filled with guilt over the affair she had with one of the painters who had come to paint her house, Miss Margaret is so confused as to believe that she has become pregnant. In fact she is seventy-two or sixty-nine (according to her sister she is seventy-two) years old. While to Truman it brings laughter, in Meridian the response is different: “He glanced at her expecting to see a face fighting to control itself, but there was only a slight blush already fading into her brown skin” (Meridian 214).

Meridian’s concern for the old woman makes her empathetic. She does not remain an outsider offering help but becomes a partner in the old woman’s sufferings, which she shares. Meridian has a similar experience when she and Truman go to a prison and meet the girl who