CHAPTER - II
WOMANISM: QUEST FOR IDENTITY

Alice Walker has been a ‘womanist’ on the American fictional scene for more than two decades. She prefers to call herself a ‘womanist’ because womanism is better than feminism; ‘womanism’ appreciates and prefers ‘women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility ... and women’s strength’ (Walker, xi). Walker explores relationships between black women’s past tradition and societal change as crucial to the individual search for freedom and wholeness. She probes many facets of interrelationships of sexism and racism in the American society and, in her fiction; she seeks to transform ‘suspended’ women into ‘emergent’ black women. As a writer, Alice Walker’s preoccupations are the spiritual survival, the survival whole of my people. But beyond that, in one of her interviews Walker states, “I am committed to exploring the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties, and the triumphs of black women” (O’Brien, 192).

Certainly, these preoccupations are evident in most of the novels of Alice Walker. Walker’s first novel, The Third Life of Grange Copeland (1970), traces three generations of Grange Copeland’s family in Georgia from the early 1920s through the 1960s. It is with The Third Life that Walker makes her mark as a controversial novelist with taboo themes that are often swept under the rug by society. Understanding and appreciation of The Third Life of Grange Copeland is enhanced when the novel is analyzed through the lens of ‘Womanism’ (Black Feminism). Black Feminist criticism of the novel analyzes and assesses the toil of the racist south on the Copeland family. The expression of this aspect of racism and of the black experience is central to Walker’s creative vision in her first novel, and is largely
presented as a cautionary tale. However, the representation of the agents and agencies that are responsible for the abuse of black women in their families and communities is not the only critical thrust of Walker’s novel. Indeed, ‘the third life’ of Grange, the father and grandfather, becomes the narrative’s attempt to re-direct the Copeland family’s value system to its ancestral and cultural roots, to its African-based ethos. In this sense, Africana Studies discourse, especially ideas from Afro centric and Kawaida theories, intervenes and mediates the intrusion not only of racism but also of the behaviours of those who are oppressed by it. Moreover, African values chart a new path for the Copeland family, one that encourages Grange to understand that his granddaughter must not only survive, ‘she must survive whole’. Returning to values that emphasize that kinship and the communal self are needed as much today as they were in the south of the 1920s situates the novel as one that speaks to twenty-first century African American reality.

This realistic novel centers on the life of a young black girl, Ruth, and her grandfather, Grange. Grange brutalizes his own family because of the overwhelming racial circumstances of early twentieth century rural Georgia. Under the pressure of poverty and alienation, Grange causes his wife Margaret’s demoralization and suicide, a pattern which is repeated by his son, Brownfield, who murders his own wife, Mem. But their daughter, Ruth, is brought up by her grandfather, Grange, who in his ‘third life’ attempts to salvage some of his own wasted life by protecting Ruth. He has survived but ‘survival whole’ is what he wants for Ruth. Ruth emerges into a young woman at the same time as the Civil Rights Movement, and there is just a glimpse at the end of the novel of how that movement will affect Ruth’s life. She becomes aware by watching the Civil Rights activists that it is possible to struggle against the abuses of oppression.
Biographer Evelyn C. White published a biography on Alice Walker in 2004 entitled *Alice Walker: A Life*. Within the biography, White shares stories about Walker’s past from her upbringing in Eatonton, GA, her eye accident, her college experiences, life as a writer, and her success all the way through to the publication on the biography. In chapter 23, White gives background information on Walker’s *The Third Life* as well as a plot summary. At the same time, White provides information on early reviews on the book that were published at the time of the release of the novel. First, White quotes from Victor A Kramer’s, a Georgia State professor of English, review from the Library Journal. Kramer says,

> The novel, compacting the Copeland family life through three decades from 1920 presents hatred… within a plot that seems near fantasy… Walker’s characters are not pretty ones. Yet this is the point: dignity can be maintained amidst intense degradation (188).

Kay Bourne writes:

> Most poignant is the relating of the lives of black women, who were ready and strong and trusted, only to so often be abused by the conditions of their oppressed lives and the misdirected anger of men. *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* is more personal than the historical form. Alice Walker wants to talk to the living and she has succeeded. (55)

The novel, *The Third Life* examines the father-to-son relationship and the parent-to-child relationship through the expression of masculinity and expounds on the three life cycles that Grange endures - the first life is dominated by [Grange’s] response to an oppressive, dehumanizing social structure which deprives him of his personhood and causes him to abuse his wife Margaret and to deny parental love and care to his
son Brownfield; Grange’s second life is when he travels to the North and settles in the fast pace world of New York. Grange’s time in the North sets up the ‘transformation’ that he undergoes in his third life. In the third life, Grange goes back to the South and gains the opportunity to be a parent to his granddaughter Ruth.

In her novel, Alice Walker successfully explains the position of the powerless Black man in terms of the oppressed Black woman and her children. Because of the ‘American social system’, men like Grange are crushed by the power of the white man. 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 [counterpart] in his relations with his wife and [children]. In other words, the Black woman and her children suffer from the anger that the Black man has inside of him that was caused by the white man; however, in 1989, Barbara Christian mentions that societal change is invariably linked to personal change, that the struggle must be inner- as well as outer-directed. In relation, Hogue mentions:

The Third Life is silent on the thousands of Black women from the Afro-American historical past who refused to be loyal and submissive to Black men, who refused to accept the daily abuse from black men… But The Third Life has to be silent on rebellious Black women, for they represent a category, which its discursive formation denies. The presence of rebellious Black women in the text would never counter one of its principle enunciations: that despite the brutality inflicted on them by Black me, Black women remain loyal and submissive. (60)
Harold Hellenbrand, the Provost of California State University, writes about the silence that is presented in *The Third Life* in his article ‘Speech, after Silence: Alice Walker’s *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*’ in 1986. Hellebrand says,

> Walker wants us to sense that silence symbolizes those moments in her characters’ biological and emotional lives — especially, though not exclusively, her women’s — when they are most vulnerable to physical penetration and psychological manipulation. (117)

For instance, the act of murder of a pregnant white woman which is committed by Grange when she was in New York is evaluated Grange as a protector and Grange becomes the guardian of his granddaughter Ruth. Grange prepares Ruth for the world and refuses to leave her unarmed in a dangerous world. As a ‘rebellious storyteller’, Grange shares many stories with Ruth in their time together and tells her about the ‘cultural norm’ from a more truthful perception.

*The Third Life of Grange Copeland* is about the way man dominates, the way he pursues freedom from responsibility to women and children, the way he nurtures family. Walker’s fiction unites in revelation of violence as part of the life in the African American community and in confronting of the exploitation of African Americans themselves. Most importantly, she writes about the possible ways of coping with the Western people’s supremacy. Brownfield in Walker’s *Third Life of Grange Copeland* meets all the requirements of a bad man. His prevalent personality traits are cravenness and wickedness that are even enhanced by his anger. This anger is directed outside by violence, especially toward his wife and children who are scared of him. Additionally, Brownfield drinks much. Finally, he degenerates into a remorseless murderer who ends up in prison and later on killed.
Since his early childhood, Brownfield has been predestined to become a bad man and the course of his life only strengthens the bad man’s traits in him. When he was a child, none of his parents was interested in him. His father, Grange, took notice of him only when he was drunk and when he was possessed by violent behaviour. Furthermore, Brownfield has married an educated African American woman, which only contributes to his feelings of inferiority. The last straw in his degradation is when his neglectful father takes care of Brownfield’s youngest daughter, with which Brownfield cannot cope. Since childhood, Brownfield has suffered excessively by his father’s unconcern. In the fields where Brownfield has worked since he is six years of age, Grange does not look at or acknowledge him in any way. Not even at home does his father speak to him ‘unless they had company. Even then he acted as if talking to his son was a strain, a burdensome requirement’ (Grange, 5). Generally, Grange is silent because he is so devastated by the sharecropping system that forces him to be subordinate to Western people. Since his moods determine the atmosphere in the whole family, silence becomes a familial trait of the Copeland household. Madhu Dubey suggests that the “resounding silence reflects their absolute incapacity not only to alter but even to name their condition in their own terms” (34). However, the silence is interrupted every Saturday night when Grange comes home drunk. Then he acts violently’, “threatening to kill his wife and Brownfield” who have to run to the woods in an attempt to hide from Grange’s behaviour (Grange, 14). Brownfield is scared of his father and this fear has not dissipated even after many years have passed. When Brownfield meets his father again, his first impulse is to ‘knock his father down’ (Grange, 82).
However, he immediately finds out that he is not capable of hitting him because he is still afraid of him (Grange, 82). Not having a loving father, Brownfield grows up idealizing the warming words that he never heard Grange speak: “surely there had been a time when his father cooed hopefully to him as he fondled him on his knee” (Grange, 11). Despite these illusions, one of Brownfield’s strongest memories remains running to the woods from the rampaging Grange. Due to his neglectful behaviour, Grange does not shape him and thus Brownfield does not have a paternal model to follow. Nonetheless, not even Brownfield’s mother dedicates her time to his education. Grange’s behaviour understandably affects her in such extend that Margaret changes from a woman who is ‘kind, submissive, smelling faintly of milk’ into “a wild woman looking for frivolous things, her heart’s good times, in the transient embraces of strangers” (Grange, 24).

Her change is another thing that Brownfield holds against Grange. However, Brownfield loses both of his parents physically when his father leaves. Margaret does not bear Grange’s departure and commits suicide. After her death, Brownfield decides that he is “‘kinda lookin’ for [his] daddy” (Grange, 35) and sets out for the North. As his whole life, Brownfield ‘lived in the country and never saw anything or went anywhere,’ he is at a loss where exactly to go (Grange, 4). Brownfield only feels that he should go north:

He had no idea which direction he should follow to go North; unlike thousands of his ancestors he had never heard of the North Star. Often at night he gazed at the sky, searching for an omen. To gaze hopefully at the sky was in his blood, but nothing came of it. (Grange, 39)
Like Milkman, Brownfield is mesmerized by the sky. However, there is a difference between them. Unlike Milkman who desires to drive the air, Brownfield does not have any specific goal. In his life there is no aim, he does not want to achieve anything. He just muddles along. That is why he looks at the sky and wishes something, but he does not try to give a concrete form to his wishful thinking.

Brownfield was never taught about his history or about his ancestry and thus the African American traditions had not been passed onto him. As a result, he does not know about the Northern Star that could show him the way to the North.

On his way, Brownfield falls in love with Mem. At first, he thinks of her as about “another mother, the kind his own had not been. Someone to be loved and spoken to softly” (Grange, 45). Mem is a teacher and that fact connects her with the role of a mother who also teaches and educates her children. As a consequence of the fact that his own mother did not have time enough to teach and educate him, Brownfield is attracted to Mem. Nevertheless, at the same time Mem arouses in Brownfield feelings of guilt and shame that “he was no better than he was. Grime. Dirt” (Grange, 60). These feelings are the cause for Mem’s future decay. After three years of marriage, Brownfield is still satisfied. He is thankful that he married Mem: “She was so good to him, so much what he needed, that her body became his shrine and he kissed it endlessly, shamelessly, lovingly, and celebrated its magic with flowers and dancing” (Grange, 66). His family means a huge support for him and he “grew big and grew firm with love, and grew strong” (Grange, 66). However, after the years of hard work in the fields and no improvement in their living conditions, Brownfield starts to feel disillusioned. Disenchantment at work affects the atmosphere at home as well. His attitude towards Mem changes and she transforms in
Brownfield’s eyes from a supportive wife into “another link in the chain that held him to the land and to responsibility for her and her children” (Grange, 67).

His behaviour metamorphoses from loving into violent one. He isolates and humiliates her. His own children start to be afraid of him. Brownfield feels “destined to become no more than overseer, on the white man’s plantation, of his own children” (Grange, 72). The possibility of productive work fails to materialize and instead “crushing degradation and inescapable entrapment take place” (Masson Jr., 298). It seems to him that there is no way out of debts, no way how to earn enough money for his own house due to the low wages: “It was as if the white men said his woman needed no style, deserved no style, and therefore would get no style, and that they would always reserve the right to work the life out of him and to fuck her” (Grange, 73). Brownfield feels powerless.

However, even though Brownfield feels ‘small and black and bug like,’ he does not have a rebellious nature. To himself Brownfield calls him foul names, but aloud he says nothing. Brownfield does not dare to resist his Western boss. In Brownfield’s perception, he is a bug while his boss takes on the form of “a white giant that could step on him” (Grange, 103). Brownfield attributes to his boss gigantic powers thus making him too powerful to overcome. It is a proof that he accepts the Western people’s conviction that African American people are inferior to them and that he identifies with this image imprinted in the Western people’s mind. This is demonstrated every time Brownfield meets his boss. At such times, he is embarrassingly obsequious and submissive, “his knees under his overalls leaned shakily against each other” (Grange, 117). He resigns himself to be under domination: “He jumped when the crackers said jump, and left his welfare up to them” (Grange, 78).
Brownfield’s submissive demeanour brings his mother to the reader’s mind. Due to the fact that Grange left his family when Brownfield was just a five-year-old child, Brownfield did not have any paternal model that he could follow. He only saw Grange mistreating Brownfield’s mother and this brutal manner remained in him as the instruction for treating wives. The only adult around him was his mother and that is why he acquires her attitudes and distinctive traits. As a result, Brownfield deals with his boss in the same manner as his mother dealt with her husband because in his mind, men are superior to women and Western men are superior to African American men. Thus Brownfield’s boss, a Western man, is superior to Brownfield, an African American man, just as Grange, a man, is superior to Margaret, a woman.

As he is humiliated in the public sphere, Brownfield tries to establish his authority in the private sphere. This is in full accord with Spiegel’s theory that very often the oppressed becomes the oppressor. According to this theory the oppressors force their victims to suffer the same pain and degradation that they themselves have experienced. When someone is ill-treated, their natural response is venting their frustration on someone whose social position is lower than their own. Because women are considered subordinate to men, Brownfield sets out to dominate his wife Mem. Thus an African American man turns to his African American woman, who being the represent of lower status, suffers at his hands to enable him to feel in power again. The sources of male violence then come not from the claiming of power, but rather men tend to be violent against women when they feel that their power is slipping and breaking down. Jerry H. Bryant who says that supports this view “violence is a way of preserving order in [African American] social structure” (89). When the public male power fails, he needs to restore it in his private sphere, i.e. in his family. At the outset,
Mem resists her husband’s patriarchal domination, but she finally submits. Brownfield cannot forgive Mem that she is more educated than he is. Brownfield has never gone to school. Margaret wanted him to go but Grange only shrugged and that was the end of the discussion. At the beginning of their marriage, Brownfield is fascinated by Mem in part due to her education and her manners. However, after several years of marriage, he decides to get her at the same level as he is.

Firstly, he forbids Mem to teach. Her knowledge puts her above Brownfield, closer to their Western oppressors. Instead, he sends her to Western households as a domestic help to experience the same humiliation as he does in the fields. She tries to remain his great support and that is why she does what he tells her to do. Nevertheless, in her husband’s eyes this submission only proves him right and strengthens his growing distaste toward her. The harder Mem works to please her husband, the more repulsive she becomes in his mind. Secondly, Mem’s way of speech becomes the target of Brownfield’s mockery. At the beginning of their marriage, Mem corrects Brownfield’s speech but gradually it is the other way round. Brownfield reproaches his wife for not speaking like “the rest of us poor niggers” (Grange, 74). He intentionally puts her outside himself and their community in order to weaken her. Brownfield perceives that Mem is much stronger than he is and thus he wants to subjugate her. Moreover, he “could not stand having his men friends imply that she was too good for him” (Grange, 75). An important moment in his task to destroy his wife is when Mem burns her books. The books, according to Theodore Mason, function as “the material signs of her literacy and by burning them, she surrenders a part of her identity” (Davis, 39).
Thus just as his father destroyed his wife, Brownfield humiliates Mem. In fact, he is even more brutal than Grange. He changes her completely:

Everything about her he changed, not to suit him, for she had suited him when they were married. He changed her to something he did not want, could not want, and that made it easier for him to treat her in the way he felt she deserved. He had never had sympathy for ugly women (Grange, 76).

He regularly beats her and treats her “like a nigger and a whore, which he knew she was not” (Grange, 72). In Amanda J. Davis’s view, Brownfield, in order to acquire self-respect, uses his wife’s body: “Mem’s body literally becomes the text onto which Brownfield can write his frustration and declare his manhood” (Grange, 38).

The African American woman’s body serves as a surface for his power to be inscribed into. If one reads the novel, one can understand that the central to the novel is a powerful thematic tension between the characters’ strong desire for a stable life centering around a ‘home’ and their equally potent inclinations toward radical change, the ‘new life’ brought about by open journeying. Brownfield takes journeys in his daydreams and desires to take a journey to the North. Brownfield believes that his life will be better if he can reach the North. Grange takes a life journey through his three lives. Grange makes the journey to the North and settles in New York. After a difficult life in New York, Grange returns to Georgia. Grange continues his journey into his third life and becomes a parental figure to Ruth. Now the question becomes, since Ruth has lost both her parents, one to death and the other to prison, how should Ruth navigate life in her journey? How will her journey be different from those around her? Robert James Butler points out:
Although, Walker is deliberately vague about the end-point of Ruth’s journey in order to stress its open, intermediate quality, she emphatically points out that it will be radically different from the failed journeys undertaken by several other characters. (74)

Regardless of what Ruth chooses, Ruth will be successful because she will ‘triumph where others have failed’ and she can continue to make ‘a way out of no way.’ While reading, it can be perceived that *The Third Life* has been created out of Walker’s double vision and that she is fully aware of the racist society that surrounds black life in the South and her desire to escape from that world and that the same truth holds for Ruth’s character.

As for as Alice Walker’s vision of the South in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* is concerned, Walker hates the South. However, Walker hates the South is far too easy of a statement report when the truth is far more complicated. Walker has drawn on the pain from her past of watching her father as a sharecropper and the racism of the South to produce positive material. According to Butler, ‘The single work which best expresses Walker’s powerful ambivalence toward Southern life is in her first novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, a book notable for its vitality and resonance’ (op. cit., 196). Walker uses the characters, Grange, Brownfield, and Ruth, as examples for how she truly views the South. With Brownfield, Walker shows how the South can physically enslave and spiritually cripple black people because he is victimized by the extreme racism and poverty. Brownfield’s name was given to him when his mother Margaret asked Grange what he saw outside. Grange saw “brownish colored fields” (*Grange*, 228) of Georgia and without hesitation or care, his mother gave him the name Brownfield. Out of these characters, Brownfield’s story is the
most pitiful. Brownfield truly lives up to his name by becoming a crop that has failed to mature and bear fruit because his life has been deprived of necessary nutrients.

Ruth represents the hope that can come out of the South by rejecting the racist world and Grange’s life points out some of the positive features of Southern black life.

Grange and Ruth share a special bond that lasts from the times of her birth to the time of his death. In their time together, Grange tells Ruth that she will not become a sharecropper and that she will go to school to be educated. Grange provides her with everything that Ruth needs to flee from the South.

When discussing the types of females in Walker’s work, Mary Helen Washington looks at them as historical representations as well as a cycle of the emerging feminist (or womanist). Washington provides a cyclical socio-historical view of black women, from victimized by society and their men to women with growing consciousness and control. She divides women into three historical groups or cycles: the first are ‘suspended women,’ who are victims of physical and psychic abuse (who make up the majority of Walker’s female characters); the second are the women of the 1940s and 1950s who assimilate and are alienated from their roots and are therefore victims of psychic violence; the third cycle are women of the Movement who reconnect with their roots and creativity and live with a new awareness. Washington places Margaret, Josie, and Mem in her first cycle, which creates a false generalization of their behavior in the novel. By categorizing them as ‘suspended women,’ Washington negates the powerful actions they perform in the text. Washington assumes that all the women in Grange, except for Ruth, belong in this category.

In Walker’s Grange Copeland, Margaret, Josie, and Mem challenge their role but ultimately fail at surviving ‘whole’. These women, however, employ survival
strategies that challenge basic present-day ideologies. These strategies are often what could be called power mechanisms because the rise and fall of these women’s lives is based on power struggles in which they battle to wield control. The novel describes the lives of these women as they struggle with society, their landlords, and their husbands. These women survive partially by taking on a role or behavior previously belonging to men. Unlike the others, Ruth has the opportunity for a life without male domination and violence. Because the other women live a subjugated life, one without the opportunities granted to Ruth, they reclaim only a part of their identity. Margaret is the only one of the three women whose existence resembles Washington’s theory of ‘suspended women’. But Margaret also employs her own survival strategies to challenge dominant ideologies; her mistake is the strategy she chooses and its lack of power against the cycle of poverty. Margaret is the only female character who could be considered a victim. Her perspective is never given focus and Brownfield describes her as always submissive: He thought his mother was like their dog in some ways. She didn’t have a thing to say that did not in some way show submission to his father (5).

Though Margaret is a submissive character, she resists through the only means she finds available. Margaret has to deal with oppression and poverty, but she also must deal with Grange’s drunkenness, abuse, and infidelity. In an attempt to gain some power in her household, she tries to beat Grange at his own game and find acceptance. Margaret assumes the behaviour of her oppressor in an attempt to overturn the power hierarchy. Brownfield’s perception guides the reader through Margaret’s sexual power struggle: one day she was as he had always known her; kind, submissive, smelling faintly of milk; and the next day she was a wild woman looking for frivolous things, her heart’s good times, in the transient embraces of strangers.
Margaret is a victim of multiple forms of oppression, but her attempt at a power upheaval implies that if she had the sufficient means, she would fight and perhaps succeed at claiming her identity and rebuilding her family. In her article, ‘Novels For Everyday Use,’ Barbara Christian discusses the inability for poor black women to fit into the female roles given by society. This is not because they are victims unable to make progress, but because they are denied the resources necessary to fill such roles and as a result they are denied identity. The label of victim might be suitable for Margaret, but even as a victim, her strength is what barely held the family together. When she falls apart, Grange abandons the family, she poisons herself and her illegitimate baby, and Brownfield is left to wander and try to make a life for himself. Margaret is barely mentioned again in the novel, and at her exit, Josie enters and changes Brownfield’s life and disrupts the narrative focus.

The figure of Grange Copeland in Walker’s The Third Life of Grange Copeland the name itself conveys his crucial characteristic of being able to ‘cope’ with the ‘land’ in order to build a ‘grange’. This suggests that Grange is a man who manages to provide his family with a place and furthermore with material support. Even though he is not capable of giving it immediately, he achieves this ability gradually. Grange undergoes a radical development. The reader can distinguish in him three stages. The initial stage is marked by violence and drinking, which is an outward display of self-hatred. In the next stage, this hatred is redirected from oneself into the oppressors, i.e. Western people. In the last phase, Grange becomes more benevolent toward the outer world and develops a cosmic sense of compassion. Grange’s first stage is characterized by a despotic behaviour in his family. His moods determine the atmosphere in his whole family. If Grange is morose or sullen, his wife is ‘tense and
hard, exceedingly nervous’ and his son Brownfield moves about the house ‘like a mouse’ and if Grange is quiet, his wife and son are ‘relaxed’. When Grange is away, his wife dresses cleanly, ‘waiting for visitors who never come’, while the son is ‘playing contentedly in the woods’. When Grange comes home drunk, threatening to kill both of them, his wife and son flee from him into the woods. The whole family is trapped in the cyclic repetition of these situations.

In their depression, Grange and Margaret cannot speak with each other. There is only silence or altercations, no peaceful conversation at all: ‘Days passed sometimes without a sound’. Instead of words, Grange uses inaudible gesticulation such as shrug. Kate Cochran suggests “Grange’s silence reflects the emptiness of his world” (90). Grange vindicates her statement when he says that all that matters at that time are ‘the long rows and wide acres of cotton’. He tries to make an adequate living for his family and the force for living his own life is missing. Grange does not speak about the situation because he is not able to face the truth. He feels shame and ‘shame leads to silence’. However, pronouncing one’s situation has the healing effect. Discussing the problems and expressing one’s thoughts contribute to the improvement of the situation. In *The Colour Purple*, Walker shows the healing effect of uttering one’s situation where Celie writes letters to God and then to Nettie. Her own words have self-revealing effect for her. When Celie writes what she feels and experiences, it enables her to look at the situation more objectively and helps her to understand the conditions better. Consequently, Celie is more self-aware and thus prepared to defend her needs and desires. In the case of Grange, he is not conscious yet of the healing power of words. It is revealed to him much later by way of the time spent with his granddaughter. For the time being, his problems emerge on the surface only when he
is drunk. The reason for this dismal state of affairs lies in Grange’s depression. He tries hard but is not successful. He does not represent any support for his family, which makes him feel useless and powerless. His ego is eroded and he therefore fails in both of his roles in the family: as a father and a husband.

Grange is not a proper father to his son. It is hinted that Grange’s father was absent in his home, which foreshadows Grange’s abandonment of his own son. Subsequently, it seems reasonable to expect the same behaviour at Brownfield as well. Judging from her novels, in Walker’s perspective, the presence of a father figure, who a male child can look up to, is immensely important. The child needs to see the proper behaviour of a father in order to imitate it in the future. Without the paternal model, the male child is ill equipped to be a proper father himself. As a result, Grange is not a proper husband either. His feelings of desolation and helplessness that are primarily caused by his subordinate position to Western people in the sharecropping system, force Grange try to establish his authority at least at home. The sharecropping period is in the novel characterized as the time when ‘love had stopped’ and it was hard even ‘to remember’ it. Thus, Grange’s behaviour to his wife does not love. On the contrary, he abuses Margaret in order to feel less subjugated. He tortures her physically by beating as well as psychologically by not speaking to her. Furthermore, Grange is unfaithful to Margaret. Since his early adulthood, Grange has had a life-long lover Josie. He does not stop meeting her even after his wedding. He explains his motive to his wife: “If I can never own nothing … I will have women. I love you, he had assured [Margaret], because I trust you to bear and raise my sons; I love Josie because she can have no sons (Grange, 228).
Thus Grange makes two women suffer — his lover and his wife. His lover is in depression because she is only a lover and nothing more. His wife suffers because she is not the only one for him and thus she turns to other men to make up for this loss as well as to make her husband suffer in return. Thus, Margaret changes from a woman who was ‘kind, submissive, and smelling faintly of milk’ into ‘a wild woman looking for frivolous things, her heart’s good times, in the transient embraces of strangers’ (Grange, 24). Finally, the last straw on her way to destruction is her husband’s departure. She decides to take her life. Moreover, Margaret takes not only her life but also her newborns. Like Sethe in Morrison’s Beloved, Margaret does not want her child to have the same joyless life as she had. She protects her newborn by killing it, which rounds off her destruction. Therefore, Grange by his own desolation damages other people around him.

The change that takes place in Grange is very similar to the change that Mr. ___ undergoes in The Colour Purple. Mr. ___ also changes from an oppressive tyrant in the domestic sphere due to the Western racism in the social sphere, into a relatively philosophical friend and companion to Shug and Celie. Alice Walker speaks highly about Mr. ___ and Grange, as they are characters who achieve wholeness – … when people die whole, a wonderful power is released in the world; a wonderful fearlessness before death, which in turn inspires in others a more profound joyousness about life (Walker, 31).

Grange dies but he has inspired Ruth to search for a life full of satisfaction. At the end of his life, he is reconciled with himself and dies whole. Walker has stated that a big part of what she is trying to do through her characters emphasize that change is possible and one of the most important things that society must work
towards. Christian discusses this belief in change as a way that women are defined in the text: “the way in which women are treated and the way in which they define themselves are related to the possibility of change” (Grange, 101). Mem’s belief in change is what allows her to survive and keep challenging her family’s status. Brownfield’s overturning of Mem’s power and literal murder of her and her identity are not grounds to dismiss her as a victim.

When Mem is murdered and Brownfield refuses to change, Ruth is the only hope left to break the Copeland’s cycle of poverty and abuse. Directly following the murder, the reader follows Ruth’s childhood and adolescence for the rest of the text. Ruth’s perspective is integrated with Grange’s, as he becomes her guardian after Mem’s death. This prominence of perspective leads readers and critics to focus on Ruth as the most important female character. There are many reasons why Ruth’s character has been given the most focus when it comes to discussing female characters in Grange. Most important is the prominence of her perspective in the second half of the novel. But the fact that prominence of perspective sways the focus of readers and critics supports the argument that Mem and Josie are as important as Ruth and as undeserving of the victim label. Both Josie and Mem have several places in the text where their perspective is given focus, like Ruth’s; therefore, these two belong in a category with Ruth. Narrative perspective focus is important, but it is only one part of why Ruth commands critical focus. Many critics view the novel as being about three generations of Copelands: Grange, Brownfield, and Ruth. This is a bit simplistic when one recalls the prevalence of the other women’s stories. There is no question that Grange is a pivotal character in this text and he is able to see what was missing in these women's lives that kept them from surviving. Grange witnesses
Margaret, Mem, and Josie fight without surviving successfully; he realizes that survival is one thing, such as Josie and the Dew Drop Inn, but something is missing: “Survival was not everything. He had survived. But to survive whole is what he wanted for Ruth” (Grange, 272). These elements enable Ruth to survive through the struggle but also to be happy, enjoy life, and enjoy being a woman. Ruth is the female character of focus in the critical conversation for all of these reasons, but her distinct opportunities and survival are not reason enough to categorize the rest of the female characters as victims without a discussion of their struggles.

Ruth is the only independent female with an intact identity at the novel’s close, but that does not erase the many things that have been done by Margaret, Josie, and Mem throughout the text that associate them to Ruth. These female characters provide the first examples of elements a woman must obtain in order to survive. Margaret, Josie, and Mem have self-sufficiency, independence, speech (proper or not), and the courage to fight. Therefore, none of them should be so easily dismissed. Mem’s strength and defiance at her place in life serve as a model for Ruth, but reviewers and critics often forget this when they begin to write about and discuss the novel. Keeping in mind what Alice Walker is trying to do with her art, it is unfortunate that the feminist critical discussion has left out the females who paved the way for Ruth, by fighting battles even though they may have lost the ultimate war with their oppressors. Margaret, Josie, and Mem may reach different levels of identity and autonomy in the text, but each of them attempts to reclaim identity and rebuild the family. Each of these women performs actions that challenge a racist and sexist society. None of them stands back and allows them to be victimized. By being silent
on the challenges to dominant ideologies performed by these women, critics relegate these women to the silent position from which Walker releases them.

As discussed earlier, it is obvious that genders decide the position of people in the all over the world. Colored women find more difficult to survive in any community and they feel that they are separated from the society. They have to endure the violence and racist behaviours of both white men and women. In addition to these, coloured women are not only struggling against racist society, but also suffering at the hands of black men as well as the white.

Alice Walker’s second novel, *Meridian* proceeds naturally from *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, the first novel of her younger generation from the older. Again, her illumination of the potent process of personal change unifies the bits and pieces of southern life as exists in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*. Here also, the image of a recurrent focal to the novel’s theme. However, Walker’s first novel is deep in its child as a continuing possibility is one of the dominant motifs and the black woman’s struggle is penetrating concentration on the Copeland family, but in *Meridian*, the novelist expands the theme of a procession of generations to the history of black people in the South. Walker focuses on a journey of her protagonist for self-realization and freedom, breaking away all the stereotypical bonds that society imposes upon her and finally emerges as a womanist. While many authors focusing on liberating the self from recognizably tangible obstacles, Walker focuses on a journey of her protagonist as a womanist. Her protagonist, Meridian confronts two painfully acknowledged social conditions - racism and sexism. Walker has also introduced the theme of motherhood in Meridian, which becomes a barrier for women in their journey towards self-definition and self-discovery.
As a writer, Walker in an interview asserts that her preoccupations: “… the spiritual survival, the survival whole my black people But beyond that I am committed to exploring the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties, and the triumphs of black women” (O’Brien, 192).

It is evident that all these preoccupations of Walker are present in her novel *Meridian*. Walker’s commitment of exploring the oppressions and triumphs of black women, and their relationships with their mothers and their struggles within their family and society and finally their transformations marked in *Meridian*. This novel records the growth of Meridian, her movement into womanhood and her emergence as a womanist at the end of the novel.

*Meridian* is organized into three major parts. The first Part of *Meridian* flows through the past and present consciousness of Meridian by discussing her initiation into adulthood and her preparation for the journey towards selfhood. The second part “Truman Held” that is dominated by the mind-voice of Truman Held and his wife Lynne, describes Meridian’s active participation in the Civil Rights Movement. The third part “Ending”, in which the voices of Truman and Meridian play with and against one another, concentrates on atonement and release. *Meridian* records the growth of Meridian, her movement into womanhood and her emergence as a womanist at the end of the novel. Walker makes it clear towards the end of the novel that Meridian’s personal identity becomes part of black people’s collective identity. As Thadious Davis asserts “Meridian is born into a pluralistic cultural self, a “we” that is and must be selfless and without ordinary prerequisites for personal identity” (49).
In *Meridian*, the protagonist Meridian Hill is a representative of black women whom she has fought against injustice by using nonviolence as a tool and has a chance to educate herself and her society in order to eradicate her people’s suffering. She believes that the ignorance is a cause, as well as obstacle to black a people’s way to get freedom and equality. These people are not aware that they have rights to get equal opportunity and to defend for themselves. They are unaware of their rights because they get accustomed to the inferior status that they have hold for a long time. This inferiority has been caused by slavery. During the time of the novel, though slavery has gone, its influence is still felt. Many black people get used to the lower status and do not ask for any changes because they are tuned to lead the life of slavery. Only a few have realized that all their opportunities should equally be provided to them.

The first chapter of the novel is significant because it throws light on the oppression of women by patriarchal society through the delineation of the pathetic story Marilene O’Shay, the mummy of a dead woman. Meridian is leading a group of black children to see the Marilene O’Shay exhibit, in the first chapter, clearly aware of the fact that no blacks would be allowed to see the exhibit on that particular day. She courageously faces the anger of white society by leading the poor black children, insisting on their right to enter into the exhibit on that day, the day for “whites only”.

The protagonist, Meridian Hill’s an early marriage and divorce, gives up her child to accept a scholarship to go to college, where she becomes an active participant in the Civil Rights Movement. There she falls in love with Truman Held, a black political activist from the North by whom she becomes pregnant. After learning that Truman has become involved with Lynne Robinowitz, another Civil Rights volunteer,
Meridian Hill aborts her baby and ties her tubes. The friendship among Meridian, Truman and Lynne continues even after Truman’s marriage with Lynne. Although Meridian becomes an active participant in Civil Rights Movement, she disagrees with its approach. Instead, as a true humanist, she uses non-violence as a tool to resist based and gets succeed. In her quest for an answer to the existing racial problems, Meridian unconsciously undergoes a personal transformation which helps her to understand the problems of sexism and the power of the collective voice of women which is the only vehicle to put an end to the patriarchal suppression of women.

As a granddaughter of slaves, Meridian is brought up among the conflicts of racism, patriarchy, and the suspicious feeling of maternal love. Being an activist of the Civil Rights Movement, she has a lot of personal problems as well as psychological conflicts. Despite many obstacles from outside forces and the conflicts within her own psyche, Meridian tries to build up her strength by taking her own way. While having to fight against her own psychological problems, she encourages her people to keep their own rights by voting. In order to gain power and strength she has to seek for effective empowering strategies by herself.

As the ignorance of the self, the people, and the strong force of patriarchal disbelief, Meridian has faced many problems, which are caused by her lack of self-knowledge about heterosexual relationships that is caused by her mother’s ignorance. As far as the problem of the relationship is concerned, nobody has educated her to adjust herself with the opposite sex. Mrs. Hill an incapacitated woman cannot teach her daughter because of her ignorance: “lack of information on the subject of sex was accompanied by a seeming lack of concern about her daughter’s morals” (Meridian, 60). While Meridian stands as the embodiment of a new consciousness, her mother
Mrs. Hill has very little of her daughter’s expanded consciousness. She is a conventional woman with a weak personality. She sacrifices her own emotional life for the sake of her children. “Her frail independence gave way to the pressures of motherhood… She was not even allowed to be resentful that she was caught. That her personal life was over” (*Meridian*, 50). Mrs. Hill believes that a married woman should be ready to allow the death of her own self. Though she inwardly experiences repressed feelings of life, she hides it outside with a determination of being a good mother. In the ironing of her children’s clothes, she expanded all the energy she might have put into openly loving theme: “in their stiff, almost inflexible garments. They were enclosed in the search of her anger” (*Meridian*, 79). Her act of ironing symbolizes her attempt to suppress her feelings. Since she is unable to express her anger towards her children, she redirects it on clothing. The starched spotless clothes she provides her children are meant to force the children to become the model family members - obedient and respectable.

By listening to the folklore in her college life, Meridian comes to know more about the lives of women in the past, who were suppressed completely by the male dominant society. These pathetic folk stories compel her to engage in search of selfhood and to fight against the oppression of women. The true patriarch Henry O’Shay whose wife, Marilène’s body has been preserved in life like condition for about twenty-five years. He not only killed her for betraying him with another man, but also proved his patriarchal power by preserving her dead body as an epitome of southern womanhood to the future generations with four slogans on it describing her: “Obedient Daughter”, “Devoted Wife”, “Adoring Mother”, and “Gone Wrong” (*Meridian*, 4).
The first three phrases suggest that a woman had always been considered as a person dependent upon the male society. She could only stand as a stereotypical image of woman in relation to others, usually men. It is also evident that she is always defined in relation to a man and is never allowed to stand as an individual. In contrast, Meridian rejects these stereotypes and tries to stand apart from these oppressed women. She disobeys her mother, renounces her child, forgets her husband and struggles to stand as an individual in society. When Meridian rejects these stereotypes; she becomes complete woman, having an identity of her own. Both Meridian and Eddie have misconception of life and sex. Eddie thinks that life would have been happy only with sexual pleasures, whereas she expects love and warmth, the male chauvinistic attitude of Eddie shows that the society strongly believes that women should be inferior, dependent, and submissive, and men can be superior, aggressive, authoritative and independent.

You just don’t care about it anymore,” he moaned, burying his head in the pillow next to hers. In fact, this last worry surprised her. She did not see how he could feel she was less interested in sex, for she felt she had never shown anything approaching interest. …. She did not know what to do, so of course she put the blame on any handy thing; her big stomach, the queasiness, the coming baby, old wives’ tales that forbade intercourse until three months after the baby was born (a fact she learned from his mother: that intercourse any earlier weakened one’s brain). (Meridian, 60)

When they say, “women are dependent and submissive”, (Meridian, 72) it seems as though women must receive protection from men. However, in reality
women have been named as helpless, submissive, that makes them victimized and exploited. Another major theme that Walker explores in this novel is motherhood. Though motherhood is exalted in society, it refuses to consider individual mothers as human beings having their own needs and desires. Motherhood not only takes away the emotional expectations of woman but also labels the women society as baby machines. Mrs. Hill and Meridian has got into the entrapment of patriarchal society. In lieu of the fact, that Meridian and her mother are victimized by strong patriarchal values. Meridian’s mother is a good example of the stereotypical image of a mother, who is typical traditional based woman, suppresses her emotions within the heart. Mrs. Hill has to come up from the struggles that are made by her husband Mr. Hill. He thinks that it is better for her to learn to cook collard greens, shortbread and fried okra to please men. Yet, Mrs. Hill has educated to bear many suffering, especially financial problems and even her father’s disregard towards her. Meridian as a young sensitive girl could understand the emotional flattening of her mother in order to serve her children. Her understanding of the difficulties of motherhood compels her to give up her own child for adoption. She is well aware that she could not play the role of a mother correctly by suppressing her own self, as her mother did. Though she renounces her child and goes in search of selfhood, she feels a deep-rooted sense of guilt for her inability to live up to the ideal of motherhood. In the course of the novel, like Meridian and Nelda who is the girlhood friend of Meridian is also victim of black motherhood, when she wanted to go for Education. However, she too never finishes her Education an account of pregnancy. Fast Mary is another girl whose pregnancy led to suicide. Barbara Christian speaks about the dangers of the myth of black motherhood by asserting:
The monumental myth of black motherhood, a myth based on the true stories of sacrifice black mothers performed for their children. … it imposes a stereotype of black women, a stereotype of black women, a stereotype of strength that denies them choice and hardly admits of the many who were destroyed. (89)

In common with many feminists, Walker considers motherhood to be death for a woman. She has also examined and analyzed the dangers of motherhood. But unlike others, Walker does not condemn motherhood, but makes it clear that it becomes an obstacle for women’s liberation mainly in black society.

Meridian’s sexual initiation starts in the Daxtor funeral parlour when she is very young. In her early sexual encounters, she imagines herself as an object, used by man for his sexual gratification. But later on she becomes disinterested in sex, as a result of which her husband Eddie deserts her and goes away with a mistress. Her next sexual encounter starts with Truman Held, when she works with him in the Civil Rights Movement. When her union with Truman results in her pregnancy, Truman loses interest in her and becomes involved with a white woman called Lynne. For Meridian, it looked “doubly unfair that after all her sexual experience and after one baby and one abortion she had not once been completely fulfilled by sex” (Meridian, 115).

As Lauren Berland puts it:

The novel is critical of the sexism within the Civil Rights Movement. Nonetheless Meridian subordinates the struggle within gender to the “larger” questions raised by the imminent exhaustion or depletion of the movement itself. Meridian’s theory of “one life” dissolves the barriers of class and education between herself and the black
community at large and effectively depoliticized the struggle with the movement’s patriarchal values and practices by locating the “personal” problems of sexism within the national project. (835)

Meridian realizes her mistake of indulging in sexual encounter, which would never allow her to attain selfhood. She decides to rise above bodily claims in order to become a perfect woman. Her act of aborting her child by Truman stands as a metaphor for rooting out the sexual weakness in her. When Truman once again comes to her and asks for her love she says, “No, I set you free” (Meridian, 216).

Meridian’s search for selfhood defines her attempt to express the totality of self and its relationship to the world. Meridian finally becomes an emergent woman, who embraces her black people, especially black women in order to help them, breaking away all the societal bonds of race and sex. She becomes a liberated woman at the end who knows what steps she should take to create a new future for black women. She proclaims I want to put an end to guilt

I want to put an end to shame
Whatever you have done my sister
(my brother)
Know I wish to forgive you
Love you
It is not the crystal stone
Of our innocence
That circles us
Not the tooth of our purity
That bites bloody our hearts. (Meridian, 235)
As a womanist, Walker deals with an individual woman’s rejection of the traditional definition of women and her powerful struggle against the whole society. Her search for wholeness can be defined as her attempt to express the totality of self and how the self is related to the world.

The theme of female bonding is also reiterated in *Meridian*. The friendship between Meridian and Lynne is significant because it helps them to share their oppressed feelings.

“I know white folks are evil and fucked up, I know they’re doomed. But where does that leave me? I know I have feelings, like any other human being. Camara wasn’t just some little back kid that got ripped off on the street. She was my child. I’d have to walk over my child’s grave to go back, and I won’t”.

“I know,” said Meridian. (*Meridian*, 190) Meridian had hugged her, she had hugged Meridian, and they had parted. Lynne had soon drifted into a kind of sleep, while thinking of the South. (*Meridian*, 192)

Meridian’s friendship with Anne Marian is also significant for Anne is the only woman who -- understands Meridian completely. Although Walker uses the complex quilt structure in her novel, she has dealt with the elements of pain and strength of an entire tradition of women, which is very appealing. By discussing the life of Meridian who has experienced both sexism and racism all through her life and her emergence as a Womanist at the end, Walker confirms the basic right of a woman to live her own life as she wishes.

In an interview with Mary Helen Washington, Walker describes three types of black women:
The “Suspended woman”, characterized by immobility, the “assimilated woman”, a woman ready to move, but finds no place to move, and the “emergent woman”, a woman who makes “tentative steps into an uncharted region”. (213-214)

The major character of the novel, Meridian is a combination of all these three types. Meridian is described as a Woman who is physically and psychologically abused at first. She is also ready to become an exception from the ordinary abused black womanhood, but nurses a deep-rooted guilt in her, for her rejection of the role of wife and mother. She finally becomes an artist by expanding her mind with action.

Meridian cannot only be limited as a main character, but she stands as an embodiment of the novel’s major concept, the relationship between personal and social change.

Although the male characters of this novel are subordinated to other women, the character analysis of Truman Held is very important. Despite his honorable struggle for social change, he persists in a patriarchal insensitivity towards women. He is torn between his attraction towards black women whom he idealizes as earth mothers and the white women whom he finds sexually appealing. He is conditioned to pursue women, but he expects virginity from them. He also longs for a woman, who should satisfy him be being a right woman who, “Would not mind being a resource for someone else … a woman to rest in, as a ship must have a port. As a train must have a shed”. (Meridian, 141)

According to him, a woman should be like, a port or a shed which is static and immobile. Another character who plays a significant role in the novel is Lynne, the wife of Truman. Her friendship with Meridian is significant for the close bonding between women and their shared feelings marks a new trend in Women’s writing.
While male writers view women as opponents competing for male favors, women writers are able to conceive the possibility of true friendship and understanding between two women, even if they are wife and mistress of the same man. Lynne tells Meridian about her traumatic experience of marriage by which she feels deceived. Though both of them know the weaknesses of Truman, they do not hate him. The bond between these two women is reminiscent of Celie and Shug of *The Colour Purple*; however, they do not have any lesbian relationship with each other.

Lynne does not feature as a simple stereotype in the novel, but as a naively idealistic reformer caught in the spirit of the times. She is a courageous and defiant woman who risks all of her personal ties. She represents what Meridian might have been, had she married Truman. She shows signs of recovered strength and a newly detected sees of her ability to endure alone towards the end of the novel.

I did not know then how much was ended. When I look back now… I can still see the butchered women and children lying heaped and scattered all along the crooked gulch as plain as when I saw them with eyes still young. … the nation’s hoop is broken and shattered. There is no center any longer, and the sacred tree is dead. (*Meridian*, 114)

By understanding above said analogies, Meridian Hill has been conditioned by her community’s patriarchal institutions to repress her individuality and, above all, not to speak out inappropriately. And her only rebellious recourse is silence. Because of her refusal to participate in authorized discourse, Meridian fails to fit in with a succession of social groups from her church congregation, to those at the elite college she attends, to a cadre of would-be violent revolutionaries. She begins a process of personal transformation when she sets out alone to fight her own battles, through personal struggle and Civil Rights work.
Walker posits Meridian’s struggle for personal transformation as an alternative to the political movements of the 1960s, particularly those that merely reproduced existing power structures. As Karen Stein writes,

... the novel points out that the Civil Rights Movement often reflected the oppressiveness of patriarchal capitalism. Activists merely turned political rhetoric to their own ends while continuing to repress spontaneous individuality. To overcome this destructiveness, Walker reaches for a new definition of revolution. Her hope for adjust society inheres not merely in political change, but in personal transformation. (130)

Even the revolutionary cadre that Meridian tries to join insists that she perform an authorized speech, declaring that she would both die and kill for the revolution. When she silently considers whether she could kill another human being, the group becomes hostile towards her and finally excludes her.

Meridian’s life is shaped by those moments when she remains silent although those around her demand that she speak. She could not publicly repent, despite her mother’s urgings; she is tormented by her peers’ hissing, “Why don’t you say something?” (Meridian, 28), and by the memory of her mother pleading, “Say it now, Meridian ...” (Meridian, 29). Meridian’s silence short-circuits the response expected by patriarchal discourse. Her refusal to speak negates the existing order’s ability to use her as a ventriloquist's doll, a mindless vehicle that would spout the ideological line. Meridian’s strategy does not prevent her from feeling guilt both for not conforming to the standards of her family and friends, and for not being able to speak out effectively against these standards.
Meridian lives on her own, separated from her family and the cadre that has rejected her. Alone, she performs spontaneous and symbolic acts of rebellion, such as carrying a drowned black child’s corpse to the mayor’s office to protest the town officials’ neglect of drainage ditches in black neighborhoods. She accomplishes more than the would-be revolutionaries, who move on to live yuppie lifestyles. Stein writes,

Walker’s novel affirms that it is not by taking life that true revolution will come about, but through respect for life and authentic living of life . . . gained only through each individual’s slow, painful confrontation of self” (140).

Only Meridian, who struggles with questions that other characters gloss over, completes this personal transformation. Her confrontations with her personal history, family history, and racial history shape the way she chooses to live.

Meridian’s struggle for personal transformation echoes June Jordan’s definition of her duties as a feminist:

I must undertake to love myself and to respect myself as though my very life depends upon self-love and self-respect . . . and . . . I am entering my soul into a struggle that will most certainly transform the experience of all the peoples of the earth, as no other movement can, ... because the movement into self love, self-respect, and self-determination is . . . now galvanizing . . . the unarguable majority of human beings everywhere. (58)

One of Meridian’s most difficult struggles is to forgive herself for her perceived failings. If she can learn to love and respect herself, she can see her moments of
silence as legitimate acts of rebellion against a system that would deny her individuality. Otherwise, she can only view her silences as examples of the times she has failed her family and friends.

The novel *The Colour Purple* also deals with issues of relationships between the sexes, the struggle for power and the search for a voice by previously silenced characters. The story is not only Celie’s but tells of other women in her community who have also been silenced in one way or another by men.

In her article ‘Philomela Speaks: Alice Walker’s Revisioning of Rape Archetypes in *The Colour Purple’* Martha J. Cutter argues that the novel is “Walker’s rewriting of the story of Philomela’ and how the text ‘gives Philomela a voice that successfully resists the violent patriarchal inscription of male will onto the silent female body” (163). Her argument centers around the claim that Celie, the protagonist of Walker’s novel, finds a way to break away from the silence imposed on her. Other critics such as King-Kok Cheung, in her essay “Don’t Tell: Imposed Silences in *The Colour Purple* and *The Woman Warrior*” claims that the novel is about ‘breaking silence’ and in turn violating the “paternal warning against speech” (162) which has been forced upon them. *The Colour Purple* can be seen as two stories; the first part of the book is the story of Celie as a silenced woman in search of her voice and the second part is the story of Celie as a strong independent woman, a mediator of experience for the reader. The story is a woman’s successful search for a voice and how her life transforms after she finds it.

Although the experiences of the women in the novel are different, there is one thing, which ties them together; all of the women of the *The Colour Purple* are, to some extent, silenced. Celie has been directly forbidden to speak by Pa and the other
women’s silence is of various kinds. The novel is about a dumb, half literate and abused fourteen year-old girl named Celie who records her experiences through letters. Celie writes to God, Nettie to her sister Celie, and Celie to Nettie. Only one sentence in the novel is not part of a letter, it is a warning from Pa to Celie: “You better not never tell nobody but God. It’d kill your mammy” (*Colour*, 155). In mortal fear of the man who has violated her, she follows his instructions and tells her troubles only to God through her letters. “Celie … never speaks; rather, she writes her speaking voice and that of everyone who speaks to her” (Gates, 243). Their insensible repression and social injustice are done by the patriarchal society of the United States and Africa. By the way of presenting their characters, Walker has reflected “revolting truth” life of black and also presents a new facet of the experience of black women in America. Trudier Harris has argued, “the novel has done a great disservice through its treatment of black woman and a disservice as well to the Southern black communities in which such treatment was set” (155). She continues and claims: “what Celie records - the degradation, abuse, dehumanization - is not only morally repulsive, but it invites spectator readers to generalize about black people in the same negative ways that have gone on for centuries” (Ibid. 156).

Alice walker portrays Celie’s growth from a dependent, defeated personality to an independent, liberated woman with purpose and drive in a sequential order. Hence, through the characters of Celie and Nettie, the novelist focuses on female assertiveness, female narrative voice, female relationships and violence through ‘female Assertiveness’ in *The Colour Purple*. As Walker’s way of delimiting women’s space, she liberates Sofia from submissiveness, making her a mouthy free spirit, a challenge to a powerful system. Shug is an adventuresome blues singer with fine tastes and without limits on her sexual preferences. Nettie, too, asserts herself by
escaping her stepfather’s house rather than succumbing to his unwanted advances. Her escape takes her all the way to Africa.

Celie writes in her letters about how she suffers at the hands of her stepfather, who rapes her repeatedly and imposes on her a terrible silence. She bears two children by her father, both of which is stolen by him and is told that they are dead. She is given to Mr.____, who marries her and separates her from her beloved sister Nettie. As an innocent girl, Celie is abused and treated like a slave even by her husband.

Her silence is representative of her invisibility, and she keeps herself in years of silence. By the way of dealing with the character Celie, the novelist adds fuel to the fire is the women’s fear of not being listened to - not being heard. They know that even if they were to speak no one would hear, in part because ‘when women speak of being silenced they don’t mean that they are incapable of adequately speaking a language; rather they are referring to social and cultural pressures which undermine their confidence and make them hesitant about speaking’ (Eagleton, 16). Silence is not simply the act of ‘not speaking’ but the social pressure applied by men who do not hear them even if they try to speak. Walker’s novel centers on women and their experiences in a society dominated by men. African-American literary scholar, Barbara Christian has argued that Walker’s work is “Black woman-centered” (457) but she maintains:

Walker does not choose Southern Black women to be her major protagonists only because she is one, but also, I believe, because she has discovered in the tradition and history they collectively experience and understanding of oppression, which has elicited from them a willingness to reject convention and to hold to what, is difficult. (op.cit., 465)
Initially, Celie is submissive to Albert’s dominance, internalizing the values imposed on her. She becomes a defeated soul, a victim of abusive patriarchal power, believing that beatings are the norm, the power men exercise over women. When Nettie comes to live with Celie, she cannot successfully be her protector or her advocate in Albert’s house. However, away from the house she helps Celie to discover her voice through letters. When Sofia confronts Celie about her recommendation to Harpo to beat Sofia, Celie takes the first step of being literally stunned out of silence. To her amazement, she stands face to face with a woman empowered to challenge a man physically. Sofia even challenges Celie verbally. Having been abused at such a tender age, Celie lacks the experience or the knowledge of retaliation. If Sofia causes Celie to ponder Albert’s authority over her, Shug Avery provides her with all the answers. With Shug’s assistance, Celie recoups Nettie’s letters, which provide her with internal strength and enable her to discover her voice. Most importantly, she overcomes her passivity and uses her voice to transform herself.

Trained as an oppressed woman by male society all her life, Celie begins to believe that women are subordinates of men and they have no life of their own. So brain washed is Celie that she tells her stepson Harpo to beat Sofia, his self-confident wife. However, Sofia’s defiant fight against her husband Harpo fascinates Celie and so she begins to share her hidden inner feelings with her.

All the women in the novel experience some kind of silencing and oppression by men. The silence the women in the novel are subjected to comes in various forms but there is always an element of it in the story of every woman. Each woman must understand her own dilemma and find a way to work through it in order to find her voice and claim her independence and freedom from male oppression.
As far as the female relationships are concerned, a strong bond exists between Celie and her mother, who is unseen and helpless, but an unspoken maternal bond is there. A tender sisterly relationship establishes a secure bond that holds even through years of separation. Nettie and Celie are sisters but also friends and for Celie Nettie’s letters are the same as her presence. When Celie reads Nettie’s letters, she is able to summon the courage to endure Albert’s brutality. Sofia and Celie share a familial connection, but Sofia is instrumental in arousing Celie’s curiosity about being assertive. Sofia explains that her strong bond with her sister is the source of her feistiness. Shug and Celie share a relationship that crosses over into many levels sisters like, girlfriends, host and guest, teacher and student, caretaker and patient, and lovers.

While Shug is strong and powerful, it is important to remember the struggle she has been through in order to gain her power. Shug’s character is, in the first part of the novel, very different to that of Celie; she is comfortable in her own body, sexy and sexual. Celie describes a picture of her as “Shug Avery standing upside a piano, elbow crook, hand on her hip. She wears a hat like Indian chiefs. Her mouth opens showing all her teef and don’t nothing seem to be troubling her mind” (Colour, 475).

Later, one can understand that “Shug wearing a gold dress that show her titties near bout to the nipple” (Colour, 1242). Her sexiness leads to rumors that she is in fact ‘the other women’ in both of Mr._____’s marriages. The gossip she evokes because of this is part of the silencing forces in her life in the way that her credibility is compromised and she is not to be trusted or believed. People talk about her behind her back and she has no way of defending herself. When she becomes sick, it gets even worse and Celie writes “Shug Avery sick and nobody in this town want to take the Queen honeybee in. Her mammy says she told her so. Her pappy say, Tramp” (Colour, 704).
When she becomes sick, she is hidden on the farm, away from the public eye, and no one (except Mr._____) will help her. Being hidden away is a physical form of silencing that she must endure while she is weak in body. Although she has been a strong character, she is preyed upon while her strength is low. Shug must suffer demeaning remarks and dirty looks from all directions and she tells Celie that she could not marry Mr._____ because “his daddy told him I’m trash, my mama trash before me, His brother say the same” (Colour, 1828). Mr._____ is sad when he exclaims that “nobody fight for Shug” (Colour, 779) and Celie whimpers that “somebody got to stand up for Shug” (Colour, 718). This is funny and tragic at the same time since Celie is, in the first half of the book, the most silenced and oppressed character in the novel and it is a long time before she stands up for herself, yet she feels the need to stand up for Shug and spits in her father-in-law’s water when he trash-talks the “Queen Honeybee” (Colour, 720). While Shug is sick and silent Celie takes care of her and helps her find her voice again, both her actual singing voice and her more figurative voice in society. At Shug’s first performance, she thanks Celie by saying “this song I’m bout to sing is call Miss Celie’s song. Cause she scratched it out my head when I was sick” (Colour, 1142). As Shug becomes stronger she gains a silencing effect on Mr._____. Celie asks Harpo, when he is whining about his own wife, “do Shug Avery mind Mr.____ ... She the woman he wanted to marry. She call him Albert, tell him his drawers stink in a minute” (Colour, 1325). When Shug regains her voice, she is in no way afraid to use it.

Shug say, girl you look like a good time, you do. That when I notice how Shug talk and act sometimes like a man. Men say stuff like that to women, Girl you look like a good time. Women always talk about hair
and heath. How many babies living or dead, or got teef. Not bout how some woman they hugging on look like a good time. (Colour, 1259)

Shug learns to use male language and that in turn is a sign of her power. In Celie’s mind man rules language and a woman dares to use his vocabulary, his syntax, she is using power that does not belong to her, something that Celie is not ready for until in the second part of the novel. Shug is entering into male territory and merging with the male consciousness - thus she has power and a voice. The notion that equality is restored when the gender-roles are less apparent is reinforced in Shug’s story.

One way or the other, Walker’s *The Colour Purple* exhibits all the characteristics of a womanist novel. Her sister saves Nettie from Celie’s fate of incest-rape. Celie writes: “Dear God, I ast him to take me instead of Nettie while our new mammy sick” (Colour, 212) thus sacrificing herself for her sister to keep her safe and away from harm. When Nettie refuses Mr.______’s affection (when she has come to stay with him and Celie) he sends her away, making sure that she cannot speak to her sister anymore. Furthermore, Nettie’s letters to Celie do not reach her until long after they arrive in the country before they have been taken by Mr.______. The discovery of these stolen letters is important to Celie they are proof that her sister is still alive. Mr.______ has attempted to hold this information from here and to silence any potential dialogue with Nettie. They have no intrinsic value to him. Indeed, he has not even bothered to open most of them. His theft is an expression of his need to assert his power over both the women by making sure that they cannot communicate. In this way, Mr.______ tries to silence Celie at home and Nettie in Africa, at the same time the women in the community must endure silencing and oppression at the hands of the men until they are ready to claim their voices and stand up to their oppressors.
Nettie gets away from the community and moves to Africa with Samuel and Corrine and their two adopted children; Celie’s children. Nettie’s silence does not end there; she is silenced by the secret she must keep about the children’s real mother. She knows she is not allowed to tell of what she knows and where they really come from. Although these silencing factors are minimal, compared to other women in the story they are still present and they affect Nettie and her development as a character. The lack of response to her letters to Celie make her live in constant fear for her sister’s well-being. At the same time, not being able to disclose the fact that the children are her nephew and niece keeps her at a distance from them. This secret also alienates Nettie from Corrine who suspects her to be the children’s actual mother as they bear resemblance to her. Only after Corrine’s death can Nettie tell her secret, in turn becoming a whole person with more mental freedom and a voice to say whatever she wants.

Celie, the main character is most silenced at the beginning but undergoes the biggest transformation as she finally claims her voice and rejects the silence, which has been imposed upon her. As *The Colour Purple* is an epistolary novel, the letters unmistakably play an important role.

Along with diaries, letters were the dominant mode of expression allowed to women in the West. Feminist historians find letters to be a principal source of information, of facts about the everyday lives of women and their own perceptions about their lives, that is of both ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ information. In using the epistolary style, Walker is able to have her major character Celie express the impact of oppression on her spirit as well as the growing internal strength and final victory (Christian, 469).
Moreover, Celie fits the criteria of womanist, because she is a survivor, develops a liberated spirit, acquires inner strength, bonds with other women, and fights the evil of sexism. She triumphs over incest, wife beating, and abject poverty. Her quest for freedom and wholeness begins at the age of fourteen, when she lacks the stamina required to resist the sexual advances of her stepfather, who impregnates her. The attack continues when she enters a loveless marriage with Albert. Even her relationship with a white patriarchal God suppresses her development. Her journey to wholeness is a psychological one in which she must free her mind of male dominance. Discovering that Alphonso is her stepfather and not her biological father helps her to release some of the agony. Knowing that her children are not, the result of incest helps her to remove a layer of pain. Walker affirms that the key to wholeness is forgiveness; thus, when Celie manages to pick up the pieces and move on with her existence, accepting herself and forgiving herself, not seeing Albert as an enemy or holding a grudge against him, the two of them begin a friendly relationship. Albert loses out because had he been more emotionally attached to Celie rather than treating her as an object, he could have had years of positive relationship development.

Equally important is Celie’s indomitable spirit, her desire to overcome her struggles. In spite of all she endures, such as losing her children, rearing Albert’s children, surviving Albert’s physical abuse, and being denied love and attention, she has the courage to rise above the monstrous forces of negativity that engulf her. Grounded in the strength of southern African American culture, Celie refuses to relinquish control of her mind. Although she retreats inward, she protects herself from insanity until the time of her flowering.
Even more, Celie is an example of strength against all oppression. The struggle all the women in the novel must go through to fight the silence imposed on them by men in the society is immense. Celie, and the others, “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” (Abbandonato, 1107). The importance of women helping each together and forming an alliance between one another become increasingly important as the story moves forward and it is evident that most of the problem that are dealt with concerning the women are figured out between themselves. Moreover, as they move further from their gender roles and merge with male the struggle becomes easier, moving towards “genderlessness in a world dominated by gender roles” (Hamilton, 384) seems like the best way to minimize the suffocating power of men over women in the novel.

Women have historically been divided by oppression, with men oppressing women and in some cases women oppressing women. Before Celie comes into her own, she attempts to oppress Sofia indirectly by suggesting to Harpo that he beat her. Celie’s envy of Sofia’s spunk blinds her to the fact that Sofia is her sister self. Her sojourn in the valley of the shadow of death begins at adolescence, a time when girls her age enter a zone of discovery and come into their own. However, male dominance swallows Celie, crushing her pride and her sense of self. Even Albert’s children disrespect her, refusing to extend simple courtesies to her. From this abyss, she rebounds, thanks to her circle of female friends who enliven in her what seems to be the last flicker of hope. The dominance of patriarchy and hypocrisy hold her temporarily, for righteous indignation rises up in her at the Fourth of July family dinner, her liberation day.
In womanist perception, *The Colour Purple* seems to focus on the bonding of women. By the end of the novel the characters have, to a great extent, lost their gender-glasses and feel comfortable in different gender-roles. From the start of the novel, it is evident that there are certain silencing forces that are stronger than others are. In fact “*The Colour Purple* begins with a paternal injunction of silence” *(op.cit., 1106)*. The first word of the novel, before Celie starts her story, is an ominous voice, which exclaims: “You better not never tell nobody but God. It’d kill your mammy” (*Colour*, 155). These words, seemingly uttered by Celie’s father, are the core of the novel. They represent the main problem to be dealt with. Celie is silenced from the very beginning by a force that is very strong. She dares not defy her father (who in fact is her stepfather) and conforms to the silence imposed on her.

From the first word, it is made clear that it is men who are the silencers and women who are silenced in the community where the novel takes place. Instantly after this threat Celie begins her first letter “Dear God” (*Colour*, 155). In this second line, the next big oppressor is made evident. God also acts as a silencing force for Celie and it takes her a long time to change that. Hite has argued in, “*The Colour Purple* the most important agent of suffering is also a (relatively) powerful male figure, Celie’s husband Mr.______” (262). Celie is forced to go and live with him and he proves to be also an agent of silencing. Before the gender roles are eliminated Celie, and other women of the book, must endure oppression and silencing by these and other men.

The female relationships develop around a community of women. Sofia extends a helping hand to Squeak, her husband’s mistress. Nettie becomes the stepmother to Celie’s children, ensuring that they will reunite with their mother. Liberated Shug, with her un-Christian-like behaviour is the moral compass that
carefully guides Celie into a brave new world. Shug and Celie take Squeak with them to Tennessee to begin life anew. They form a sisterhood whereby they tend to each other’s needs. Their survival does not depend on being the pampered servants of men or performing domestic chores. They are the masters of their own liberty, not the recipients of perceived liberties granted to them by men. Their dedication to each other supports and sustains them.

The silencing and the oppression that women in the novel are exposed to is a direct subsequence of the power that the men have in the society in which they live. In her essay “A View From ‘Elsewhere’: Subversive Sexuality and the Rewriting of the Heroine’s Story in The Colour Purple” Linda Abbandonato maintains that “the specific system of oppression that operates in Celie’s life symbolize the more or less subtle operations of patriarchal power in the lives of women everywhere” (106). That is, it is men that hold the power and women that have to bend to that power. As the novel moves forward and the genders become less apparent the power shifts from the men and over to the women. However, that happens the power is completely in the hands of the men who rule all and treat women as they like.

One could easily notice that in this novel violence among the men plays a significant play in the novel, the act of gender violence almost handed down from father to son. Walker shows the generational implications of violence. Albert is much like his father, who controlled his household through abusive behavior. Harpo finds it difficult to carry on the cycle only because Sofia is resistant to masculine dominance; she refuses to be beaten. Celie takes on an attitude of violence, telling Harpo to beat Sofia because she cannot assume Sofia’s independence. Race and class violence are a result of societal influence, the result of one group subverting the assumed power of another.
Hamilton has argued, *The Colour Purple* focuses “the only relationship to men comes in the form of the master/slave arrangement, be the master black or white. The ideology of patriarchy as used by Walker applies similarly to all men; black or white, they have been united by sexism” (385). Furthermore, a student of Harris’s states, “Walker had very deliberately deprived all the black male character in the novel of any positive identity” (158). This is not entirely true as for example the character of Samuel is portrayed as decent and good throughout the whole novel. However, Alice Walker herself had an opinion on this. In an interview she talks about Brownfield, a character from her first novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*.

I will not ignore people like Brownfield. I want you to know I know they exist. I want to tell you about them, and there is no way you are going to avoid them. You are going to have to deal with them. I wish people would do that rather than tell me that this is not the right image. You know, they say the man Brownfield is too mean; nobody’s this mean. (Walker, 177)

It has often been said that ‘knowledge is power’ and this novel does little to discourage this notion. When Celie claims “us both be hitting Nettie’s schoolbooks hard, cause us knows we got to be smart to git away” (*Colour*, 242) it is obvious that both sisters, Celie and Nettie, comprehend the importance of education. In order to get away from the violence, the oppression and the evil of Pa, the sisters must study and learn. To deny someone the opportunity to learn and to deprive them of education and knowledge is a form of oppression that is not new. This is an echo from the time that black people were slaves for white people and it was a crime to teach a person of colour to read and write. When denying Celie to go to school Pa is acting like a slave-
master. Pa silences Celie by trying to keep her ignorant and un-educated. The image is re-enforced when the violence and rape is put into the mix. The rape is a big obstacle in Celie’s thirst for education. From her letters to God she tells us: “The first time I got big Pa took me out of school. He never care that I love it” (Colour, 249). Here Celie shows her longing for education and how Pa has ripped her of the opportunity. She is taken out of school because she is pregnant with his child. This makes it a double offence on his part. He also gives away her children, not caring weather she loves them either. When Mr._____ wants to marry Nettie, Pa exclaims “I want her to git more schooling. Make a schoolteacher out of her. But you can have Celie” (Colour, 222).

Pa has absolute power over Celie, she is already “damaged” in his mind and there is no reason for allowing her to pursue her studies. However, he is the one who has damaged her and the one who deprives her of what she loves; education and her children whom he takes away from her as soon as they are born. Harris argues that “her lack of understanding about the pregnancy is also probable within the environment in which she grew up” (Colour, 156). In her first letter to God Celie exclaims:

“Maybe you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me” (158).

Celie is pregnant by her Pa but has no idea what is happening inside her body. When the baby is born, she is quite surprised.

Though Walker chooses the traditional happy conclusion where everyone is united and forgiven for all of their sins, she does not solve all the issues presented in this novel. For example, the matter of the gap between the black and white people remains unsolved. Celie seems happy but still has wounds, which will never heal. The fact that Walker leaves these issues ignored makes the story seem more realistic. She wants to confront the reader with real life problems, which in many places have not
been solved either. By the way, of supporting her ideology, she portrays Celie the protagonist who undergoes such a development from being ‘nobody’ and to become ‘someone’. This improvement can only take place because of the increased recognition she gains from her surroundings.

Though Walker’s *The Temple of My Familiar* is not so unanimously positive in comparing with her earlier novel, some critics applaud her “multivocal experiment with postmodern romance and magical realism” (Bell, 154), others deride her narrative technique and style, which they claim is “rife with clichés and sentimentality” (Sol, 400). Part two of *The Temple of My Familiar* has some strong connections with Walker’s previous novel *The Colour Purple*, as many characters are remembered through Olivia, Celie’s daughter in *The Colour Purple*, and her daughter Fanny Nzingha, who is married to Suwelo, one of the main characters in the novel. Olivia talks about her mother Celie, her brother Adam, her aunt Nettie, her adoptive mother Corrine, her father Samuel and their experiences while living in Africa as missionaries. Shug’s and Sofia’s names are also mentioned.

The novel consists of 61 chapters that are grouped in six parts in a seemingly arbitrary way. Each of the chapters is focalized through one of the main characters. This formal fragmentation is supported by the content, as the novel tells the stories of several characters in a non-linear manner and in bits and pieces. Together the stories constitute a new version of the history of human kind, talking about different times and places and about man, animal and nature. All these factors seem to fragment the novel and yet, while reading, all the pieces fit together and form a successful whole. The same is true of a quilt, which essentially is “[a whole] that show[s] the process of [its] construction” (Wall, 264).
In *The Temple of My Familiar*, Walker adopts a number of themes including individual and collective freedom for black people and women, ancestor worship, human and animal rights, and the impact of racism and sexism on black relationships. Steeped in mysticism, and filled with ample symbols, myths, legends and dream memories, this novel addresses the issues of self-knowledge, the power of love and the evolution of patriarchal power in society. Although Walker has dealt with the problems arising out of patriarchy and sexism, in all her earlier novels, she has concentrated entirely on the evolution of patriarchy in society in this novel, which is the root cause for the suppression of women and domination by men.

The novel mainly revolves around three couples and it is through the specific situation of each of these six characters that Walker gets her message across. Because the characters gradually become acquainted with one another and because their situations are similar in several respects, this message is intensified. The major theme of the novel seems to be the difficulty of love and the pain that one should undergo in finding their own self and others. Through this novel, Walker makes it clear that love is the only vehicle, which has the power to overthrow all the inequalities of society like racism and sexism. The novel re-examines the past lives of man, women and animals and analyses their relationship with one another from a primeval time.

Generally speaking, at the beginning of the novel each of the main characters except Lissie, is spiritually fragmented, as they, all struggle with a fundamental and destructive fear, frustration or conflict in their lives. The book relates the process of their striving “for the demonstrable values of oneness, wholeness, and unity as opposed to dialectical tension, exclusivity, and separateness” (Dieke, 508). The novel preaches communion between all the different aspects of one’s own personality,
between people of different races, sexes, cultures and times and between different species or creations. As Dieke argues, “Walker (…) creates a salutary vision, which points toward a monistic idealism in which humans, animals, and the whole ecological order coexist in a unique dynamic of pan cosmic symbiosis” (Ibid. 507).

The novel narrates the story of three pairs of characters, who differ from one another in their problems and life styles. Suwelo, a professor of History and Fanny an academic administration have divorced, but decide to live with each other in San Fransisco, while sorting out the tangled threads of their lives. Carlotta a professor of women studies and her husband Arveyda, a famous musician live in Okhland hills. A third older couple Lissie and Mr. Hal enters the story when their friend Rafe, Suwelo’s uncle dies. Suwelo becomes acquainted with them when he comes to Baltimore to attend the funeral of Rafe. The marriage between Suwelo and Fanny breaks down irrevocably and this compels each of them to take a journey towards self-discovery. Determined to find out the roots of her ancestry, Fanny leaves Suwelo and travels to South Africa, where she meets her father Ola. From him she learns the meaning of life. Arveyda, the musician abandons his wife Carlotta and elopes with his mother-in-law Zede, in whom he finds a good friend. Left alone, Suwelo and Carlotta become close to each other and embark on a turbulent affair. In course of time, all these character begin to respect one another’s feelings and realize the value of love.

In *The Temple of My Familiar* different sorts of communication are present: dialogues, letters, tape recordings, fragments of a diary, paintings, music, stories, etc. By communicating, the characters, all being at a different stage in their development towards wholeness as a person, help each other in the process. They share their insights, but also reach new ones talking and listening to each other. At the end of the novel,
“they all vaguely realize they have a purpose in each other’s lives. They are a collective means by which each of them will grow. They don’t discuss this, but it is felt strongly by all. There is palpable trust” (Temple, 398).

Yet, there is a subtle difference in the level the characters’ development reaches. Each couple seems to consist of a spiritually ‘weaker’ person, who can only strive for wholeness up to a certain point (namely Carlotta, Suwelo, Hal), and a stronger spiritual personality, able to achieve the highest level of wholeness (namely Arveyda, Fanny, Lissie). As Sol argues,

Lissie, Arveyda, and Fanny achieve an awareness of their place in existence with a sublimity scarcely paralleled in contemporary literature. By the novel’s end, Lissie recalls her incarnations at the beginning of human history, and Arveyda and Fanny unite as incarnations of (a very different) Adam and Eve. Meanwhile, Suwelo, Carlotta, and Hal can only achieve fulfillment through their understanding of the prodigies’ [i.e. Lissie’s, Arveyda’s and Fanny’s] powers and by coming to terms with their own painful pasts. (398)

The novel makes it clear that stories of the origin of tribal people long ago were accounts of hardships optimism, love and family, and of endurance. Through this novel, one can experience the dreams, hopes, pain, love of a people, and understand the love that will outlast us at the end. Most of the women characters of this novel are womanists, which are clearly seen in their attitude towards life. As Walker describes a womanist as one who loves and appreciates another woman, loves spirit and spirituality, loves nature and music, the woman characters of this novel prove to be perfectly womanist characters in almost all their actions. The women
characters engage themselves in a journey of self-discovery and finally become perfect human beings in their understanding of life and value of love. They love to look back their ancestors and identify themselves with them. They attach more importance to spirituality and thus believe in the transmigration of souls. Their love for nature is clearly seen in their attachment towards their land and their love towards animals.

As Walker indicates in her definition of the concept, a womanist is “[c]ommitted to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female” (Walker, xi) in the same manner, she pleads for a Universalist attitude between the races, saying “Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige, and black?” Ans. ‘Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented” (Ibid., xi). Walker communicates a similar message in her theoretical writings by putting a lot of emphasis on community.

This non-separatism as well as the stress on community is clearly present in The Temple of My Familiar as well. As stated, the novel preaches a connectedness between people of different races, both sexes and even between people and other fauna and flora. For example, Lissie says,

In these days of which I am speaking, people met other animals in much the same way people today meet each other. You were sharing the same neighborhood, after all. You used the same water, you ate the same foods, you sometimes found yourself peering out of the same cave waiting for a downpour to stop. (Temple, 361)

The Temple of My Familiar indicates a remarkable advance over The Colour Purple in its fictional technique, complexity and range of themes. It differs from the previous
novels of Walker in only one significant way. While *The Colour Purple* and *Meridian* dealing with the problems arising out of patriarchy and sexism, this novel speaks about how the patriarchal, institutions originated in society, which is the root of cause, all the sufferings of women. *The Colour Purple* is mainly focused on relationships within black community (especially the prevalent sexism), and the novelist touches again more at length on the race issue in *The Temple of My Familiar*. With six main characters as well as most of the others are being black, Walker can treat several dimensions of the problem, leading the readers to understand that racism is age-old and has existed between all sorts of people.

Walker, through this novel makes it clear that the worst results of racism in the country have been to subvert the most basic human relationships among black men and women, and to destroy their individual psyche. Most of the characters of this noel are damaged by material poverty and difficulty of marriage, but what they suffer from most often is emotional destitution. For examples: Lissie clearly remembers the lifetime in which her own uncle into slavery sold her. She says, “The white men, who looked and smelled like nothing we had ever imagined, as if their sweat were vinegar, paid the men who’d brought us, …” (*Temple*, 63). Probably more than a century later, Hal’s father is not allowed into the house of his friend Heath, because he is black, which some decades later also happens to young Fanny, whose friend Tanya is white as well. Hal and Suwelo’s uncle Rafe are confronted with the race issue:

… white folks wanted [them] … for the army, to fight in the Great War, or so they said. The truth was, they wanted [them] to be servants for he white men who fought. … They wanted [them] to fight some people none of [them] had heard of, and they were white folks, too. (97)
Suwelo and Fanny also find themselves to be discriminated against. As Suwelo tells Hal and Lissie, “We sold to another black family, because we knew that one of the reasons our neighbours wanted to buy our house was to keep other black people out” *(Temple, 241).*

As Olivia says,

> The Africa we encountered had already been raped of much of its sustenance. Its people had been sold into slavery. Considering both internal and external ‘markets,’ this ‘trade’ had been going on for well over a thousand years; and had no doubt begun as the early civilizations of Africa were falling into decline, around the six-hundreds. Millions of its trees had been shipped to England and Spain and other European countries to make benches and altars in those grand European cathedrals one heard so much about; its minerals and metals mined and its land planted in rubber and cocoa and pineapples and all sorts of crops for the benefit of foreign invaders. *(Temple, 148)*

Ola, Fanny’s father, also tells his daughter about how the white man came to Africa and made everything go wrong. As he says,

> [t]he whites had done terrible things to us; … But beyond what they were doing to us, as adults, they were destroying our children, who were starving to death - their bodies, their minds, their dreams - right before our eyes. *(Temple, 307)*

Secondly, the book on several points criticizes how little black community itself has learned from the painful experiences of slavery, white domination and racism. Ola’s art, as Fanny argues, for example also gives insights “into the
oppression of women, black women by black men, who should have had more understanding - having criticized the white man’s ignorance in dealing with black people for so long” (Temple, 262). Black people are guilty of sexism and other forms of oppression and misuse of power themselves. When someone asks Ola why he does not write plays that put their country and government in a more favourable light, he answers:

THE WHITE MAN IS STILL HERE. Even when he leaves, he is not gone. … EVERYONE ALL OVER THE WORLD KNOWS EVERYTHING THERE IS TO KNOW ABOUT THE WHITE MAN. That’s the essential meaning of television. BUT THEY KNOW NEXT TO NOTHING ABOUT THEMSELVES. … When my people stop acting like the white man, I can write plays that show them at their best! (Temple, 182-183)

Nzingha, Fanny’s half-sister, draws the same conclusion:

And I feel so frustrated, because the men can always run on and on about the white man’s destructiveness and yet they cannot look into their own families and their own children’s lives and see that this is just the destruction the white man has planned. (Temple, 255)

With Walker being, as she herself indicates, “a rather ardent feminist” (152), one could expect her novels to treat the gender issue in detail. Walker, analyzing the lives of her women characters, who suffer from a difficult marriage, leaves no doubt that marriage can be a problematic and trying institution for the female society. She clearly speaks about marriage, which becomes a license for men, to dominate over their women. The difficulty of marriage has been real ones in black community,
although it has often been the black woman whose training was superior to her husband. Walker has taken this social fact and shaped it into personal tragedy so that more of her readers would understand the position of black women after their marriage.

The novel implicitly, yet effectively, criticizes some of the most important aspects of our current sexist or patriarchal society (e.g. religion, marriage, government, academy…) by numerous references to matriarchal systems. Such ancient matriarchies are opposed to the present-day institutions that Fanny describes as “unnatural bodies, male-supremacist private clubs” (Temple, 274). The present situation is traced back to the point where everything went wrong. Whereas up to that moment men and women lived in separate tribes, visiting each other regularly and living in perfect harmony with each other, themselves and the nature and animals surrounding them, at a certain moment men and women merge. It is during the lifetime in which Lissie is a lion that this happens. She experiences the consequences of the merger first hand:

In the merger, the men asserted themselves, alone, as the familiars of women. They moved in with their dogs, which they ordered to chase us. This was a time of trauma for women and other animals alike. … Soon we would forget the welcome of woman’s fire. Forget her language. … and with man’s ‘best friend,’ the ‘pet’ familiar, the fake familiar, the dog. (Temple, 370)

Not only the animals suffer, both men and women do as well.

The men now took it on themselves to say what should and should not be done by all, which meant they lost the freedom of their long,
undisturbed, contemplative days in the men’s camp; and the women, in compliance with the men’s bossiness, but more because they now became emotionally dependent on the individual man by whom man’s law now decreed they must have all their children, lost their wildness, that quality of homey ease on the earth that they shared with the rest of the animals. (Temple, 369)

Ever since that moment, men and women have allowed for a patriarchal system to develop, in which women were treated badly. Even black men, who should have learned from their own oppression by white people, are guilty of this.

Obviously, the rich novel deals with sexism and the gender issue in several ways. Firstly, all of the female protagonists are or have been victims of sexism. The most obvious example probably is Carlotta, who tries to please men by behaving as a “female impersonator” (Temple, 386). Yet, Fanny as well is perfectly aware of the impact of sexism, which to her is inextricably linked with her position as a colored woman.

[Fanny] thinks of white feminists she knows who are happy that they can at last express their anger. In their opinion, this is something white women have never done. … But this seems like a delusion to Fanny. For she knows the white woman has always expressed her anger, or at least vented it, as some of her friends like to say - and usually it was against people, often men, but primarily women, of color. (Temple, 391)

Most of Walker’s women love their men wholeheartedly. But men never seem to respond to this love, but hurt them physically and sexually. Because Walker tells the stories of each of her women characters from the point of view of the character
herself, it becomes easy for her readers also to share the inner lives of these women who have been dismissed as super dominant matriarchs or bitches by both white sociologists and black men.

In *The Temple of My Familiar*, sex is referred to in two ways. On the one hand, there is unfulfilling sex, for example, the sex Suwelo forces both Fanny and Carlotta to have with him and onto which he projects his male-oriented fantasies. For example: he tries to force Fanny to wear sexy lingerie and tells Lissie and Hal how: “[s]he felt terrible. She cried and said she felt degraded” (*Temple*, 281). It should not come as a surprise that Fanny later confesses to him that she has never experienced an orgasm with him. On the other hand, there is the type of sex that is possible only if both the woman and the man value the woman for being a woman. It is the sex Arveyda and Fanny have at the end of the novel. But, in order for this to happen, Fanny has to come to terms with her sexuality herself. Just like Shug made Celie aware of her “little button” (*Colour*, 83), Fanny is helped as well:

Fanny thinks of the years during which her sexuality was dead to her. How, once she began to understand man’s oppression of women, and to let herself feel it in her own life, she ceased to be aroused by men.

By Suwelo in particular, addicted as he was to pornography. And then, the women in her consciousness-raising group had taught her how to masturbate. Suddenly she’d found herself free. Sexually free, for the first time in her life. At the same time, she was learning to meditate, and was throwing off the last clinging vestiges of organized religion. She was soon meditating and masturbating and finding herself dissolved into the cosmic All. Delicious. (*Temple*, 389)
The second important thing Shug teaches Celie is to discard the view of God she has. In that way, Walker is ‘attacking patriarchy (and patriarchal culture) at its Christian foundation’. The same view is put forward in The Temple of My Familiar. It is important to note however, that religion is not done away with altogether.

Walker does not believe … that any attempt at a redemptive system of thought will ultimately prove tyrannical and hegemonic. In Temple, the characters seek methods of connecting to their pasts and each other--through storytelling, music, massage, and of course love and sex--and strenuously avoid the traditional systems of the white male patriarchy, while asserting a philosophy of spiritual unity and balance. (Sol, 395)

Instead, traditional, patriarchal Christianity - in which both God and Jesus are representatives of the white man - is replaced by something very personal and spiritual, celebrating man’s connection with other people as well as with nature. As Olivia tells Fanny:

We had all begun to see, in Africa - where people worshiped many things, including the roof leaf plant, which they used to cover their houses - that ‘God’ was not a monolith, and not the property of Moses, as we’d been led to think, and not separate from us, or absent from whatever world one inhabited. … You might say the white man, in his dual role of spiritual guide and religious prostitute, spoiled even the most literary form of God experience for us. By making the Bible say whatever was necessary to keep his plantations going, and using it as a tool to degrade women and enslave blacks. (Temple, 146-147)
This is also why Fanny’s grandmothers, Shug and Celie, eventually found their own church, which they called ‘a band’.

‘Band’ was what renegade black women’s churches were called traditionally; it means a group of people who share a common bond and purpose and whose notion of spiritual reality is radically at odds with mainstream or prevailing ones. (*Temple*, 301)

Their church worked according to the following principle:

Everyone who came brought information about their own path and journey. They exchanged and shared this information. That was the substance of the church. Some of these people worshiped Isis. Some worshiped trees. Some thought the air, because it alone is everywhere, is God. (*Temple*, 170)

This view on religion as explicitly different from the patriarchal Christianity is supported by the stories of Lissie’s past lifetimes in which she relates how in the beginning of civilization people worshipped mothers and goddesses, instead of male figures.