"SUSPENDED" WOMEN

Edging into life from the back door. Becoming. Everybody in the world was in a position to give them orders. White women said, "Do this." White children said, "Give me that." White men said, "Come here." Black men said, "Lay down."

- Toni Morrison

The women characters in The Third Life of Grange Copeland, Meridian, The Colour Purple and a few stories from In Love and Trouble are discussed here. All these characters are in dark enclosures and narrow spaces. Some of them manage to move further awakened by a powerful political force.

Walker's first novel The Third Life of Grange Copeland (1970) is about a black sharecropper who is enslaved by circumstances and eternal debt. He breaks free of the destructive cycle at the point where he would have slain his wife, who has betrayed him with the white landowner. Instead, he abandons her and his son, Brownfield, and heads north. Consumed with hatred for Grange, Brownfield nevertheless echoes his father's sins in more sinister harmonic; he destroys his wife's intellect, batters her and their three daughters and eventually kills her. The youngest daughter, Ruth, is taken in by Grange, now returned and transformed by
time and experience into a wise and saintly old man. He
nurtures and protects Ruth, in the end to the point of
killing his own son and sacrificing his own life.

The Third Life of Grange Copeland opens in 1920 and
ends around 1960, after the civil rights movement is well
under way. It exposes the devastating consequences of the
racist practices of the twenties and thirties on the lives
of rural Southern blacks and traces the beginnings of the
struggle against such practices. It also strikes a balance
between Walker's interest in exploring racism in the South
and her interest in exploring male insensitivity in black
male-female relationships. W. Lawrence Hogue has summarised
one view of this period that corresponds with Walker's
selection, transformation, and arrangement of historical
fact:

The American social structure turns the black man
into a beast - suppressing his human qualities and
accenting his animal tendencies. The black man, in
turn, reflects his violent relation with his white
land owner in his relations with his wife and son.
He takes his anger and frustration out, not on the
social system or the people who exercise its power
but on his children and the black woman, who, as he
does in the master-servant relation, remains loyal
and submissive.

(Hogue 1986, 49-50)

Though the title of the novel suggests that it revolves
around Grange Copeland, the no-good scoundrel who turns good
in the end, it is the pain and suffering of the female characters - Margaret, Mem, Josie and Mamie Lou Banks - that dominate the stage even after the curtain is drawn.

With more compassion for her female than male characters, with the exception of Grange as an old man, the omniscient author-narrator catalogues episodes in the Copeland family life, especially Brownfield's, to arouse the readers' indignation at the price black women pay as the victims of economic, racial, and sexual exploitation. Margaret Copeland, Brownfield's mother, was like a family dog in some ways: "She didn't have a thing to say that did not in some way show her submission to his father" (TLGC: 5). Grange drives her to drink, degradation, and death. She is one of those black women who are submissive and loyal because they have such limited control over their own lives. Dependent on their husbands, such women lose respect for themselves and their husbands. Their marriage is a mutual trap, for in order to support his family, Grange must face a lifetime of slavery as a sharecropper. And as a sharecropper's wife, she must do the same.

Their life follows a kind of cycle that depends almost totally on Grange's moods. During the course of a week, Grange terrorizes his family through periods of, respectively, moroseness, quietness, frustrated mumbling,
dreaming, accusation, restlessness, drunkenness, and repentance.

When Grange starts visiting Josie, the other woman, Margaret also starts to follow Grange down the same road. Soon she starts arriving home the next morning in the same truck that carries the white man (Mr. Shipley) who turns Grange to stone. Having refused to "sell herself," Margaret now chooses to give herself freely to the man who drives the truck or to any one else. The "comforting odors of cooking, and soap and milk" Brownfield once associated with his mother "when he had loved her" have been replaced in Margaret's new life by her "new painted good looks and new fragrance of beds, of store-bought perfume and of gin" (TLGC: 16). Her new life produces a new son, Star, and as Brownfield recognizes, "From its odd coloration its father might have been every one of its mother's many lovers" (TLGC: 19).

Margaret's reasons for adultery are not simple. There are her own desires to be considered, of course. But Walker hints at another reason which complicates Margaret's motivation: her sexual liaison with Shipley may be in partial payment of Grange's debt. The fact Grange does not seem to mind indicates his helplessness, his indifference, or even his collusion. Only when Margaret bears evidence in the person of the odd-coloured baby, Star, does Grange show any
resentment by deserting her. Guilty and unable to cope up with life without Grange, Margaret poisons Star and then herself, exhibiting in death her repentance by separating herself from her baby. Margaret's murder and suicide go beyond attesting to her misery and guilt; her suicide might be seen as a final act of rebellion since it is such a rarity among black women, especially during Margaret's life time (Hendon 1969, Appendix I).

But Trudier Harris argues that "Margaret's murder and suicide are not defiance; they are a bow of defeat, a resignation to the forces outside. She is destroyed by forces that have dissolved her family" (Harris 1975, 246). Margaret's inability to find a coping mechanism to give her life order and meaning makes suicide an inevitable choice. When one looks closely at Margaret, one sees a struggling and complex woman, often fighting with Grange over his treatment of her and ultimately rebelling by taking other men, then finally taking her own life. Although she has not been dominant in life, Margaret's death influences her husband and son. Grange, when he later comes to understand the role he plays in Margaret's death, thinks of her as saintly. Brownfield's feelings, however, go beyond hatred to indifference. Walker's poignant and poetic epitaph for Margaret Copeland captures the oppression of black women in the rural South who were slaves of black men who were
themselves slaves: "married not into ecstasy but into dread. Not into freedom, but into bondage; not into perpetual love, but into deepening despair" (TLGC: 176).

Brownfield chooses a wife, much like his memories of his mother before she became a wild woman. Mem (Josie's educated niece and ward) is a school teacher, "plump and quiet, with demure slant eyes." She is a "talking proper... walking proper" (TLGC: 44) lady whose character is reflected in her appearance. Brownfield describes her as "some one to be loved and spoken to softly, some one never to frighten with his rough, coarse ways" (TLGC: 45). In the beginning of their relationship she tries to teach Brownfield how to read; he feels she can help him to rise above his ignorance. At first she is for him a lady, "the pinnacle of his achievement in extricating himself from evil and the devil and aligning himself with love" (TLGC: 49).

Like all too many men, Walker implies, Brownfield has two missions for a woman in his life. He wants her to be his wife, loving him physically, and his mother, caring for him as if he were a child. Walker writes, "He thought of [Mem] as of another mother" (TLGC: 45). It is difficult to understand why Mem decides to marry Brownfield, an illiterate man whose character, she knows, has been jeopardised.
For three years they enjoy a relationship of physical joy, surpassing in intensity and passion the love making Brownfield had known with Josie, his mistress. Mem, like Josie, is a "devouring cat", but she has no claws and no sly intentions.

Walker tells the readers about their initial happiness, so that the readers can see that Mem and Brownfield were originally passionate and hopeful. But in the small Georgia town where black men's dreams are shattered in the pernicious institution of sharecropping, Brownfield falls victim to the powerlessness and humiliation of a life of "endless sunup and sundown work on fifty acres of cotton" that brings him nothing more than "two diseased goats for winter meat, some dried potatoes and apples from the boss's cellar, and some cast-off clothes for his children from his boss's family" (TLGC: 53). He gives his own fatal shrug of hopelessness the year he has to teach his five-year-old daughter, Daphne, how to mop the cotton plants with arsenic to kill the boll weevils. His destruction as a man becomes, in time, Mem's suffering as a woman: "he determined... to treat her like a nigger and a whore" (TLGC: 54). The contentment and joy of the earlier married years are replaced by misery, scorn, and contempt.
Initially, Brownfield idealizes Mem. Her education and beauty are, to him, desirable attributes. But these become the self-same attributes that he seeks to destroy by inflicting upon her a desolation that matches his own. So, after several years, their marriage assumes the same predictable pattern of Grange and Margaret's marriage: Saturday night beatings, recovery from hangovers, suspense and tension, followed by another week bearing the characteristics of the preceding one.

The idea of the black man taking out his frustration on the black woman because he dare not risk taking them out on a white person of either gender is not new. Hurston popularized the image of a black woman of an earlier time as "the mule of the world". The image is based on the assumption that the black woman has been the only human creature more helpless than a black man living in a white world. Mem Copeland, however, breaks the mould of the black woman brutalized because of her helplessness. Mem, rather, is the target of Brownfield's abuse because her power, not her lack of it, allies her with Brownfield's white oppressors. The source of her power is her education - an education Brownfield does not have:

His crushed pride, his battered ego, made him drag Mem away from school teaching.... It was his great
ignorance that sent her into white homes as a domestic, his need to bring her down to his level! It was his rage at himself, and his life and his world that made him beat her for an imaginary attraction she aroused in other men, crackers, although she was no party to any of it. His rage could and did blame everything, everything on her.

(WLG: 55)

Walker calls Brownfield Mem's "Pygmalion in reverse" (TLGC: 56). He sets out to break her, starting with her speech, demeaning her and humiliating her in front of his friends until she drops her educated dialect for the old one she shared with them. Her school books become the kindling to start the daily fire in whatever shack he has condemned his wife and his growing family to live. Only once does he go for a midwife when the time comes for one of his children to be born; the other times he is too drunk or it is too cold. Mem becomes haggard and ugly by his beatings.

She is too weak physically to resist his beatings, and she has no refuge to which she can escape. She is caught in a social web without an exit: "She wanted to leave him, but there was no place to go.... From a plump woman she became skinny... even her wonderful breasts dried up and shrank; her hair fell out and the only good thing he could say for her was that she kept herself clean" (TLGC: 58). And yet, there are times in her conversations with herself when her woman's rage desires revenge;
If I was a man, she thought, frowning later, scrubbing the dishes, if I was a man I'd give every man in sight and that I ever met up with a beating, may be even chop up a few with my knife, they so pig-headed and mean.

(TLGC: 84)

Loneliness is a dominant feature of Walker's portrait of Mem, for she is a woman without a past, without fond memories, without life-giving myths, without self-reinforcing stories related by a grandmother, with ties to a warmly hysterical black church that beckons the disconsolate to its bosom, and without neighbours who give advice and lend support. Mary Helen Washington, writing of black women in real life, captures the loneliness of Mem Copeland. Black women have been alone, she writes, "because the damage done to our men has prevented their closeness and protection; and alone because we have had no one to tell us stories ourselves" (Washington 1975, xxii). But it is Toni Morrison's definition of loneliness that is the most incisive caption for Alice Walker's moving portrait of Mem Copeland: "the loneliest woman in the world is a woman without a woman friend" (qtd. in Wade-Gayles, 1984, 111). Grange's wife, Margaret, found her alternative to despair in suicide. Ironically perhaps, she killed herself because she loved Grange so much that she could not live without him and could
not forgive herself the sins of infidelity. Mem goes on living with Brownfield in what Walker terms "a harmony of despair" until she strikes back - once - for the sake of their three children.

In this role as a devoted mother, she is the superhuman woman of strength, endurance, and compassion. Her every goal, every wish, every struggle, is born of her identity as a mother. She cleans cow manure out of sheds to make them "habitable for her children". She fights Brownfield with words, though never with blows, "always for the children". She "slogged alone, ploddingly, like a cow herself", for the sake of her children.

Mem finally takes the initiative and signs a lease on a house in town. This reminder that Brownfield never learned to read and write well enough to sign a lease, together with knowing that Mem has assumed the responsibility of caring for the family, is a blow to his ego. She has got a job and announces that she will take the children to live in town whether he goes or not. His typical response is to laugh at her attempt to better herself and once more to beat her into submission. As Brownfield sleeps off his drunkenness, she wakes him by pushing a loaded gun barrel into his "balls", a symbolic statement that her liberation is sexual in nature. Mem understands what the man has done to Brownfield, but she
also understands, more painfully, what Brownfield has done to himself and his family.

Called to account by a wife who has had enough, Brownfield tearfully but characteristically tries to shift the burden of guilt for all the wrong that he has done onto the white man: "Mem,... you know how hard it is to be a black man down here,... Mem,baby, the white folks just don't nobody feel like doing right.... What can a man do?"..."He can quit wailing like a old seedy jackass!" she said, hitting him over the head with the gun (TLGC: 95).

In her one triumphant moment, as her husband lies on the floor grovelling in his own blood and vomit, Mem delivers her own "Ten Commandments", her rules of conduct for the new home she is going to control. All Brownfield can do is to cower against the door and sob, "yes, ma'am" (TLGC: 97). To that end, she forces Brownfield to assent to her own Ten Commandments at gun point, which she significantly does not aim at either his head or heart, knowing that he regards them as his less important organs.

Her single act of assertion threatens and momentarily destroys Brownfield's straightened sense of manhood; it also becomes to him an act for which Mem must be made to pay. Consequently, despite the fact that they are able to live in a comfortable house with electricity and indoor plumbing for
the first time in their lives, despite the fact that Brownfield is physically and financially better off working at a factory instead of farming, and despite the fact that the family has broken the sharecropping cycle, Brownfield plots Mem's subjugation. Like a bird of prey that bides its time, circling ominously above those who will be its victims, he awaits his triumph. He plants "a seed... that would bring her down in weakness and dependence" (TLGC: 103), the seed of procreation. Two years and two miscarriages later, Mem's health breaks and Brownfield is victorious. His family is forced to leave their house in town when he intentionally neglects to pay rent and utility bills. Like a vulture, in one full swoop descends on her weakened body and returns her to the manure-filled shack, where she becomes, once again a "plodding cow".

In spite of her own destruction, Mem holds fast to her sanity and dignity. For the sake of her children, she works as a domestic and returns home to tend the house and cook. She continues to plant flowers (although she no longer plants them in beds and boxes) and she continues as Brownfield's wife, eventually giving birth to an albino son whom Brownfield murders. He uses this child as an excuse to murder Mem, too, thus slandering her memory even though he knows that she has never been unfaithful to him. Brownfield kills her with the very gun with which she proclaimed her
recent independence. The murder of Mem, by the way, is more than an act of Brownfield's anger; it is, in part, a suicide as well, for Mem, who can see her armed husband on the lighted porch of their house, walks calmly towards his pointed gun:

Mem looked up at the porch and called a greeting. It was a cheerful greeting, although she sounded very tired, tired and out of breath. Brownfield began to curse and came and stood in the steps until Mem got within the circle of light. Then he aimed the gun with drunken accuracy right into her face and fired.

(TLGC: 122)

Mem dies violently as did Margaret, a generation before. Following Mem's death, one daughter becomes a prostitute. Another goes insane. Ruth, the youngest, becomes Grange's child, his way to salvation, his "third life". Like Margaret, "her bloody repose had struck them instantly as a grotesque attitude of profound inevitable rest" (TLGC: 122). The fact that Mem's efforts are not ultimately successful could lead the casual observer to categorize her with Margaret and claim that both were equal losers. Mem, however, brought to her experiences two dimensions of coping that distinguish her from Margaret: a dissatisfaction sufficiently potent to inspire meaningful efforts directed towards improving her lot in life, and a sense of her own responsibility for that improvement. But Mem lacks an
important attribute necessary for effective coping. Her appraisal of the possibilities for success fail to take into account the evil of which Brownfield is capable. Because Mem is not evil, she does not attribute this trait to others, a naivete that clinches her failure. Thus, despite the admirable quality of her perception, she does not succeed because of her failure to anticipate appropriately the risks involved in her chosen course of action. Like the women Walker pays tribute to in "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens", Mem had worked "for a day when the unknown thing" inside her, pushing her to plant flowers and to dreams of different alternatives, "would be made known; but [she] guessed, somehow, in [her] darkness, that on the day of...revelation [she] would be long dead" (MG: 66).

Fat Josie is the one black woman in the book who is neither virginal nor wifely, and who does not depend on a man for her financial needs. In fact, her profession feeds on the despair of the men around her. But although she is economically independent, Josie's life is another example of the way in which the society's definition of woman and man conflict with one another.

Pregnant at sixteen, Josie incurs the wrath of her father and is cast out of the house for the shame she has brought to the family. In an attempt to win back his love,
she uses her body, her only asset, to earn money to buy him gifts. He takes her gifts, sits proudly amid his circle of male friends, and refuses to acknowledge Josie's plea for reconciliation. Walker's presentation of young Josie's fall as a woman is marked by her analysis of the difference between society's view of her lovers, who are encouraged to express their manhood through their sexuality, and its punishment of the woman who succumbs to them. Although the young Josie is expected to attract men through her body, she is also expected to be a virgin. "Like a phoenix who rises from the ashes with unfurled wings, she soars above male control to become the richest and most powerful black person, male or female, in the community," observes Gloria Wade-Gayles (Wade-Gayles 1984, 130). She decides that she will never again be controlled or humiliated by a man. If women are bodies to be used by men for their pleasure and then discarded, so be it, she feels. She intends to make the most of what she is supposed to be. She becomes a prostitute.

Ironically, Josie the whore is also the continuing thread between the various generations of Copelands. As a whore, she is indispensable to the system of sexual and racial conflict within which the frustrated husbands and the anguished wives suffer. She is both Grange and Brownfield's whore, later Grange's wife, and finally Brownfield's co-conspirator. She feels that Margaret has taken Grange away
from her and hates her. Though Mem is her niece Josie is also angry at her for taking Brownfield away from her and feels obligated to wreck his marriage. Years later when she is replaced by Ruth Copeland, her innocent step-granddaughter, in Grange's affections, she plots with Brownfield to have the courts take Ruth from Grange. She is the destructive link between father and son. In her sixties she is bereft of her fortune and aged out of the "bumping and grinding" that had been her livelihood: "Once again she had been used by a man and discarded when his satisfaction was secured" (TLGC: 156). Her father's judgement of her becomes her own: she was "the biggest curse in her life and it was her fate to be an everlasting blunderer into misery" (TLGC: 150).

Thus Josie is always seen in her social ambience, taking into account or reacting to the people surrounding her, profiting or suffering from them. Despite the occasional authorial allegation of innate corruption, Josie remains the most complex female character of the novel, free of the programmatic enhancement of others.

One more character who also contributes to one's understanding of the plight of black women is Mrs. Mamie Lou Banks, a washerwoman. Her life represents a biographical sum of the lives of many black women in the rural South. In her conversation with Brownfield, she unabashedly reveals the
social conditions of her life in which she had many men. She blames the other black women for her plight. Mamie Lou Banks symbolizes the multiplicity of pain that black women inflict on each other. In less than four pages of the text about her Walker provides a condensed vignette of a woman's existence.

This novel is marked throughout by the motif of physical and spiritual murder, by suicide and infanticide, by wife beating and killing, set against a background of the horror of racism in the South. The pervasive pattern of the quilt is kin killing. Margaret and Mem are destroyed when they begin to gather strength or to rebel. As mothers they are more deranged and more pathetically abused. They are victims with the strong black woman image shattered. They are also women who are trapped by the stereotype inflicted on blacks and on women. They believe that if they are faithful, good wives who take care of their husband's physical needs, they will be cherished. They relate initially to their husbands as if they are seen as men in society, as if they have access to power. Misguided, they, too, are unprepared for the avalanche of misery that falls upon them. "Margaret and Mem," according to Barbara Christian, "are examples of Walker's first group of black women, the most abused of the abused" (Christian 1980, 194).
Seven of the thirteen women in Walker's short story collection *In Love and Trouble* (1973) are also part of the "suspended" cycle in which the women are subjected to and often destroyed by oppression and violence. Pain, violence, and death form the essential content of these women's lives.

Walker describes these characters as "mad, raging, loving, resentful, hateful, strong, ugly, weak, pitiful, and magnificent" women who "try to live with the loyalty to black men that characterizes all of their lives" (MG: 251). She portrays these troubled personalities as products of a dehumanizing culture, as victims of sexual and racial oppression. Though they vary greatly in the background, they are bound together by their vulnerability to life: Roselily, on her wedding day, surrounded by her four children, prays that a loveless marriage will bring her respectability; a young writer, exploited by both her lover and her husband, wreaks an ironic vengeance; a destitute, ignorant girl, unable to get a doctor for her sick child, is advised to try "strong horse tea"; a jealous wife, looking for her husband's mistress, finds a competitor she cannot fight; an old woman, thrown out of a white church, meets God on a highway. These are some of the seekers of dignity and love whom Alice Walker portrays in an enlightening, disturbing view of life in the South.
The problem of marriage and the varying expectations of women are handled with intelligence and expert craftsmanship. In Roselily, Walker uses a country wedding to illustrate that what is good for the Black man is not always good for the Black woman who needs to be freed from an unyielding masculine ideology. The story's title character, whose name suggests the grafting on of a new identity, has found a means of escape from her life of labour and single parenthood in Panther Burn, Mississippi, by marrying a black Muslim from Chicago. While the minister reads traditional marriage vows, Roselily, the poor mother, dreams of a life such vows do not promise. In her dream, she sees herself, as a little girl in her mother's white robe and veil. The marriage is her chance to "be on top," for her four children to be "at last from underneath the detrimental wheel" (ILT: 4). Yet the life she foresees in Chicago promises to be a nightmare; the marriage veil will merge with the veil (purdah) she will have to wear as the wife of a Muslim. When she hears the phrase "to join this man and this woman," Roselily "thinks of ropes, chains, handcuffs, his religion. His place of worship. Where she will be required to sit apart with covered head" (ILT: 4).

For her, the marriage veil has been transformed into the purdah, the outward sign that in her womanhood she is
inferior and that marriage is a binding, not freeing. She will have rest from her labour in a sewing factory - "her place will be in the home, he has said, repeatedly" (ILT: 7). Yet when she is rested, there will be more babies, a thought that does not console her. Though she loves her new husband's understanding of her condition, she somehow feels uneasy and the image of "a rat trapped, cornered, scurrying to and fro" (ILT: 8) troubles her mind.

Walker portrays Roselily as provider and protector of her family. But she also presents the predicament of Roselily as her marriage signals only her entry into another level of silence. Her Muslim husband condescends to marry her but Roselily wonders whether there will be any personal fulfillment in her life. She knows that she will be remade into her husband's image of black womanhood.

Roselily's marriage to a Muslim brings us the fact that many black women were willing to walk behind their men because the women were hungry for the respect and attention they believed whole, black men could or would give them. Walker provides us with fresh insights about the nature of Black womanhood during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and early 1970s as well as the evolution. The eponymous narrative strategy, interlocking the minister's reading the traditional marriage vows with the protagonist's dreaming and
the varying images crossing her mind are some of the techniques Walker adopts to highlight the suspended plight of Roselily.

In contrast to Roselily, Myrna, the protagonist of Really, Doesn't Crime Pay? is the wife of a middle-class Southern black man. Still, she too is trapped by her husband and society's view of woman, though her confinement is not within a black veil but in the decorative mythology of the Southern Lady. However, unlike Roselily, Myrna does more than dream, she writes. In a series of journal entries, she tells us how the restrictions imposed upon her creativity led her to attempt to noisily murder her husband with a chainsaw, an act certainly perceived by her society as madness. In Roselily problems arise because of children; in this story for want of a child, problems arise.

Fulfillment comes for Myrna through her writing, yet her middle class husband scorns her creative efforts: "No wife of mine is going to embarrass me with a lot of foolish, vulgar stuff" (ILT: 15). He wants rather, a mindless beauty accompanied by the sweet smells for which he is a glutton. If she wants something to occupy her time, she should go shopping or have a baby, both appropriately feminine activities and thus roughly equivalent in his mind. She does follow his instructions, goes shopping and stocks up on
needless supplies of beauty aids: cold cream, lip gloss, wigs, and perfumes. Being the serious writer that she is, though all the time she is haunting the mall, she is grieving not for the children she will never have (she religiously uses birth control pills) but for her latest story, "dead in embryo" (ILT: 16). She envisions a "serious" writer as one dressed in dungarees with messy hands and the smell of sweat.

When Mordecai Rich, "a vagabond, scribbling down impressions of the South," (ILT: 12) comes along and recognizes that Myrna's pretty brown hands are capable of writing "ugly, deep stuff," she is so grateful that she gives herself to him on the spot. She succumbs to his flattery and asks him to read everything that she has ever written and gives it all to him as readily as she gives him her body.

Later, Mordecai betrays the trust she places in him not only by deserting her but also by stealing one of her stories, publishing it in a magazine under his own name. Mordecai is long gone, beyond her reach, so she turns her fury - and the chain saw - on her husband.

She is seen at the end of the story (which is also its beginning) sitting in the new red brick home where Ruel believes they can forget the past. She feels that she fits into her new surroundings perfectly: "like a jar of cold cream melting on a mirrored vanity shelf" (ILT: 11). She has
become the fragrant piece of fluff that her husband has always wanted, yet she has sweetened her body to such an extent that even he (especially he) may no longer touch it.... I wait, beautiful and perfect in every limb, cooking supper as if my life depended on it. Lying unresisting on his bed like a drowned body washed to shore. But he is not happy. For he knows now that I intend to do nothing but say yes until he is completely exhausted.

(ILT: 12, 22-23)

Her consciousness of freedom is not illusory. Soon she realizes, when both husband and she are quite tired of the sweet, sweet smell of her body and the softness of those creamed hands, she will leave - leave without once looking back at her doll's house. As Anne Z. Mickelson observes: "We are aware of the psychic damage of so much attention paid to revenge, but also aware that in order to exercise free choice in working out her destiny, she is doing what seems psychologically necessary at the moment" (Mickelson 1979, 156).

To all appearances, for that is what counts, Myrna has succeeded in ways that Roselily had not. While Roselily does not know what she wants to do, when she is rested, Myrna knows that she wants to write, must write. As in Roselily, Really, Doesn't Crime Pay? takes place within the imagination of the character. But while Roselily dreams during her
wedding, Myrna's imagination is presented through her entries in her writing notebook. Unlike Roselily then, whose critical musings never move beyond her interior, Myrna's break for freedom lies in trying to express herself in words.

The husbands of Myrna and Roselily share the same limited perception of women's roles. Each expects no more of his wife than that she stays home and has babies. Lacking knowledge of himself and therefore incapable of changing, Ruel faces a hopeless situation. But what he represents is an important part of what Walker wishes to show us. Even such basically good men as Ruel are often unwitting contributors to the destruction of relationships between Black men and women. Neither wife is physically abused, yet both are denied psychological freedom and wholeness.

In Her Sweet Jerome Walker introduces a theme she develops further in her first novel The Third Life of Grange Copeland: how larger social issues intrude into the individual lives of black men and women to become the excuse for cruelty. Written in three parts, this story discusses the tragic Mrs. Jerome Franklin Washington III (she is identified by no other name than her husband's is telling) who falls so far short of what her husband thinks the modern black woman should be that he does not even consider her worth the effort it would take to remake her. From the squat
roll of fat that constitutes her neck and the plump molelike freckles on her cheeks to her fat hairy legs and orange shoes, she is every inch an unlovable woman. When "little and cute" Jerome, a "studiously quiet teacher" ten years her junior, agrees to marry this homely hairdresser, his motives are suspect, especially when he beats her black and blue even before the wedding. However, she is able to buy his name, if not his love with cars and clothes - and with money to support his real love: the revolution. So repulsed is Jerome by his wife's physical presence that she can occasionally get him to stay home quietly reading his paperbacks only if she promises not to touch him or talk to him.

The sympathetic narrator of this story tells us in the second part how this ugly rich hairdresser turns mad violently searching for "the other woman". The gossips at the beauty parlour turns her to look at the neighbours with suspicion. Armed with axes, pistols and knives she starts demanding whomsoever she encounters with a question, "you been messin' with my Jerome?" (ILT: 29). She abandons all of her earlier attempts to make herself look pretty: "Her firm bulk became flabby. Her eyes were bloodshot and wild, her hair full of lint, nappy at the roots and greasy on the ends. She smelled bad from mouth and underarms and elsewhere" (ILT: 29). The life that Jerome lives when he is with his
"Comrades" with their "African" names and their white friends is beyond her comprehension. She is unable to understand what goes on in their meetings.

In her mind, they represent a level of existence to which she can never aspire. While she spends her days in her beauty parlour processing hair to make it look like the white ideal of feminine beauty and prides herself on her pastel taffetas, umbrella hats, and elbow length red satin gloves, the women in Jerome's group wear the "short kinky hair and large hoop earrings" of a new era. While she minces off to church on her high heels each Sunday morning, they reject traditional religion. While she brags about how she doesn't "miss her 'eddicashion' as much as some did who had no learning and no money both together", they talk about the "slave trade", "violent overthrow", and "off de pig" (ILT: 26).

In the third part, the truth about her 'rival' finally dawns on her in a rush of panic as she searches the house for clues to the identity of Jerome's lover. She searches his clothes, shoes and the bed. Only under the bed does she find a stack of dusty paperbacks that have fallen there over the months of their marriage - paperbacks about blackness and about revolution. When the truth strikes home, it is with "the belated rush of doomed comprehension. In a rush it came
to her: 'It ain't no woman.' Just like that. It had never occurred to her there could be anything more serious" (ILT: 33). She realizes that she doesn't even know what the word revolution means, "unless it meant to go round and round, the way her head was going" (ILT: 34).

She sets out to "kill" her paperback rivals, stacking them on Jerome's pillow and slashing them with her knives, then dousing them with kerosene and setting the marriage bed on fire. As the room burns, she backs into a corner "not near the open door" and screams as the fire starts, to consume her flesh. According to Donna Hasty Winchell, this situation is: "Misplaced loyalty. Misplaced love. Walker's women suffer the consequences - physical and psychological" (Winchell 1992, 35). Mrs. Jerome is one of these women who get lost, or in this case trampled on, in the course of men's larger struggles. Jerome is hardly the noble revolutionary. In his intellectual fight against oppression in general, he feels no remorse for his cruel and literal oppression of his wife.

The right to define 'what black women should be' and the right to set the 'boundaries of self' for these women, it appears, seem to reside in black men. Yet these restrictions placed on black womanhood are not primarily personal or idiosyncratic, but rather common responses to the dictates of
a racist and sexist culture. The black men are more concerned about how the behavior of their wives will reflect on them than about the women as individuals. They do not want to be made to look bad by their women.

In short, these bleak marriages between black men and women provide Walker with the pretext to enter into a larger context - her critique of the male-dominated Civil Rights Movement. In the public sphere, the men preach the rhetoric of inclusion, while in the domestic sphere they practise the rhetoric of exclusion - which translates into a phallic power that does not recognize women as equal. "Marriages," according to Mercedes A.Wright, "must be partnerships rather than ownerships" and that the place of the black women must not be "behind their men, but beside them who have no qualms about being beside women in their endeavours, mutually loving, caring, and sharing in sickness and health" (Wright 1974, 31).

Definition of self becomes a function of where and with whom these women's loyalties lie. Is their primary loyalty to themselves or to others? At what point does a black woman say no to a definition of self being forced upon her from without? At what point does a black man? These answers, too, are bound up in societal expectations.
In "The Contrary Women of Alice Walker", Barbara Christian asks, "What happens when a black woman goes against convention, transgresses a deeply felt taboo, and says no directly and aloud?" (Christian 1985, 38). In choosing a white lover, the child in The Child Who Favored Daughter, who is certainly no child, is saying no, thereby breaking a societal taboo, yet her choice is also a reflection on her father's manhood. Walker illuminates the relationship between sexism and racism as modes of oppression that restricted the lives of many women and men in America.

As a boy, the sullen father saw the psychological deterioration of his sister called "Daughter" at the hands of the white man for whom he worked. A broken woman physically and spiritually - hair missing, teeth wobbly in her gums, no recognition of her relatives - the sister returns, eventually to prey upon the lingering sympathy of her brother. Unable to resist her power over him, he watches as she lies tied to the bed to which their father had strapped her and suffers as vividly as she does. Convinced he must set her free, the brother does so and hopes that she will "run away into the woods and never return" (ILT: 39), thereby also freeing him from her: "But Daughter, climbing out of bed like a wary animal, knocked him unconscious to the floor and night found
her impaled on one of the steel-spike fence posts near the house (ILT: 39).

Daughter's action sets only her free, for the brother is still "galled" that she had turned to a white man and that she had been "cut down so". He cannot forgive her, "for though her own wound was a bitter one and in the end fatal, he bore a hurt throughout his life that slowly poisoned him" (ILT: 39-40). His sister thus becomes a metaphor for all women, and he treats those with whom he comes into contact as if they were fools. He exists in a world "where innocence and guilt became further complicated by questions of color and race" (ILT: 40), and he responds to that world by beating and crippling his wife because he chooses to believe, in spite of all evidence to the contrary, that she returns the white landlord's advances. The wife escapes by killing herself, but leaves behind the little girl who is a replica of Daughter.

When the daughter from this unhappy union enters puberty, the father's repressed rage, as well as his sexual jealousy, once again surfaces. The bloody cycle renews itself in a demonic ritual in which there are no winners, only losers. His daughter falls in love with the son of the plantation owner and still loves him in spite of his marriage with one of his own.
The child's love, like her aunt's, knows no barriers. Like the flower that grows in any soil and "pledge no allegiance to banners of any man" (ILT: 45), she loves where she will. As the excerpt from Rilke, used as an epigraph for this collection says, she, like nature, must be herself, grow and defend herself in her own way, not as defined by her father nor society. The enraged father punishes her by cutting off her breasts and flinging them to the waiting dogs.

Hints of incestuous longing on the father's part are evident throughout the story over his sister, his "first love" and then to his daughter. When he confronts his daughter, in his mind the line between daughter and sister blurs, just as in Walker's poetic interlude the line between sisters and wives does: "Unknowable women / sisters / spouses / illusions of the soul" (ILT: 38). The violence the father inflicts on his daughter, for he literally cuts off her sexual organs in biblical fashion ("...if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off") confirms his own sexual desire for her. It also underscores his fear of her proclaimed autonomy, her independence from him, which is based on her sexuality. The brutality of his act also suggests that he must doubly kill her since he cannot attack the other object of his rage,
her white lover. He kills in one blow, his desire for her and his long-frustrated rage at the white man.

Walker handles this theme very carefully as many black writers hesitate to discuss the theme of incest in their writings. She avoids explicit treatment of incest by being indirect and by leaving more unstated than is made explicit. She also succeeds in toning down the treatment of incest by allowing for the possibility of insanity in the father.

From the woman who dreams to the woman who writes and to the woman who openly says no and defies the patriarchal order, Walker slowly builds up the transition in her protagonists. In spite of their efforts they fail.

Walker uses the third person narrative here but neither the child nor her father is presenting a different self to the world. Rather the "She" and "He" used in the absence of personalized names give the characters an archetypal quality, as if the child stands not only for this individual black woman, but for all daughters who have transgressed against their father's law; and the father stands not only for this bitter black man, but for all fathers who have been sinned against by their daughters. Walker's language links the girl to nature. She is a "young willow"; her arms are like long golden, fruits"; her eyes, "perfect black-eyed Susans" (ILT:
42, 41, 38). The horror in the story is bearable only because of Walker's images fusing nature and the girl's inner world and because of the ebb and flow of blues rhythms in the story's voice.

Institutions, not individual black men, also fail the women who put their trust in them, restricting their already circumscribed lives and limiting their ability to define the boundaries of their existence. The stories belonging to this group are about women who suffer more because of race than sex.

Written in the third person, Strong Horse Tea tells the pathetic story of Rannie Toomer, an illiterate, ugly and unmarried woman who centres her life upon her baby, Snookes. When her baby is dying from "double pneumonia and whooping cough" (ILT: 88), she puts her trust in the white medical world with its new miracle drugs to cure her son. She scoffs at the old home remedies, insistent that her child will have the benefits of modern medicine. She asks her white mailman, the only contact she has with the outside world from her rather secluded rural area, to send a doctor to attend Snooks. The mailman, whose cultural breeding will not allow him to think of dispatching a physician to "Rannie Mae", stops by Aunt Sarah, "an old neighboring lady who wore magic leaves round her neck sewed up in possumskin next to a dried
lizard's foot. She knew how magic came about, and could do magic herself, people said" (ILT: 88).

Refusing to allow Aunt Sarah, Rannie sits waiting for the "REAL doctor" to show up and the child gets progressively worse. Aunt Sarah wonders in despair, "When would this one know that she could only depend on those who would come" (ILT: 93). The story ends with the now desperate Rannie pathetically pursuing an old mare in a rainstorm trying to catch horse urine in her tattered shoe, the "strong horse tea" Aunt Sarah has recommended for Rannie's dying baby. When she succeeds and her plastic shoe begins to leak the precious liquid, Rannie holds it up and uses her mouth as a plug. The picture becomes more absurd when Rannie's actions are contrasted with a flash back scene in which the reader discovers that the baby, Rannie is struggling humiliatingly to save, is already dead.

Rannie's situation is crushingly vivid. Her problem is her own private agony. The mare chasing scene bares her before the reader. "Expecting sympathy or understanding from the postman", says Trudier Harris, "is comparable to expecting the mailbox itself to live and breathe" (Harris 1977, 6). The postman believes that "magic that if it didn't work on whites probably would on blacks" (ILT: 92). Because
of her physical condition and the distinction the postman makes between blacks and whites, he denies Rannie the basic human rights which he feels privileged to enjoy. The denial leads to the strong horse tea remedy.

A close look at Strong Horse Tea and The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff reveals that Walker employs folklore for purposes of defining characters and illustrating relationships between them as well as plot development. By doing so, she comments on the racial situation in the United States and, in some instances, chastises her black characters for their attitude towards themselves. The folklore materials Walker uses and the ways in which she uses them are especially evocative of Charles Waddell Chestnutt and Zora Neale Hurston. These two stories grow directly out of black folk tradition and rely heavily on a knowledge of folk materials and folk attitudes for their development. These two stories are written based on tales told by Walker's mother.

Walker uses Hurston's knowledge of authentic voodoo in The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff, which is based on an event in Walker's mother's life. In this story the narrator (apprentice of Tante Rosie, the local rootworker) achieves the desired revenge by skillfully playing on a white woman's fear of voodoo. Hannah, like Walker's mother, is denied food during the Great Depression because her cast-off clothes,
sent by Northern relatives, are of better quality than those of the white woman (Sarah Marie Sadler, "the little moppet") giving out the food. Walker's mother told the story again and again - how she managed to get food from family and friends, and how, years later, she felt satisfaction that the white woman, hunched and shrunken, could walk only with the aid of two canes. Hannah doesn't fare so well. Her husband abandons her; her children die. Shortly before her own death years later, Hannah asks Tante Rosie, the local rootworker, to help her get revenge. The narrator, Tante Rosie's apprentice, goes to the white woman's house and asks for some hair, nail parings, urine, and feces, explaining that a black woman is seeking revenge and that, if the white woman doesn't believe in voodoo, she won't mind. Terrified, the white woman eats her finger-nails and hoards her bodily excretions, driving away her friends and family who can't stand the smell. She eventually dies in "constant anxiety lest a stray strand of hair be lost... the foul odor of the house soon brought to the hands a constant seeking motion, to the eyes a glazed and vacant stare, and to the mouth a tightly puckered frown" (ILT: 80). Thus Hannah, already dead, has her revenge.

Walker has written this story "in grateful memory of Zora Neale Hurston" (ILT: 60) who is one of the foremothers of twentieth-century Black American literature. Whereas Roselily's marriage signals her entry into another level of
silence, Hannah Kemhuff breaks through her years of enforced silence to redefine her relation to community and self. Given the circumstance, it is no wonder that Hannah's visit to the rootworker serves as a real or imaginary vehicle for Black American literature. "When the choice is between resignation or faith and humanistic action or reason, literary characters, like their folk counterparts", as Trudier Harris reminds us, "often reject Christianity in favor of a more exacting and humanistic idealism" (Harris 1981, 62).

Metaphorically, Hannah, therefore, represents the community as a whole. As the familiar ideal, her (story) speaks to the deepest desire of the Black community to free itself from the presence of the other. Her journey to the rootworker (for indeed it is a physical as well as a spiritual journey) rekindles her faith in the moral order. Dolan Hubbard terms her visit as "a home coming" (Hubbard 1991, 66).

The characterization of Tante Rosie relies on black history to a degree but for more of the psychological aspect of conjuring is apparent. Her ultimate destruction of her victim is more psychological than physical. Interestingly, Tante Rosie's victim is a white woman. This white woman actually believes "voodoo" and is destroyed, indicating that
blacks were not the only supposedly gullible individuals in the matter of belief in conjuration.

The narrator apprentice carrying out Tante Rosic's orders is reminiscent of the enthusiasm of the youthful Zora Neale Hurston who recounts her numerous adventures as apprentice to various hoodoo doctors in the New Orleans area. Interestingly, too, when the narrator cannot remember the "cure-prayer" by heart, she "recited it straight Zora Neale Hurston's book, Mules and Men" (ILT: 72).

Hannah's clothes symbolize her "unmerited destruction" (ILT: 72). Her family wore its Sunday best to the relief station. A misreading occurs. Whereas the proud Hannah sees the clothes as the outer manifestation of her inner confidence that her family will make it through the Depression, the relief woman reads them as a badge of arrogance. She denies this well-dressed family of Black folk their ration of food in order to put them in their place. Twenty years later, on the eve of the Civil Rights Movement, Hannah, her spirit "trampled down" (ILT: 67), sits before the conjure woman "almost smothered, in a half-dozen skirts and shawls" (ILT: 60). Hannah, smothered under layers of clothing, probably, is emblematic of the thwarted Black female.
The implicit and explicit references to Hurston's *Mules and Men* is Walker's way of acknowledging that Black women writers need to draw upon their literary foremothers - a community in which black women consciously read and relate to each other's work. In addition to this, it also serves to narrow down the distinction between her (story) and fiction and to illustrate how the group ethos is shaped by the material conditions.

Walker also emphasizes the multiplicity of pain black women inflict on each other. Like Miss Mamie Lou Banks, the washerwoman in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, Hannah is left with her children when her husband "with a wandering eye" (ILT: 61) runs away with another black woman. There is no rationale for the condescending attitude that women have to each other. There is no good explanation apart from their own sense of insecurity or their need to claim some man's attention.

Walker has not only used black folk culture for purposes of plot and characterization, she has used it in larger functional context as a means to comment on social conditions affecting blacks in the States. In an interview with John O'Brien she states that, in *Revenge*, "voodoo" is used as a weapon against oppression" (Walker 1973c, 206). A notion of inequality also comes through with Hannah's casual
comment that while blacks in the welfare lines were given cornmeal and red beans, whites received "bacon and grits, as well as meal" (ILT: 63). In the face of such oppression, conjuring becomes Hannah's only viable means of protest; it is the only weapon she has when religion fails. She cannot turn to the law and courts because the system has set up the inequality. Such a character remains, in the eyes of Walker and Toomer, "suspended a few feet above the soil whose touch would resurrect" them (Toomer 1969, 191).

While racial inequality has its toll in the social sphere for Hannah Kemhuff, the unnamed old black woman in The Welcome Table is a victim in the religious sphere. Nearly blind, this old woman has walked half a mile from her house to enter a white church on a Sunday.

While the whole congregation is confused about how they are to react to her unconventional act, the old woman is clear about her actions. From the whites' point of view, in her coming to their church, this old black woman challenges the very thing that gives them privilege. At their behest, she is thrown out of the church. Looking bewildered, the old black woman starts singing, this time a sad song, in her head. Suddenly she finds Jesus walking down the road looking just like the picture she stole from the Bible of a white woman for whom she worked. She starts following him on his
Command, singing, complaining, and quietly looking up at the sky until death overtakes her.

This story is about the tragedy of American race relations. Walker protests the fact that segregation is enforced even in church at the time about which this story is written. The old woman's refusal to leave the church is an early stage of militancy. Walker reinforces the integrity of a black Christian tradition, of which Southern black women were the heralds, by dedicating her Composition of her Spiritual in prose form to Clara Ward, the great black gospel singer:

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!

(ILT: 81)

Majority of this triste group of women, both new and old, have a serious love affair with Jesus (Father/Son). He is viewed by them in the physical - the only "do right" Man that they know. Therefore, they endure their lot, work from sunup to sundown, go to church on Sunday and seek relief. They believe that Jesus has power, and will soothe, love, respect and respond to their need. Even the weather-beaten harlot Josie, in The Third Life of Grange Copeland visited church every Sunday. Because of the long-standing romance
between them and God they know exactly what he looks like. The old woman in The Welcome Table has no problems recognizing Jesus when she sees him walking down the highway. Walker's women find solace in the church, accept the church in the ways that they can best relate to it, time and circumstance playing important roles.

Most of the young heroines in this volume struggle through dream or word, against age-old as well as new manifestations of social conventions. They are a "disturbing bunch" indeed. For the most part, they do not understand the complexity of their problem, and because their limited worlds cannot assist them they are destined to operate haphazardly.

"The distinctive feature of these women is the tremendous quality with which they carry their suffering. Some are forgiving even to the men who mistreat them. Some are trusting and patient" (Parker-Smith 1984, 491). According to Mickelson:

The women in these series do not always have a chance or a choice....These stories possess something in common: the fight against resignation, victimization, loneliness, despair, stasis, "the odor of corruption" which Joyce said hovered over his Dubliners.

(Mickelson 1979, 154)

Both The Third Life of Grange Copeland and In Love and Trouble, explore to varying degrees, the dynamics of being a
black woman. In *Meridian* (1976), the female protagonist's conflicts are not only with external obstacles, but primarily with herself. And as she journeys towards mature self-knowledge, Meredian Hill calls into question the meaning of heroism, social activism, self-sacrifice, and moral judgements. She is the embodiment of a new consciousness. By symbolically naming her protagonist and by using dictionary excerpts for an epigraph, Walker indicates immediately that her central concern is with concepts. Thus *Meridian* represents a shift from a preoccupation with commemorating black women's suffering to a concern with probing an individual black woman's situation for its roots and possibilities.

The novel tells us the story of a black woman, Meridian Hill who grows up in a small southern town. After an early marriage and divorce, she gives up her child to accept a scholarship to go to a college. While in college she is an active participant in the Civil Rights Movement. She falls in love with Truman Held, a black political activist from the North with whom she becomes pregnant. But when he becomes involved with Lynne Rabinowitz, a Jewish civil rights volunteer, Meridian aborts her baby and has her tubes tied. Truman later marries Lynne, and the relationship between these three characters continue even when the Civil Rights Movement gives way to the idea of violent revolution.
Meridian, who is not sure that she can kill, even for the revolution, continues to practise nonviolent resistance in a world that no longer respects it. In her quest for an answer to her questions about the relationship between violence and change, she undergoes a personal transformation and is able to absolve her feelings of guilt about her inability to be a mother. At the end of her quest, she passes on the struggle for wholeness to Truman Held.

Meridian is a combination of the three types of black women that Walker has described. Like some of her ancestors, Meridian is a "looney" woman who is physically and psychologically abused. Like Phyllis Wheatley and Nella Larsen, she is given the opportunity to become an exception, torn by "contrary instincts". And like the contemporary black woman that Walker envisions, Meridian becomes an artist by expanding her mind with action.

The early details of her childhood and youth emphasize the leaden quality one normally associates with the pattern of the black woman's life. As a young girl, Meridian is pure, innocent and loving. The prudish Mrs. Hill never uses the word sex in Meridian's presence. Instead, she impresses on her daughter the necessity of being "sweet," not realizing that Meridian has no understanding of the caution against sex that the expression intends. Her first sexual encounter
occurs in a funeral parlour. The lascivious Dexter, the local funeral parlour director, pursues Meridian when she is only twelve.

To convince Meridian of the desirability of sex, he arranges for her to witness his assistant's seduction of another school girl. The assistant uses his voice and his body to ride the young girl with supercilious vanity, and then coldly pushes her aside when his performance ends. Meridian is unimpressed, even repulsed by the scene. What she remembers most is the "greedy, obscene and ugly" face of the man and the young girl's ignored need for tenderness afterward (M: 77). From these experiments Meridian gains little pleasure and even less information. No one in her family has taught her "what to expect from men, from sex" (M: 67). As a result, when she acquires a young boy friend (Eddie), Meridian has sex as often as "her lover" wants it: "sometimes every single night. And, since she had been told by someone one's hips become broader after sex, she looked carefully in her mirror each morning before she caught the bus to school. Her pregnancy came as a total shock" (M: 68). Meridian drops out of school, marries her lover, and awaits the birth of her son. Her whole life has been changed - and by an experience she did not enjoy.
In these chapters, that deal with Meridian's early days, Walker questions the relative importance of sex in a woman's life, suggesting that the notion that a woman lives for sexual pleasure is a sexist myth, celebrating the power of man's potency. But, Meridian sees sex as a "sanctuary" (M: 69). Only when she is sexually active with one boy, becoming his girl friend in the eyes of the community, can she get over her fear of men. Only in this "sanctuary," Walker explains, can Meridian "look out at the male world with something approaching equanimity, even charity; even friendship" (M: 69).

Pregnancy is another negative experience with Meridian. It changes her physical appearance, making her once velvety skin "bloated and tight" (M: 72). Her husband, because he is male, remains in school in spite of his new role as husband and father. Meridian, because of the swollen stomach that she carries as innocently as she had engaged in the experience that changed the direction of her life, remains at home, and then she receives a different kind of education. She learns that a wife is forever turning in the small confines of home, doing for others. She is an inept wife and her ineptitude at tasks irks her husband.
The "creative pain" lasts for a "day and a half", and she delivers a son. She is exhausted by caring for the baby, who gasps, screams, twists, and turns, robbing Meridian of her rest:

It took every thing she had to tend the child, and she had to do it, her body prompted not by her own desires, but by her son's cries. So this, she mumbled,...is what slavery is like. Rebelling, she began to dream, each night, just before her baby sent out cries, of ways to murder him.

(M: 79)

She wants to get out of her servitude: "It seemed to her that the peace of the dead was truly blessed, and each day she planned a new way of approaching it; it is only out of her "reliance on suicide" that she maintains her sanity (M: 80). Gloria Wade-Gayles observes this as "the true condition of womanhood trapped in the institution of motherhood" (Wade-Gayles 1984, 202-203).

Meridian's mother and other women in the community attempt to dissuade Meridian from leaving her husband and child. Though Eddie, her husband, has the right to beat her or cheat her, he doesn't do either. The black women of her community insist that she has the obligation to adjust her needs to providing for his rights. They do not understand that Eddie cannot measure the width of Meridian's dreams or chart the course of her journey towards their realization.
Meridian cannot be a wife because the role demands submersion of her self in perfunctory expressions of love and togetherness.

More important than Meridian's lack of interest in being a wife is her inability to be a mother. She is plagued by her mother's question, "Have you stolen anything?" (M: 54) and sensitive to the "paradox of life-giving death" in the history of black motherhood. "In giving life to children who were both unwanted and unappreciated by society, Walker's mothers also had to give up much of their own lives to sustain their children's. The children know they survive only because their parents committed acts of extraordinary suffering" (Christian 1980, 215). Meridian's guilt for causing her own mother's suffering and the emptiness she believes will always be hers in marriage, precipitates her departure from the small Mississippi town. She commits the cardinal sin of giving her child for adoption for her own dreams.

Unlike her mother and a long line of mothers before her, Meridian lives in an age of choice. She chooses a college education over the motherhood that she feels unsuited for, taking advantage of a scholarship to Saxon College. When she leaves to attend college in Atlanta, probably in the summer of 1961, Meridian Hill begins the first stage of her
journey towards wholeness. At seventeen, Meridian finds herself a dropout from high school, a deserted wife, a reproach to her mother for being "fast" (M: 106), and a mother herself to a baby she cannot love, and for whose care she is responsible. Suspended in a fog of blankness, she suddenly finds some of the mist blown away by a picture on the TV screen. It shows a house on her street bombed by white racists and she learns that black children and adults have been killed. Responding to these events, occurring "in the middle of April 1960" (M: 85), Meridian volunteers to work at the local movement house "typing, teaching illiterates to read and write, demonstrating against segregated facilities and keeping the movement house open when the other workers returned to school" (M: 102).

Mrs. Hill, Meridian's mother, is another example of the 'suspended' women. As a single woman and a school teacher in a small Mississippi town, she enjoys the "freedom of thinking out the possibilities of life" (M: 51). The possibilities, though limited, are that she can either stay there and teach or move to any other place. However, the patterns of the lives of the other women in the town raise some unsettling questions for her about her own life as a woman without a man or children. While she is enjoying the material things her life as a professional woman makes possible, she finds the lives of the other women, by contrast, devoted to the daily
tasks associated with the nurturing of children and husbands. She feels that her life lacks that glow of excitement. In their looks, she believes she sees respect but not approval of her life. She is not eager to marry and has no genuine interest in rearing children, but she is conditioned to the cultural expectation that makes the role of mother a necessity in the life of a woman. Unable to live outside the culture, she marries. Within a space of a few years, she gives birth to Meridian.

Mrs. Hill's life reveals how a woman's sacrifice of a life of independence leads to a life of frustration and emptiness. For her, pregnancy is but an uncomfortable prelude to a life of emptiness. As she carries Meridian, she feels that she is "distracted from who she is" (M: 53).

Mrs. Hill is one of the "variegated flowers in a garden of humanity" (Wade-Gayles 1984, 65) for Walker's vision challenges the assumption that black women are a monolithic group with the same needs, the same strengths, the same weaknesses, and the same dreams. Motherhood, in Mrs. Hill's opinion, is like "being buried alive, walled away from her own life, brick by brick" (M: 53). Walker says: "Creativity was in her, but it was refused expression" (M: 54).

Mrs. Hill becomes a conventional woman with a weak personality after her motherhood. Her advice to Meridian who
is busy participating in the Civil Rights Movement is an example:

God separated the sheeps from the goats and black folks from the white.... It never bothered me to sit in the back of a bus, you get just as good a view and you don't have all those nasty white asses passing you.

(M: 102)

Meridian's mother is introduced in a flashback within a flashback as "that past" which cannot be ignored (M: 17). Meridian's troubled feelings about her mother revolve around the conflict between the need to love her mother - "it is death not to love one's mother" (M: 52) - and the need to be different from her. The lives of mother and daughter are similar in that the crucial event is pregnancy. As Meridian perceives it, her mother "could never forgive her community, her family, his family, the whole world, for not warning her against children" (M: 53).

By her existence, she spoils her mother's life: "It was for stealing her mother's serenity, for shattering her mother's emerging self, that Meridian felt guilty from the very first..." (M: 54). Meridian's own pregnancy - for which her mother had not prepared her - "came as a total shock" (M: 68) and compounds her guilt.
Meridian's life at this stage is one of restraint and repression. Her family relationships have led towards a death of self rather than an affirmation of life. Meridian's maternal ancestors, slaves of white masters or of their husbands, all sacrificed their own lives to gain freedom or education for their children. Her parents are both, in different ways, obsessed with death. Her father is drawn to the past and detached from the physical world. Her mother is emotionally dead. Meridian is made to feel that she is a usurper - of others' places in the world, of her mother's life.

The brief recounting of the tale of the Wild Child (M: 31-34), another "suspended" character by Walker, reveals the continuous oppression of black women in the 60s. The incident of the Wild Child provides the message: Society has no place for an unbridled woman. Susan Willis feels that Wild Child "is not gratuitous, not an aberrant whim on the part of the author, but an epigrammatic representation of all the women Walker brings to life." She considers "Wile Chile" as "Meridian's social anti-thesis" (Willis 1987, 110-111).

In Meridian, child bearing is consistently linked to images of murder and suicide. Fast Mary, another anecdotal figure is as much a paradigm for this as Wild Child. "In posing the contradictory social constraints that demand
simultaneously that a woman be both a virgin and sexually active, the parable of Fast Mary prefigures the emotional tension Meridian herself will experience as a mother, expressing it in fantasies of murder and suicide" (Willis 1987, 112-113). Another anecdotal figure which reflects the racial oppression is Louvinjie.

The tales of these anecdotal figures also pose the problem of the individual's relationship to the group. Susan Willis writes: "Fast Mary's inability to call on her sister students and her final definite isolation at the hands of her parents raise questions Meridian will also confront: Is there a community of support?" (M: 113). These tales reveal how Walker has managed to keep the story telling tradition among black people alive in the era of the written narrative. They are also pedagogical in nature. They have their impact in the mind of Meridian who is trying to move out of her suspended stage.

In The Color Purple, her third novel, Alice Walker again focused on the cruel domination of black men over black women, this time using the time-honoured epistolary technique. The Color Purple spans about thirty years in the life of Celie, a Southern black woman. When she was a teenager her step-father beat her and raped her repeatedly, gave away the two children she bore him, and forced her into
a loveless marriage with a widower who beat her for no other reason than "she my wife". Through her relationship with other women - mainly with Shug Avery, a dazzlingly vital blues singer who move in with Celie and her husband as his mistress but also becomes Celie's lover - she transcends her degrading circumstances and is transformed and redeemed.

Celie's story concentrates first on tyrannies. Forcing himself on her, her step-father warns Celie: "You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy" (CP: 11). The reader remains riveted as Celie tells of her life through her letters to God. Raped and impregnated twice by a man she believes is her father, who gives away her children, she is then given to a man who uses and abuses her to such a degree that she cannot bear to speak his name.

Saddled with farm work as well as with the care of four "rotten" kids and domestic chores, she is overworked, beaten, and reduced to virtual bondage by her husband. Celie's status is suggested as her stepfather Alphonso negotiates her marriage to Albert, the widower:

She is ugly, He says. But she ain't no stranger to hard work. And she clean. And God done fixed her. You can do everything just like you want and ain't gonna make you feed it or clothe it....She would come with her own linen. She can take that cow she raise down there back of the crib.

(CP: 18)
When Albert, whom she calls "Mister", returns for a second inspection the transaction is completed. The echo of the slave's auction block in the sale and bartering of a human commodity in a quasi-feudal Southern economy is resonating through this passage. Celie's status as a slave, or chattel property - subservient to father and later to husband - expected to perform domestic, field and sexual labour, is confirmed when Albert is assured that the "cow [is] coming" (CP: 20).

Marriage perpetuates Celie's plight. Like the central character in the novel of sentiment, Celie finds herself beleaguered and victimized by the scheme of patriarchy. Albert attempts to impose a pattern of dominance and submission on his wife and children. "He beat me like he beat the children," writes Celie. "It all I can do not to cry" (CP: 30). Over and over again, Celie accepts abuse and victimization. She submits to a system of beliefs and values. She submits to male authority because she accepts a theology which requires female subjugation to father and husband. Her submission finally leads her to sterility in which condition she is unable to menstruate, probably, an hysterical symptom.

Alice Walker defines her objective as "finding Celie's voice". She wrote in Ms.: 
[I] describe the brutal sexual violence done to a nearly illiterate black womanchild who then proceeds to write down what has happened to her in her own language, from her own point of view. She does not find rape thrilling; she thinks the rapist looks like a frog with a snake between his legs. How could this not be upsetting? Shocking? How could anyone want to hear this?

(Walker 1985, 71)

Celie's step-father, after failing to coerce his "half-dead" wife into marital relations, sexually assaults Celie, sells the babies she consequently gives birth, and lasciviously eyes her younger sister, Nettie. After his wife's death, "he" (Celie does not write his name until he dies) brings home a child bride on whom he presses what seem insatiable sexual demands: "He be on her all the time" (CP: 14); meanwhile, he beats Celie for flirting. When her new step-mother falls ill, Celie selflessly offers herself to save Nettie from their step-father's advances: "Nettie she finally see the light of day, clear. Our new mammy she see it too. She in her room crying" (CP: 17). Thus one finds Walker portraying not only Celie but also her mother, her step-mother and her sister as victims of sexual oppression.

Not only sexist but racist oppression can gag a person. Asked condescendingly by the mayor's wife to work as her maid, Sofia, the outspoken wife of Celie's step-son Harpo, answers: "Hell no" (CP: 86). The mayor then slaps Sofia, who
counters his blow by knocking him down. She is consequently jailed and tortured. Celie relates, "They crack her skull. They crack her ribs. They tear her nose loose on one side. They blind her in one eye. She swole from head to foot. Her tongue the size of my arm, it stick out tween her feet like a piece of rubber. She can't talk" (CP: 87). The black woman who dares to return insult and exchange blows is imprisoned, brutalized, and muted. The impudent tongue is bludgeoned - to seal her mouth.

Sofia's friends play Brer Rabbit by sending Squeak, a black girl who loves Harpo, to convince the warden that Sofia is much happier working in the prison jail as laundress than she would be working as a maid. While the trick works, the prize is not exactly the briar patch: The warden rapes Squeak and condemns Sofia to live in the mayor's home and to raise his children. Years later, after she has completed her twelve-year stint as a twentieth-century slave, she returns to her own family.

Most of the characters do not seem particularly bothered by the racist insults they endure. Even though she sits in front seat of the car when she teaches the mayor's wife how to drive, Sofia gets in the back seat without an argument when Miz Millie explains that she will never see "a white person and a colored sitting side by side in a car"
When the otherwise assertive Shug Avery arrives for a visit, she reports without apparent rancour that she and her new husband Grady have "been driving all night... Nowhere to stop, you know" (CP: 105). Writing to Nettie about the trip to Memphis, Celie simply reports that "us have to find a road going off onto the bushes to relieve ourselves" (CP: 186); she observes that, when Shug is on the road, there is "no place hardly to stop and really wash herself" (CP: 190).

Even Celie's parents are victims of racism. From Nettie's letter Celie learns that her real father was a "well-to-do farmer" who opened a store and prospered. The white merchants resented a black man taking away some of their business and had him dragged from his home and lynched. Celie's mother who had one child (Celie) and was pregnant with her second (Nettie), went mad when neighbours brought his mutilated and burnt body home. When she remarried, her new husband Alfonso, not only abused but raped Celie. Celie's two children were sold to Samuel and Corrine, who adopted them and hired Nettie as their nurse.

From Nettie's letters from Africa, it is understood that the situation there is no better. The Olinka people "don't believe in educating girls" (CP: 144) and "scarification" is very much prevalent among them. Added to
these, the Olinkas follow a "female genital mutilation" on their young girls. Through Nettie, Walker describes the subordination of women to men in Africa. She suggests that sexism for black women do not derive from racism, though it is qualitatively affected by it. She adds, "We're going to have to debunk the myth that Africa is a haven for black people - especially black women. We've been the mule of the world there and the mule of the world here" (Walker 1982b, 273).

Thadious M. Davis observes:

Celie is not a "new" character in Walker's fiction; she is similar to one of the sisters in "Everyday Use", the bride in "Roselily", and the daughter in "The Child Who Favored Daughter", but unlike these other silent, suffering women characters, Celie writes her story in her own voice.

(Davis 1983, 50)

Instead of diaries of suffering (as in Myrna's writings in Really, Doesn't Crime Pay?) her letters become records of growth.

The progression in Walker's world is from external to internal, from male control of female lives to women controlling their own lives. There are various stages of transition among the black women in the 'suspended' cycle. Margaret and Mem are the victims of the sharecropping system.
Roselily is a victim of single parent family and is influenced by the New Islam. Myrna in Really, Doesn't Crime Pay? is victimized not only by her overly attentive husband and by the unscrupulous Mordecai but by her own unstable mind. Her husband is not as destructive as are the male characters in The Third Life of Grange Copeland. She lacks the spark of altruistic selfishness that would enable her to fight against his psychological confinement of her desire to write. The lack of control of female destiny and art, therefore, is reflected in the breakdown of mental control.

Inability to order the imagination and also to order the world is also evident in Her Sweet Jerome, The Welcome Table, and The Strong Horse Tea. In each of these stories, the black women characters are as much the victims of malice as they are the victims of their own heightened, frequently uninformed, imaginations. Mrs. Jerome's search for her husband's lover is a desperate and frivolous action in comparison to the drudgery of Mem's and Margaret's existence. She has not been destroyed by forces as large and as impersonal as the sharecropping system. In this story, Walker places the emphasis less on Jerome's beating and neglecting his wife than on the wife's inability to see and understand things as they are.
Rannie's desire to save her son from pneumonia ties her to Mem in the sacrifice for children and to Mrs. Jerome in the heightened imagination that makes her the victim of superstition and other folk beliefs. She is a pathetic creature who lingers in the reader's mind because of the absurdity, not the sanity, of her actions. If religion can be reduced to imagination or superstition, then the black woman in The Welcome Table is a victim of both.

In Meridian, the title character is as much driven and victimized by the civil rights movement as she is a moving force in it. Meridian makes the civil rights movement into an art form that drains the artist without supplying ultimate satisfaction. In many ways her life has as much missing from it as do the lives of the earlier women. The other women have nothing outside the home; Meridian has everything outside at the expense of home.

Celie, in The Color Purple, has many of the qualities of the women earlier mentioned. She is physically and psychologically abused. She sacrifices herself for saving others. Her problems are confined to her house and she is ignorant of what is happening around.

The black women in the first cycle of Walker's personal construct are victims of sexual and communal abuse. Sometimes
they are victims of their own minds. In her earlier fiction, Walker's protagonists gave their labour for the benefit of others, often to the detriment of their own selves. Their plight is to suffer in silence, to live the myth of the strong woman. Their strength enables them to endure, and sometimes to fight, but never to hate. Their very goodness contributes to their victimization. Death, in certain cases, is a quiet giving in, a resignation rather than an assertive departure. These characters are both physically and psychologically abused. The issue of physical beauty is another problem of these women.

Another important feature of the suspended state is its impersonality. It is not concerned with individual enemies, but with the hostile system itself. The futility of individual response is apparent when she tries to take out her wrath over the oppressor. Though the individual sees the systematic nature of her oppression, she has no systematic counter and withdraws into a suspended state of thought.

Suspended state is a curiously alert and thoughtful state, with more virtues at its roots than appear on the surface. It carries its own recoil towards self-assertion. The woman in this state does not quite break the surface, but she contemplates it with the savage glee of someone of superior gifts confronting humdrum order that has forced her down.
The novels and short stories discussed in this chapter deal with black women of different age group, different status in society, literate and illiterate, and who suffer for various reasons. But they are all women of South. Though these works were written at different times, the traumatic plight of the women is the same. Among these characters Meridian and Celie move forward crossing the next stage ("Assimilated") to be "Emergent Women". These women would no longer live in suspension and they search for a place for them to move into.