CHAPTER - III

WOMANISM: CULTURAL IDENTITIES AND IDEALOGIES

Raymond Williams has argued that culture is the sum of the processes of human societies and human minds and that culture is ordinary, in every society and in every mind. The ordinariness intrinsic to Williams’ famous definition highlights the universality of cultural influence, which results in the relativist ethics the chapter proposes the cross-ethnic coalitions. Every subject, whether originating linguistically or socially, undergoes a process of acculturation. It follows then, that the construction of any dominant value (whether it should be an epistemological norm or a system of mores and beliefs) would be culturally determined to some extent. Williams goes on to posit five important observations about culture; first, culture is learned. Second, culture is socially mediated. Third, culture emerges out of language. Fourth, culture works to organize hierarchies, and fifth, culture is material. Literature, as both an individual and a cultural product, may be one of the best examples of the applicability of Williams’ observations. The ethnic hierarchies produced by culture are evident in almost all written works. Language, of which all literary works - from those composed by oral-formulaic poets in the 13th Century to those written by high Modern novelists in the last 50 years - are built, is both learned and socially mediated. Because, Walker explores how her characters’ ethnic identities are shaped by solidarity and complicated by trans-cultural contact especially in her novels provide fertile ground for the analytical seeds of inter-ethnic encounters as illuminated by an ethos produced by particular histories of cultural trauma. The linguistic and symbolic maneuvers that each novelist employs in allowing readers to infer that ethos of encounter is revealed by the use of language to construct culture.
An overwhelming number of 20th and 21st century’s literary theorists seem to agree that language is among the most important of all external pressures on burgeoning subjects, but approaches to the analysis of linguistic acquisition and socialization are quite divergent. It seems natural, then, that the ways the novelists employ language to shape fictionalized historiography are also divergent. In any case, the category of identity - gendered, sexed, racial or ethnic - emerges at the point of its naming and the ethos of each ethnic identity may be manifest in the symbols chosen for that naming. When Walker chooses to employ particular dialects when framing ethnic differences between her characters to indicate her link to European, African and Caribbean cultural perspectives, the connotations of the diction and tone she chooses communicate as much as the denotative meaning of the words she writes.

For Walker, the search for wholeness is analyzed as a source of creativity and agency and is linked to the search for freedom. Silvia Pilar Castro Borrego in her book The Search For Wholeness, says that in the contemporary literature of black women writers, starting in the 1980s, the search for wholeness reflects a beauty realized through the healing of the spirit and the body, and is a process that takes on dimensions of reconciling the past and the present, the mythical and the real, the spiritual and the physical - all in the context of an emerging world view that welcomes synthesis and expects both synthesis and generative contradictions. Ever since the 19th century, African American writers have given expressions to an African American self which functions in Western nations simultaneously as a colonised ‘other’ and an assertive ‘self’ due to this continuous torment, this self is trapped between the binaries proposed by the material and the spiritual world, seeking a balance where the person can become whole. The search for wholeness springs from
cultural roots that imply the presence of ancestral spiritualism, re-memory, and double consciousness. Contemporary black women writers reflect the metaphor of building spiritual bridges, seeking the possibilities of building a bridge to the archetypal African past that is carried in their memories as a presence that offers sustenance via spiritual reconnection. They seek to bridge the gap between the myths and traditions of the past and contemporary African American culture. Alice Walker explicitly recognizes the cultural signs left scattered along the road of progress and attempts to weave them together. She exposes that material acquisition is achieved at the cost of cultural dispossession, becoming a metaphor for the history of the African in America.

In *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, Walker presents the story of a woman’s experience with genital mutilation from the points of view of eight different narrators. Each of the four women and four men brings the tale in a unique perspective on the practice, derived from the diversity of their ethnicities, genders, and social backgrounds. Though this work considered being a work of fiction on cultural ideologies, the writer makes no serious attempt on female genital mutilation in proposal in a historical or sociological perspective.

The novel expands the issues of women’s autonomy, economic oppression, and the struggle for selfhood through connection with the community from the African American community especially in the South to the broader arena of the African world, and specifically in the fictional African community of Olinka. The novelist is also focusing on women’s personal and political power and women’s sexual autonomy. Alice Walker’s previous novel *The Colour Purple* also deals with the same by drawing attention to a serious social issue of female genital mutilation, (FGM). The FGM is a cultural tradition that has existed for as long as 6000 years,
dating back to the time of the ancient Egyptians; it persists today in as many as
twenty-eight African Nations, as well as parts of Asia, and the tradition continues in
“immigrant communities in the United States, Canada, Europe, and Asia” (Rowley, p.2).

Three characters that make brief appearances in *The Colour Purple*: Olivia, Adam, and Tashi and in *The Temple of My Familiar*: Olivia and Tashi resurface in
*Possessing the Secret of Joy*, In this novel, Tashi, the woman protagonist who acts as
different narrators by different names: Tashi, Olinkan tribal name, after arriving at the
States named as Evelyn, Tashi-Evelyn or Evelyn-Tashi, whenever her dual self has
pushed to the way to surface, Tashi-Evelyn Mr. Johnson when a role of convergence
and approaches her death, finally Tashi-Evelyn’s soul is splinted by the experience of
Genital mutilation. By presenting his single woman character that represents various
voices, Alice Walker reveals the competing pressures on which women have to
comply with and to resist the mutilation ‘tradition’. Clitoridectomy (female
circumcision or female genital mutilation) is the focus of *Possessing The Secret of
Joy*, which chronicles the life of one African woman traumatically scarred by this
millennia-old practice and her struggle to comprehend its impact physically, mentally,
and emotionally and survive its consequences. The novel explores phallic control of
women’s lives and the indoctrination of women to make the procedure a tradition,
offering no options to unsuspecting young women.

African societies are not monolithic in their beliefs, customs, and traditions.
Although within the African continent there are amazing similarities in cultural
practices, there are also wide differences both in the agrarian communities and in the
thriving urban areas. Advantaged Africans who gain access to Western Education and
knowledge adhere less strictly to time-honored practices than the minimally educated
Africans who cling to traditional customs and resist any changes in tradition. Many Africans begin their lives in the bush or farming communities that have tribal connections and, therefore, are immersed in the practices that give them their identity and acceptance within the society.

African societies are both monogamous and polygamous, depending on the economic stability of the men, for the more affluent the men, the more wives they can afford. Men are the overall providers and take additional wives only if they are in superior economic situations. Multiple marriages assure men many children, who add to the prestigious advantages of their families. Initially, children receive instruction from the mothers, but as the children mature other teachers who are members of the tribe replace the mother’s tutelage (although she remains a vital connection throughout the child’s life), which leads to the ultimate ceremonial initiation into manhood or womanhood. Walker sees female circumcision as taking sexual gratification out of women’s control, making pleasure a practice enjoyed only by men, and relegating women servants rather than participants in the act.

Prior to Walker’s novel becoming such a controversial rallying cry for abolition of the circumcision practices, others, such as informed Western feminists and missionaries, expressed outrage over the practice of female circumcision, and members of the United Nations included it in its human rights initiative. However, some native Africans are not impressed by Westerners’ intrusion into their cultural practices. For example, Jomo Kenyatta, Kenya’s first leader after the end of colonial rule, rebutted Western views in his study Facing Mount Kenya (1965), asserting that the practices of circumcision for males and females are significant components of the sacred rituals for birthing young people into adult membership in
the tribal family. Kenyatta’s stance was that he stemmed from a culture as elevated and complex, although different from, as European culture. He encouraged his fellow citizens to return to the ways of the ancestors and cease to allow European agitators to detribalize them.

The novel was controversial and provoked disparate reactions. Janet Turner Hospital’s review in the New York Times asserted that, at its best, the novel resonates with the voice and impact of Greek drama. Other critics felt that Walker’s background as a prominent Western writer obscured the voices of the non-Western activists who had spoken out against the practice before her. She also was accused of writing without sufficient nuance regarding the different ways the procedure is practiced in different countries and about the relationships between the ritual and colonialism, racism, sexism, and violence. Nonetheless, the novel became a best-seller, and along with Walker’s follow-up on the subject in the form of the documentary and companion book Warrior Marks: Female Genital Mutilation and the Sexual Blinding of Women, it helped to bring worldwide awareness and attention to the subject of female genital mutilation. Tashi received a whole novel for herself, entitled Possessing the Secret of Joy where Walker goes deeper into such a delicate and complex subject as ‘female genital mutilation’, as she calls it. In Walker’s words:

It took me twenty-five years since I first heard about female genital mutilation to know how to approach it. To understand what it means to all of us in the world, that you can have this kind of silencing of the pain of millions of women, over maybe six thousand years. Throughout Alice Walker’s literary works she uses her characters and her stories to
help portray the strength of women as they overcome the abuses men and society place on them. Walker shows this theme through her diction, literary devices, and imagery. (42)

Tashi, an African woman who has lived in America most of her adult life, returns to Africa and is challenged with overcoming madness, the source of which lies in her childhood. As a young woman in Africa, she undergoes a procedure known as female genital mutilation, (FGM), an experience that cuts her off from her sexual self and threatens to destroy her mentally. Her role as victim in an androcentric society that insists on the mutilation of its females as a means of maintaining its position of power will be discussed as well. To remedy this irreparable physical damage, she enters intensive psychoanalysis and is treated by several unnamed Jungian analysts. The inclusion of Jung as a character adds an interesting dimension to this story about an African-American woman struggling to come to terms with the cultural traditions of her homeland. In the later part of the story, the psychological healing of Tashi is not only brought out of Walker’s womanist perception but also her own experience of personal healing. Here it is echoed too in other two minor characters Janie and Celie for their self-discovery.

When Nettie, Samuel, Corrine, and Celie’s children, Olivia and Adam, first arrive in the African village of Olinka, Tashi is portrayed as a crying child in a group of welcoming Olinkans; she disappears soon after their arrival. As Samuel notes, “there could be no community in which there was one unhappy child” and he asks the question that pervades the entire novel: “Why was the little girl crying?” (Possessing, 7-8). For the moment, all that is revealed is that the same morning they “arrived in the village one of Tashi’s sisters had died. Her name was Dura, and she had bled to
death” (*Possessing*, 8). The cause of Dura’s death is unknown to the reader, but Tashi’s experience of her sister’s death traumatizes and scars her, closing her off on a psychic level. Over the course of the novel, one could understand various situations given by different speakers leading to Tashi’s psychological breakdown as well as the process of healing that takes place to repair the damage done to her as the result of the African tradition as it is experienced by her and imposed on her by her culture.

The initial clue about Dura’s death and the hint that, prior to her actual death, the day of her death was a reason to celebrate, forces the reader to begin asking the same questions that Tashi asks about the traditions of the Olinkan culture. Contemplating about the tradition, Tashi recalls “Everyone knew that if a woman was not circumcised her unclean parts would grow so long they’d soon touch her things; she’d become masculine and arouse herself. No man could enter her. …” (*Possessing*, 121). By practicing FGM ritual the Olinkan people seek to emasculate women as Pierre echoes:

> Human being from the first was endowed with two souls of different sex… In the man the female soul was located in the prepuce; in the woman the male soul was in the clitoris… (so) the man is circumcised to rid him of his femininity; the woman is excised to rid her of her masculinity. In other words, he said, a very long time ago, men found it necessary to permanently lock people in the category of their obvious sex. (*Possessing*, 175-6)

This practice is perpetuated by ignorance, rewarding, and punishment. The ritual is considered so sacred that women neither ask question about it, nor were provided with answers, nor could speak about it. Their blinked approvals of this practice is illustrated in what Tashi claimed “everyone believed it genitals’
elongation, even though no one had ever seen it…And yet elders…acted as if everyone had witnessed this evil” (Possessing, 121). Additionally, this ritual was perpetuated through carrot and stick approach. Girls, undergoing the ritual are rewarded in return for their subordination and surrender of their sexual autonomies by being courted by Olinkan men while being discarded by society, and not being asked for marriage penalize those Olinkan women, not undergoing the ritual and violating the social standard. Unfortunately, Tashi does not ask those questions as a child and it is not until she has been grown that the things she has forgotten begin to creep back into her subconscious. In Jungian terms, this is significant because middle age is a period during which an individual’s outward focus turns inward in a search for meaning; “cultural, philosophical, and spiritual values” become important and the individual attempts to “expand [her] conscious grasp of the unconscious that is master of [her] fate” (Robertson, 36).

While analyzing the theme, it is obvious for reader focusing on the questions of the relationship between the developing and industrialized world, the survival of the individual in the context of past suffering, the role of tradition in cultural practice, the exploitation and domination of women, and the limitations of personal choice within the context of overwhelming cultural currents. This last concern emerges as primary to Walker’s mission in crafting Possessing the Secret of Joy. The narrative ponderers three central conflicts having to do with autonomy and choice. These conflicts emerge as questions about the nature self-construction and identity, about individual and collective perceptions of reality, and about the ability to transcend the past in order to experience, even transform the present. Walker engages in a unification process, tries to link African and American, dreams and memory, and female genital circumcision as continents through the characters in Possessing the Secret of Joy.
This novel begins with an epigraph from a book entitled *African Saga* in which the author Mirella Ricciardi writes:

> Black people are natural, they possess the secret of joy, which is why they can survive the suffering and humiliation inflicted upon them. They are alive physically and emotionally, which makes them easy to live with. What I had not yet learned to deal with was their cunning and their natural instinct for self-preservation. (11)

Throughout the novel, Tashi has to determine and authenticate her sense of selfhood. She has distinct and evolving perceptions of herself and of her ability to define her identity. The novel moves back and forth in time and allows the reader to encounter Tashi’s self-perceptions at various points in her life. Unlike many, she does so because she is making a choice of her own free will. Tashi has no understanding of the destruction that would take place when she underwent FGM; she was not even aware of what a woman’s genitals are supposed to look like until after she came to the United States. She says, “My own body was a mystery, as was the female body, beyond the function of the breasts, to almost everyone I knew” (Possessing, 121). As the narrative unfolds, however, the extent to which Tashi actually has the ability to make a choice becomes less and less certain.

Circumcision damages Tashi in multiple and overlapping ways: physically, mentally, and emotionally, she becomes crippled, muted into a phantom of her former self. In “The Black Woman’s Selfhood in Alice Walker’s *Possessing the Secret of Joy*” Demirturk explains, “African believes by cutting apart clitoris, deemed masculine, they both deactivate women’s masculine spirit and desensitize female sexual desires, which make her the object of desire for man, who will never be able to
have full orgasm” (83). In *Like the Pupil of an Eye: Sexual Blinding of Women in Alice Walker’s Works*, Sally Wolff notes: “Without the clitoris and other sexual organs, a woman can never see herself reflected in the healthy, intact body of another. Her sexual vision is impaired, and only the most devoted lover will be sexually ‘seen’” (75).

Her body initially suffers shock, then prolonged agony. Forced to walk with sliding steps, she rarely raises her feet above the ground. It takes her a quarter of an hour to urinate, and she is confined with incapacitating cramps for two weeks in every month. Tashi no longer experiences her body as a source of pleasure or an expression of strength. “Her movements,” explains Olivia, “became . . . slow. Studied. This was true even of her smile, which she never seemed to offer you without considering it first”. (*Possessing*, 65)

When Tashi is a young girl and makes the decision to undergo the initiation ceremony, even, though she is older than most girls are when they undergo the ceremony, Tashi is not pressured into the circumcision. She decides that she wants to have the operation as a sign of defiance against colonial oppressors and as a marker of solidarity with the customs and traditions of her people.

Additionally, as a young woman, Tashi wants and needs to affirm her status as an African woman, partly as a consequence of her long childhood relationship with Nettie, Samuel, best friend Olivia, and lover and eventual husband Adam. Yet despite general ignorance of the body’s mysteries and the overall respect given to the taboo against sex, the influence of the modern world, as identified in her relationship with Adam, causes Tashi to venture outside the boundaries set by Olinkan society. Tashi and Adam violate the Olinkans’ strongest taboo by “making love in the fields”; Adam notes, “So strong was this taboo that no one in living memory had broken it. And yet
we did… lovemaking in the fields jeopardized the crops…no one ever saw us, and the fields produced their harvests as before” \( (Possessing, 27)\). Even more serious, however, Adam had oral sex, or cunnilingus, with Tashi, breaking the Olinkan taboo against having sex solely for pleasure, that is, with no reproductive purpose. Adam remembers lying “on my belly between her legs, my cheeks caressed by the gentle rhythms of her thighs. My tongue bringing us no babies, and to both of us delight. This way of loving, among her people, the greatest taboo of all” \( (Possessing, 28)\). It is unclear whether Adam and Tashi break these taboos because Olinkan society is changing as a result of “civilization”.

Tashi’s seeming choice to undergo the procedure is also influenced by a heroic figure and imprisoned political leader called Our Leader. Our Leader adheres to the traditions of the Olinka and suggests that political loyalty and patriotism relies on remaining true to the people’s ancient customs and ensuring that the act of clitoridectomy remains in practice. These factors are major motivators for Tashi’s decision to undergo the procedure. Over time, she begins to question the extent to which these factors predetermined her actions and caused her to act.

As an adult, Tashi discovers to therapy that she witnessed her sister Dura’s clitoridectomy as a child. This event, the associated trauma of seeing her sister in such pain, and the feelings of loss that occurred with Dura’s death may have instigated in Tashi feelings of guilt and responsibility for not having had the operation and also for being alive. As her recall of the experience improves, Tashi wonders if she had the operation as a gesture of solidarity with her dead sister.

Traumatized, Tashi does not want to remember her sister’s death or the circumstances surrounding it. The reader is given few details about the event either, other than the fact that Dura
Had been very excited during the period leading up to her death. Suddenly she had become the center of everyone’s attention; every day there were gifts. Decorative items mainly: beads, bracelets, a bundle of dried henna for reddening hair and palms, but the odd pencil and tablet as well. Bright remnants of cloth for a headscarf and dress. The promise of shoes! (*Possessing*, 9)

Although Tashi volunteers for the operation against the advice and counsel of the people who are closest to her, as a young woman she engages in the ritual as a way of aligning her identity politically and possibly as a means to relieve her subconscious but overwhelming feelings of culpability for her sister’s violent death.

One of the questions that Tashi seems unable to resolve and that become a major factor in her decline into madness is the extent to which the choices she makes are her own or are catalyzed by factors beyond her control. This lack of resolution about her autonomy leads Tashi down a path of declining certainty. Even her act of retaliation when she begins to feel that the choice was not her own - her murder of M’Lissa - may not ultimately have been her own. The old woman seems to want Tashi to kill her, and therefore Tashi cannot even claim that act as one entirely of her own volition.

After immigrating to the United States, she repeatedly checks herself into a mental institution, escaping the stresses of everyday life and the temptation to inflict pain on others. Physically and emotionally debilitated, Tashi allows her mind to abandon her body. So being circumcised and left in incomplete, Tashi transforms to physically and psychologically silent girl that patriarchy prefers. Her lover Adam, finding her in the circumciser’s tent after the mutilation, mourned: “Her eyes no
longer sparkled with anticipation. They were as flat as eyes that have been painted in, and with dull paint” (Possessing, 43). Describing the same encounter, Tashi concurs: “I can see as (Adam) looks at me that he does not know whether to laugh or cry. I feel the same. My eyes see him but they do not register his being. Nothing runs out of my eyes to greet him. It is as if myself is hiding behind an iron door” (Possessing, 45).

Alienation from self, or erasure of identity, is a central component of Tashi’s brokenness. Her narrations frequently veer into fantastical imaginings, evasions of her unpleasant “true” story. The novel’s first train of thought, “I did not realize for a long time that I was dead”, is immediately interrupted: “And that reminds me of a story. There was once a beautiful young panther who had a co-wife and a husband” (Possessing, 3). The panther's tale, like all the fables Tashi fabricates, erases her tragic reality and presents the reader with metaphoric mirror-worlds in which to glimpse fragments of her shattered psyche.

Tashi’s self-perceptions also reveal her alienation. She describes herself as “a dark spectre floating . . . flapping my arms and shrieking like a crow” (Possessing, 143); “a hover(ing) dragonfly” (Possessing, 155); “rising from around my own neck exactly as if I were wind” (Possessing, 159); and “flapping my wings unceasingly, cawing across an empty sky” (Possessing, 217). Animal and supernatural images convey Tashi’s identification with the nonhuman, the wordless. Her inexpressible fury and anguish are given “voice” through howling, cawing, and screaming.

Identity loss also occurs when Tashi adopts an American name. As “Evelyn” she attempts to fit into America, where “people are warm and squeaky clean and eating meat Safe” (Possessing, 55). Yet she still lacks confidence. “My fantasy life,” she muses. “Without it I’m afraid to exist. Who am I, Tashi, renamed in America
‘Evelyn,’ Johnson” (Possessing, 36)? Reflecting its protagonist’s schizophrenic state of mind, the novel itself jumps from name to name; the sections narrated by Tashi are alternately titled “Tashi”, “Evelyn”, “Tashi-Evelyn” and “Evelyn-Tashi”.

On the day Tashi faces the firing squad, Mbati, Tashi’s family, and Raye unroll a banner that reads, “RESISTANCE IS THE SECRET OF JOY!” (Possessing, 281). Strengthened by her sacrifice and the broken taboo of silence which came as a result of the court case, women sing to support their mutual cause outside the jail and expose the intact genitals of their baby girls at her execution to reveal that her sacrifice has not been an exercise in futility and that there is hope for the next generation. This brings both the novel and Walker’s political agenda to eradicate FGM full circle and signifies Tashi’s complete psychological healing.

Only the final segments, in which Tashi has regained self-possession and inner strength, integrate all her names. Her reconciliation letter to a former rival is titled “Tashi-Evelyn-Mrs. Johnson” and signed “Tashi Evelyn Johnson, Reborn, soon to be Deceased”. And the last chapter, her account of her own execution, implies simultaneous embodiment and disappearance of identity; it is titled, “Tashi Evelyn Johnson Soul” and concludes with the paradoxical statement: “There is a roar as if the world cracked open and I flew inside. I am no more. And satisfied” (Possessing, 279). Resisting the prevarications of the establishment and facing the truth of female suffering, Tashi goes to her execution a whole woman and amidst the fertility symbols of corn, flowers, seeds, beads, and herbs brought by the women supporters.

Tashi’s psychological healing and her connection at the moment of her death with the universe reveal Walker’s unifying vision for the future and what she perceives as her role as the artist. The protagonist of her novel Meridian offers a
glimpse of Walker’s holistic and unifying vision of the universe as well as what she perceives as the role of the artist:

[Perhaps it will be my part to walk behind the real revolutionaries—those who know they must spill blood in order to help the poor and the black and therefore go right ahead and when they stop to wash off the blood and find their throats too choked with the smell of murdered flesh to sing, …If I can only do that, my role will not have been a useless one after all. (Walker, 201)]

Alice Walker continues a subject which she begun in Possessing The Secret Joy, in the novel By The Light of My Father’s Smile. In this novel, besides her focus on female sexuality that deprives women of self-esteem and self-worth, she treats subject as a celebration of pleasure and expectation. By Light of Father’s Smile is about hypocrisy, masquerade, and dissipation the qualities are much needed by the most of the characters to accomplish their anthropological goals. Alice Walker begins the novel by stating “A story of Requited love, crossing over, and the sexual healing of the soul” (Light, 1). Indeed, the narrative unfolds an exciting story line of love avenged, disembodied humans, and sexual intimacy. She insists this with a poetic tribute to instructors, awareness, and kinship.

When life descends into the pit

I must become … (Light, 219)

This poem which is the last entry of the novel, tells about the next best thing to within ‘hope’ for creating one’s self, not without sacrifice such as getting burned, but also not without gain such as transforming into a flame a light hope. Whether by burning or transforming, life is being created; creating is nothing but living. Perhaps women
have the best opportunity if not, privilege, enjoys such capacity to create. Early mothers created pots from clay; early society related the myth of creation to the clay the first human beings where believed to have come from clay.

The development of the plot of this novel has three sections. The long first section, ‘Angel’, begins with a chapter of the same title and introduces readers to the characters, alive and deceased, and to the issues they face through life’s journey. ‘A Kiss between the Dead Is a Breeze’ is the title of the second division, a segment of poetry and conversations among the characters on the other side of life. The final and shortest section is ‘Fathers’, a focus on eternity and guardianship of the living through the divine state of grace. Walker ends her novel with acknowledgements of assistance from the spirit of Eros and spiritual helpers who encourage her in consciousness rising and new understandings of the universal cycle.

For focusing on ‘cultural and ethical identities’ it is relevant to discuss on socio-historical content which is presented by the novelist in this novel. Alice Walker introduces readers to the presence of Africans in Mesoamerica. She creates a group of people called the Mundo, a cultural group that is a fusion of African and American bloodlines in Mexico. Within the mainstream scholarly community, African presence in the Americas is a subject that is either rejected outright or treated as controversial. However, African American scholar Ivan van Sertima asserts in his publication *They Came before Columbus: the African Presence in Ancient America* (1976) that historical evidence documents the participation of Africans in Mexico in the pre-Columbian period. More widely accepted is that African accompanied Spanish conquistadors to Mexico in the sixteenth century. By the nineteenth century, Mexican countrymen demanded their independence from Spain, and slave revolts led to the
abolition of the system of slavery under the leadership of the Afro-Mexican Miguel Hidalgo. Before emancipation in the United States, some escaped North American slaves found their way to Mexico, settled in the region, married Seminole Indians, and assimilated into the community. Miscegenation continued into the twentieth century, and the reduction in the numbers of Afro-Mexicans was precipitated by marriage for skin lightening, making Afro-Mexican heritage undetectable. The Mexican leadership used the phrase mejorar la raza (improve the race) to sanction marriages between lighter-skinned Amerindians and darker-skinned Afro-Mexicans to create lighter skin in their offspring. Today, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, dominant Afro-Mexican settlements are in Costa Chica, Veracruz, Coahuila, Zacatecas, Sinaola, Yucatan, and Quintana Roo, among others. Members of the African American middle class affirm each other. Employment status and the inheritance of wealth and property are less significant than decorum, refinement, reputation, respectability, and morals. Even within class structure, there are gradations of identification. Langston Hughes, expressing his views in his essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain”, illustrates:

African American class distinctions, calling the middle class not wealthy but not uncomfortable, and the high class white imitators. As with most groups, there are gender issues and some biases centered on skin hue, a carryover from antebellum society, but these do not detract from their middle-class ideals. While they are not monolithic, a common thread and a common call connect them. (98)

They have a commitment to the African American church, the hub of religious life, organizing, and politicizing. Moreover, they address the needs of African Americans
and citizens of the African Diaspora as a whole. They retain the spirit of resistance to oppression and injustice that was embedded in their ancestors, and they work hard to advance the cause of marginalized and disenfranchised people. Vigilant in their duty to those whose lives are weighed down by societal pressures, they are instrumental in bringing about change where it is needed. The Robinsons in Alice Walker’s novel are members of the African American middle class and they are practitioners of agnosticism. A doctrine that holds that the existence of God and other spiritual beings is unknown and probably unknowable.

Though Walker’s works are thematically multifocused, the dominant themes of *By The Light of My Father’s Smile* center on father-daughter relationships, love, reconciliation, sexuality, and spirituality. Walker focuses on father-daughter relationships to emphasize the importance of fathers in the lives of their daughters. Fathers are instrumental in socializing their daughters in the proper life styles and values. Fathers are the support system not just emotionally, but also sexually. The father-daughter relationship in this novel is first strained and then nonexistent. Walker illustrates through the character of Magdalena the vulnerability of young girls whose fathers do not provide them with a sense of compassion and belonging. Walker implies that fathers are essential in the development of daughters who are not conflict-ridden and can enter womanhood empowered and positive in the development of adult relationships.

In her book, entitled *In Search of Our Mothers’ Garden* Alice Walker defines a womanist vis a vis a feminist, underlying the unique stance black women took in response to the threefold oppression of race, gender, and class. Loving the humanity of all people, a womanist is concerned with survival and wholeness of entire people,
male and female. This commitment to the wellbeing of all people reflects womanist
global concerns, as the womanist theologian Jacquelyn Grant states,

To speak of Black women’s tridimensional reality…is not to speak of
Black women exclusively, for there is an implied universality, which
connects them with others. (67)

Accordingly, referencing the literary portrayals of womanist interest in the world’s
condition, Alice Walker contends:

I create characters…who are not passive but active in the discovery of
what is vital and real in this world. Characters who explore what it
would feel like not to be imprisoned by the hatred of women, the love
of violence, and the destructiveness of greed taught to human beings as
the ‘religion’ by which they must guide their lives. (74)

Above all, this broad definition of womanist love outlines the resistance to
oppressive Western patriarchal praxis and it calls for the recognition of female beauty,
enhancing women’s self-esteem and self-love. In this novel love is pervasive—love of
spouse, love of children, love of siblings, and love of self. Love manifests differently
in different relationships and meets different requirements in different situations.

While Senor Robinson faces no difficulty in verbalizing his attachment to and his
dependency on his wife Langley and his love for his daughter Susannah, he fathers in
expressing his love for Magdalena. His inability to demonstrate a caring attitude
toward her severely handicaps her socially. She then confuses the definition of love in
her relationship with her sister. Magdalena holds Susannah hostage, manipulating her
into not showing Senor Robinson kindness and affection. Magdalena equates
Susannah’s love for her with mistreatment of their father, something that Magdalena
desires. Self-love in the Robinson family suffers because they fail to show adequate affection toward each other; therefore, they cannot look inward to give themselves proper care and concern.

Walker’s central concept of ‘womanism’ is the idea that women must commit themselves to each other by creating their own identity. This is a folk term peculiar to the African American tradition, which implies to a characteristic of boldness, premature adulthood and a spirit of enquiry among female children. It also suggests capability, responsibility and leadership qualities of the black women. It pays tribute to the indomitable spirit of the black women and of their creativity. By seeing this background, one can weigh in that David Bradley has misunderstood Alice Walker when he states that “Alice Walker has a high level of enmity towards black men”, (81) to which Walker responded by saying:

I just like to have words that describe things correctly. Now to me ‘black feminist’ does not do that. I need a word that is organic, that really comes out of the culture… I don’t choose womanism because it is ‘better’ than feminism…. I choose it because I prefer the sound, the feel, the fit of it; because I cherish the spirit of the women (like Sojourner) the word calls to mind…. (Ibid. 94)

Walker reveals the ‘whole story’ of the black people in order to achieve the ‘wholeness’ or ‘roundness’ in her novels because everything around her is deliberately split up. As a womanist, Walker is after the ‘whole truth’ of African American life. Her concept stresses the sense of solidarity and sharing, the sense of community that brings about a blossoming in self and society.
By the Light of Father’s Smile depicts a story of requited love and sexual healing of the soul. Moving back and forth in time and among unforgettable characters and their stories, Walker crosses the conventional borders of all kinds as she explores the ways in which a woman’s denied sexuality leads to the loss of much prized and necessary original self. She regains that self, even as her family’s past of lies and love is not transformed. The novel presents a celebration of sexuality, its absolute usefulness in the accessing of one’s mature spirituality, and father’s role in assuring joy or sorrow in this are for his female children. It explores the richness and coherence of an alternative culture, experience of sexuality as a celebration of life, of trust in Nature and the Spirit, even as it affirms the belief, as Walker says, “it is the triumphant heart, not the conquered heart that forgives and that love is both timeless and beyond time” (xi).

The novel opens with a dead father; Mr. Robinson who had died of horrible cancer, narrating a chapter entitled ‘Angels’ to readers. He is trying to haunt his younger daughter, Susannah, to learn how he might have been a better father. Denied funding for their research work in Anthropology by an anthropological society, as they are black, Robinson and his wife, Langley, conduct their anthropological study of the Mundo - a tiny band of mixed race Blacks and Indians who fled across the border during the civil war-people in Mexico through the sponsorship of their church. The church enslaves and forces them to do its work as a spiritual advisor in order to do their own work of anthropological study. They had to do their work in the guise of missionaries. “He preached about the stuff he hardly knew, or cared, a thing about. Mama pretended to be pious” (Light, 91). Unfortunately, the ‘pastor’ gets fooled by his own disguise as he has to explain to his daughters that “his profession…. Was
based on the forgiveness of other people’s sins” (Light, 23). Though he had gone to study Manuelito’s people, he ends up knowing nothing about them. Though the father revels in his wife’s sexuality, he is terrified by his daughter’s passion for a Mundo boy, Petros. When he discovers her tryst with Mundo, boy-tryst is meant to represent natural, unsullied sex—he whips her mercilessly hoping to remake her in her sister’s more demure image. She is the one who eats herself into oblivion, dying eventually from the rage she has savored and the mounds of food she has consumed trying to satisfy herself. Susannah spends her life searching for a partner, finding plenty of lust but precious little love. Instead both girls—Susannah and Magdalena—are forever distanced from him. When Susannah witnesses him turn into Godzilla, they decide not to love their father again.

When the wild boys come home to see Susannah, her father sends them away being afraid of her getting pregnant. She doesn’t like her father thinking of his daughters in this way. Susannah notices the warmth of Petros’ mother smile when she was at his home in Greece. Petros wants to leave it as soon he could. He is grateful to her for being present and receptive. He silently thanks her for loving his parents and not considering them grotesque. That night he floats on her and things she might become pregnant. Susannah is curious to know how she fell in love with him. Petros now thinks that he has a good fortune to marry her, a woman of substance to create a good new life.

They encounter a dwarf woman named Irene who is a caretaker and the fixture of the small white church, the shrine of St. Theodore the Merciful. She witnesses local women entering the church, pulling their shawls on their heads and prostrating themselves kissing the small virgin’s feet. Susannah wants to know why she looks
intensely at her when she gave a smile. Later on, she realizes that in Greece the word ‘passion’ denotes suffering. Therefore, when many of the women smiled, they smiled through tears. Nobody talks to her.

Irene’s mother, raped and beaten, had died while giving birth to her. Hence, she is supposed to be God’s punishment for the sin of her mother. At a very young age, she is given responsibility as a servant to the church. No one is supposed to speak to her about her mother’s grave in a separate square. But she knows it and offers lilies on it regularly as a mark of respect to her neglected mother. The lilies are grown on her grave. Thus she is denied childhood and is forced to serve her mother and the church. They dislike her living in a small lonely room at the back of the church. Petros sighs at the thought of her loneliness and asks:

What was the life of this woman? This woman dwarf? How could she be so punished for what she was? For being her mother’s child? For being? And who had cradled her through babyhood? Comforted her through adolescence? Who had instructed her how to serve both her mother and the church? (Light, 53)

From Pauline’s letter she knows that women have a case of fright. It is as if the look into each other’s eyes and discovers they have been transformed into bears, an image that puzzles her. While writing a response to her Susannah is stuck on a line: “You are a bear; I am a bear; yes, I am afraid” (Light, 197). One of the cards its Irene studies shows a woman riding a large elephant. By the elephant’s side, then is a woman yelling at her attempting to warn her of the danger. At the edge of the card, there appears a tiniest wing of an angel. If a woman comes to her senses, she will be saved which means becoming aware. This card shows that she is gaining that
possibility and dream of her sister. There is a place right in the middle of her life where Magdalena and her lover meet. Irene is an angel who has arrived to her the wounded or sufferers from the hitting over the head. She is having just a sin fracture that means her spirit is not broken yet.

Susannah doesn’t want to get married. She says to Irene:

I am already married - a life of experimentation, change. I fell I must try all of life - at least all of life that interest me - before they can truly understand that all of life suits me. If marry, I’m afraid, I’ll turn to stone (Light, 179).

Both Susannah and Irene are well aware of their white oppressor who uses black people as a means of exploitation. They never extend help to the black people interested in any sort of work for the wellbeing of the society. They deny help to Robinson Senior, as he was a woman of color. Susannah tells Irene that white people never study themselves. They prefer to study the blacks and write about how they don’t quite measure up. They are afraid to find out how different they are from the rest of the world’s people. The Europe has lost her strong mother in which burning in which her strongest, best; most spirited and wisest women were destroyed along with best men. Susannah says what whites do to the best men: “and best men, too. Because the best men always love women, all of them captured, tortured and systematically put to death, over a period of centuries!” (Light, 186)

Susannah is glad to know that Irene hardly listens to men who used to stone at women. They stoned great many before they got their ‘vaunted’ democracy in these parts. She comes to know that in some cultures, they have written in their religious books about the size and shape of the stones to be used to break woman’s nose and
others to crack her skull. Irene was spending her leisure time embroidering a tablecloth that would be sold to tourists who visit the place. The truth proved by the life she led pains Susannah. Irene tells Susannah about the treatment given to her by the white: “In the old days, when I was young, it was forbidden. I was beaten if I left. Dragged back. There was no place to go. Either. My mother was dead. Nobody wanted me” (Light, 57).

The stoning pillar is made of a marble and metal sign coca-cola is propped against its back from where men stone at women even today. Irene explains her concept ‘ladies first’. They are kept in front so that they can keep eye on them and there is least possibility of their running away. Later on when they become tame, they invented chivalry and gallantry to threaten them. Irene asked Susannah who was known for her walk not to stoop over like most tall girls and walk like a queen. When she wants to know about the card aside, Irene says, “There is a man inside you, your own inner man, so to speak, and he is dedicated to helping you. He is lifting you into the carriage of your own body, in which you can begin to take charge of your own body” (63).

She shows a rare type of courage to fight against all odds in her life. Irene tells her that there is a cure to each sickness. The most important thing that Pauline and Susannah cannot do in their life and which Susannah likes very much is: “Her intelligence, her will, It is also her courage. She has managed to live by herself, with herself, for two-thirds of a century without losing her mind” (Light, 175).

Irene likes Pauline (Paul-een-nay) as she is unfortunately named for a man St. Paul who caused extensive oppression of women through the church. He demanded their silence in the church. He demanded their silence in the church and
expected them to be loyal and honest to their husbands forever like Indian ‘pativrata nari’. According to Irene, Lily, Pauline’s first name, is the best one she likes. Perhaps the Lily controls Paul. She is exactly a kind of ghetto goddess who has created her own life and lives it to the hilt. She says, “The lily is the flower of the Lilith, first mother. … It is really an ancient symbol for the yoni. People used to think that with just a lily and her yoni woman could impregnate herself” (Light, 178).

Although her life is perfectly amazing, Irene wants the life Susannah had. She craves for the ‘idyllic’ childhood, the educated parents, and the rides in the car, the experience of Mexico and an opportunity to enjoy it like her. She metamorphoses herself into something different. She decides to throw away everything black she owned, when she will leave Greece. Now she wears green, red, yellow and blue instead of black, which she was wearing forcefully over the years. In her new, look she looks like a magical person. She says, “It was very hard to cast off the black clothing. It was as hard to do that as it was to leave my mother buried there behind the church” (Light, 180).

Irene shows womanist consciousness by revealing Susannah how women were enslaved by the church. Irene has been a wonderful lover who takes her closest to the door of her own locked closet. She is grateful to Irene for making her conscious of slavery of the blacks in the past. Susannah calls her a teacher who taught her, “a freer and much deeper expression of sex” (Light, 189). For her, Irene is a wonderful, gorgeous, rich, a great lover and a very good cook. Pauline has also learnt from their years of mutual cramming that: “She can neither have her nor be she. Nor can I have your childhood instead of my own. I’m stuck with who I am” (Light, 189).
Magdalena, a daughter of Robinson, is grown up and educated in Sierra Madre along with Susannah. At sixteen she tells that she should be called June, a symbol of the moisture, readiness and richness of summer:

   It is without a question a beautiful name elegant. Evocative of mystery.
   Warmth. It is promise in itself. … It is always the beginning of
   whatever is bountiful. The illustrious people, poets, musicians and
   painters carry it. She hums a pagan song, which is not permitted by
   church Por la laz, por la Luz… (Light, 21 & 24)

Like Magdalena’s experiences at fourteen, a feathery moment of Manuelito’s breathed and feels her whole self-seen. Everything in her runs into his arms and she whispers back: “Manuelito, my love, my angelito, my pretty, pretty boy” (Light, 24). She disobeys him by sleeping with Mauelito. She does not know why her Daddy punishes her for no reason. Being a pastor his profession is to forgive me. He does not understand her passion for riding horses, or her passion for riding Vado that belongs to Mauelito. As a result, her father mercilessly beats her with a silver color leather belt Mauelito had given her and thrashes her in silence. Later on she sees through the keyhole of the girlish bedroom the same gentle and compassionate father who prevents them from love-making turns into Godzilla. This shows his double standard nature. Since that day she decides to take subtle revenge by not loving her daddy again.

   June meets Manuelito on the plane coming home from lecture from Las Cruces. He is a cute boy with black horse from the mountains. He was in army and the only one of his platoon who survived having a limp in Vietnam War. He is faithful to her. Though he is married, he wants to marry her seeking his wife’s pity on them. The ‘job’ the government assigned for him after his injury is to make speeches about
the Army and experiences in Vietnam War to high school students. He tried to tell them how to stay alive. He dies singing his initiation song, which he teaches, to her when they live in the mountains. Magdalena sings or hums it all the time:

Anyone can see the sky is naked
and if the sky is naked
then the earth must be naked also … (Light, 90)

Magdalena is called Mad Dog and later on, her father insists on calling her by a nickname, Mac Doc. The mad dog is considered wise because it has lost its mind, which is the most difficult thing to do in the world: It is a way of saying you must not live too much in your head; reminding you to stay in your emotions and saying that carziness has value. The elders found this retort amazing and then started to call her Mad Dog or Mac Doc. He doesn’t understand that Magdalena is, “a changing woman, a natural one, uninstructed and uninitiated, and therefore very rare” (Light, 93).

Mauelito teaches the Mundo initiation song to Robinson and ask him to learn it correctly. Magdalena is being singing that song all the years. The Mundo believes that there is a connection between the man and the moon. The crescent moon is the moon smiling its light on the good lovemaking. The moon, forever a woman, for just a while becomes, also, a man! When they go to meet their lovers to make love, they think of the moon as a father happily looking down on them. Mundo fathers are happy that their children, girls as well as boys, enjoy sex singing a song: “By The Light of My Father’s Smile!” (Light, 211).

Finally, Robinson realizes that this is what his poor daughter was singing all those years: ‘Por la luz….por la luz. …’ He still hears her despairing cry. He ignores an element of pleading. She has been begging to see, to witness, the light she had
found. To love and bless what she loves. He now knows that he has committed a blunder by refusing her love. She loves Manuelito believing that the moon is with her, and so perhaps her own father might be. However, her father who is a fool fails to understand her and without reason destroys her life completely by refusing her to marry Manuelito.

Magdalena decides not to forgive his father for what he did to her. “He was a brute, a hypocrite, a liar. And Mama was his Moll” (*Light*, 119). She wants reparation rather than apology. She wants to be made completely again. He thinks her to be a tramp and does not trust her. She knows that his love for her cannot exist without love. He is guilty of taking away the best moments of her life. She further tells:

> The moment my life opened, not to my family and friends, but to me myself. The moment when I knew my life was given to me for me to own. He took that moment and he broke it into a million bits. He made it dirty and evil. (*Light*, 116)

The woman dressed in billowy native costume is Pauline in the tiny village Wodra. She is the tourist woman who dresses inappropriately and accepts motorcycle rides of local village males with whom Susannah travels in Kalimsa. Her strange behavior reminds Susannah her sister, Magdalena. Lily Paul was a mother from the age five like Celie in *The Colour Purple*. Her parents were devout Christian and thought birth control means murder. As a result, at the age of eight she is due to give two more births. They refuse her marry until they become almost old. As a result, she becomes a girlfriend of Susannah.

Pauline is not a woman who can be trapped easily. Like men, she rides horses, drives fast and speaks her mind. By the time, her son, Richard, is three; she has saved
enough money to run away from this hell. Like Meridian who ties her tubes and joins Saxon college, Pauline leaves her son with her family and joins a night school. After graduation in aerospace engineering in City College, she joins Navy. She gets out of it, works in restaurants and by her own restaurant. She informs Susannah about the treatment given to women in military:

In the military there is no respect for women. No respect for feminine, whatsoever. And no respect for anyone who is not white. It is as if the world is meant for the pleasure of white male, and that is how they behave. I felt completely unsafe among the men designated to protect our country…I was lucky to get out alive. (Light, 134)

Pauline likes stories of women of earlier times and cares for “the bold, the brave, and the brazen. The women who knew that they were trapped and resolved to fly out of one trap to other” (Light, 108). When she suffers from menopause, Susannah offers her help by massaging her scalp. Two weeks later, they start loving each other.

Pauline’s mother who had died of childbearing blames her for abandoning her to suffer alone. She begins to hate her body, which has produced ten children. Susannah reveals her how women are denied sexual pleasure: “Women all over the world have been brainwashed to think sex is not meant to be pleasurable to them, only to the men fucking them. You are supposed to sort of steal your pleasures form theirs” (Light, 130).

Susannah asks Pauline to name her son after Richard, husband of Gena and the only person apart from Gena who inquires about her baby sympathetically. She tells her about the importance of personal freedom which her parents tried to sell her.
When she tries to know from the minister about orgasms, she realizes: “Orgasmic freedom has been a male right with any woman they wanted to fuck, since the beginning of the patriarchy” (Light, 132).

Thus being a womanist, she expects that women must become conscious of their oppression and live free and independent life by educating themselves about sex.

The theme of reconciliation in this novel is the restoration of peace and harmony to disjointed lives. When Senor Robinson proves that he possess the human skill of empathy, it becomes crucial to the act of reconciliation with his daughter Susannah, even after death. He spends endless time hovering around her as a ghost, but he does not begin the reconciliation process until he empathizes with her. In addition, when he finally listens to Mauelito and accepts the teaching of the Mundo, the door opens for him to experience full reconciliation with all of his family members. Then he is able to experience the afterlife in a constant state of harmony.

Walker’s theme of spirituality centers on understanding primitive belief systems rather than adhering completely too institutionalized Christianity and Judaism. The Robinsons are agnostics and do not subscribe to any spiritual belief system. Highlighted in the novel is the Mundo spiritual system, which avoids jargon about the world’s end, the annihilation of evildoers, heaven and hell, and the just reaping a special reward. Through the character of Manuelito readers become aware of a system of beliefs and practices shared by the Mundo that help them cope with human existence in life and after life. Mundo cosmology acknowledges the interconnectedness of the human spirit and/or soul to all existence since time immemorial. While the Mundo do have public and private rituals, their cosmology is dependent
upon the cohesiveness of the cultural group, as is evident in the fact that the culture does not disintegrate when Senor Robinson introduces a foreign religion.

Alice Walker projects the characters’ various sojourns towards womanist reconciling love, a love that embraces people in their immediate surroundings as well as afar. Their sojourns involve encounters with cultures and worldviews not tainted by religious oppression. In projecting the fictitious Mundo indigenous culture, Alice Walker alludes to womanist love. First, recognizing the sacredness of women, the Mundo reject oppressive Western religious patriarchy.

They had never understood how woman could be considered evil…since they considered her the mother of corn. When hearing of her original sin of eating the forbidden fruit, they scratched their chins again and said, even more gravely, perhaps this is the one biggest lie that has unraveled your world. (*Light*, 29)

They regard women as carriers of life and birthing. Because of this belief, they respect the female body and view it as a part of the beauty of creation. The disjunction between Mundo and Western culture regarding the feminine is symbolized by two varying approaches to Magdalena’s femininity.

Manuelito’s concern with the wellbeing of all people is another point of correspondence with womanism. Not only does he laments the oppressions inflicted upon his community but also grieves for victimized people worldwide. For example, Manuelito cannot countenance certain practices found within African patriarchal tribes. One practice is circumcision, the removal of a part of the female genital organ accompanied by a curse. Also visualizing the women wearing nearly ten-pound-heavy iron collars around their necks disturbs him. Above all, he is shocked upon finding out
that the western priests and missionaries in Africa for the most part keep silent about these practices, and sometimes even support them as expressions of cultural uniqueness. Therefore, he observes that Western patriarchy, although expressed differently, collaborates with other oppressive patriarchies worldwide.

Together with womansit, Manuelito also holds to the uniqueness and particularity of different cultural expressions and prioritizes love in practice. He seeks intercultural and interfaith communication even with the agents of Western oppression. After being presented with the Old Testament view of an authoritative God who sides with the Western world evangelization, he feels affinity with the gospel of Jesus Christ, who

Stayed only long enough to sort things out. To tell his people not to worry; to absolve them from blame. We were glad to hear he had returned from the dead; this made perfect sense to us. And we liked him. He resembled a Mundo! (Light, 133)

The Mundo vision of Christ corresponds with Alice Walker’s perception of Jesus Christ. She states, “Jesus Christ was not a Christian, but a Christ, an enlightened being. The challenge for me is not to be a follower of something but to embody it; I am willing to try for that” (Light, 127). Again, the Mundo male discerns correspondence between the value system of his people and biblical message of love.

The contemporary multi-religious American reality manifests not only into a dynamic religious landscape discussed in public life, but into literature as well. African American literature constitutes a crossroad of many forms of knowledge, i.e. religion, intersect and interact. To procure an atmosphere of tolerance, religious diversity and religious freedom in America are guaranteed by the First Amendment to
the U.S. Constitution, which states: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof” (Eck, 7). These lines, initially not intended for the present state of profuse religious diversity, help the American nation to “claim and affirm what the framers of the Constitution did not imagine but equipped us to embrace” (Ibid. 3). America has always been a land of multiple religious traditions: “[a] vast, textured pluralism was already present in the life ways of the Native people — even before the European settlers came to these shores” (op.cit., 3). In accordance to the American ideal and dilemma of E Pluribus Unum, “civic and religious bridge building is our greatest challenge today” (op.cit., 335).

It is in an attempt to guarantee the democratic value of institutional and individual religious freedom.

The term “spirituality” is understood as a particular inwardness, sensitivity to religious values, and a concern for ethical or ideological values pertaining to human inner nature. Ethics is linked with both of these as a philosophy endorsing moral choices and decisions made by an individual who follows a certain code of conduct.

Walker’s *Now is the time to Open Your Heart* explores the issues of personal religion, spirituality, and ethics through the prism of the concept of *kairos*. *Kairos*, a seminal concept in ancient Greek rhetoric, literature, and philosophy denoting right timing, a turning point, an opportunity, or, in the words of James Kinneavy: “the right or opportune time to do something, or right measure in doing something”, (58) which is applicable to contemporary African American Literature. The Protagonist of this novel experiences kairic moments, for instance, under the guise of religious conversion or a personal transformation brought about by a crisis. The title of the novel evokes the kairic as well as expresses the urgency for the enactment of change.
Thompson, in accordance with Kinneavy’s definition and Paul Tillich’s usage of kairos in theology, analyzes “how timing, propriety, and appeals to spiritual power become inextricably intermixed in nineteenth-century American literary culture” (189). He applies the term *kairos*, understood as “the idea of spiritual timing and due measure” (Ibid. 187) to works by Ralph Waldo Emerson. This American *kairos*, defined as the “feeling of the right time and moral entitlement for a new literature,” is a plea for spiritually profound American literature capable of engendering social change (Ibid. 187). Emerson, according to Thompson, was convinced that the American nation was *kairos* incarnate, that its people were chosen, and that they had a religious mission to fulfill. The definition of *kairos*, as applied by Thompson to nineteenth-century American literature, is “a moment of spiritual insight and propriety”, (Ibid. 187). This concept is also applied to contemporary African American literature to denote a religious or spiritual breakthrough in the life of a modern individual.

The African American religious experience also encompasses a variety of traditions, and Alice Walker is renowned for her syncretistic approach to religion and spirituality. She weaves the novel *Now is the time to Open Your Heart* with religious, ecological, womanist, and political threads. The protagonists of Walker’s novel venture on spiritual journeys during which they are healed and attain knowledge. These retreats are like a baptism, heralding a rebirth and a new life. The protagonists’ religious and spiritual practices consist of elements of Buddhism, Feng Shui, Shamanism, yoga and meditation, and natural/herbal and ancient medicine. Traces of humanism, compatible but not necessarily allied with organized religion, are also found in Walker’s novels *The Colour Purple* and *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*:
Alice Walker’s humanism is deeply contemplative. It is, in essence, a worshipful appreciation for humanity and for the earth in general. This type of reverence for life gives it god-like status in that it must remain at the forefront of our thoughts and actions, centering our every move within a profound sense of awe. What is called for, according to Walker, is a recognition of life as beautiful and beautifully connected to all things (Pinn, 166).

In *The Colour Purple*, Walker’s idea of God has been aptly mediated through the person of Shug, who says: “I believe God is everything, everything that is, ever was or ever will be” (*Colour*, 202). The concept of the divine is broad and inclusive, as expressed by Celie in one of her letters: “Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God” (*Colour*, 292). Such a personalized vision of religion is characteristic of New Age and Neo pagan movements, whose practitioners “express their generation’s disenchantment with traditional religious options” (Pike, 14). Neo paganism, however, focuses on the relationship with nature and recasts religions of the past, whilst New Age is concerned with shaping individual consciousness and thus impacting the future. Yet, spiritual searches in both these movements generates an individualized spiritual formula that embraces manifold beliefs, as well as medicinal and healing practices aimed at the integration of the mind, body, and spirit. Similarly, New Age and Neopagan religious movements provide purpose. As Sarah Pike writes,

“[t]hrough the ritual structures and symbolic sources provided in various religions, humans give their thought and actions meaning. Therefore, religion at its core is a process of meaning-making” (Ibid, 18).
Now is the time to Open Your Heart is one of interpersonal conflicts centered on Kate Nelson Talking tree and Yolo Day, who interact with characters who have their own interpersonal disharmony. The two major characters resolve their issues by taking parallel quests, while traveling parallel waterways, and receiving instruction in parallel circles. The first four chapters center on Kate; the remaining chapters form parallel structure, swinging like a pendulum from Yolo to Kate and back again.

The protagonist of the novel Kate is a 57-year-old successful writer and affluent suburbanite on a collision course with life and love. As if, these agitations were not enough, her mind is also tormented by dreams of empty freezers, snake images, and a recurrent dream of dry rivers. Encouraged by her friends to find a real river to explore, she bids her lover and her home goodbye and begins her quest with a group of other woman seekers white-water rafting on the turbulent Colorado River.

In the first section, Kate has taken a new name, ceases her fascination with Buddhism, has disquieting dreams, reminisces about the Black Freedom movement, dismantles her home altar, and vows to change her restless spirit.

The twists and turns of the Colorado River and its elevated rapids make Kate ill, but the challenge of the river represents the uneasiness of her life, and she must become ill in order to become better. This experience on the river is the beginning of Kate understands of internal and external life. Through consistent regurgitation, Kate’s body begins to cleanse itself, each emptying of her innards representing the casting off past burdens, such as domestic abuse in her first marriage and the accidental death of her mother. Her resolution to return home and live as a virgin proves fruitless, thereby creating the need for a second quest.
Kate’s retreat to the rainforest unites her with a heterogeneous group of medicine seekers and with Armando, the Yoda of the Amazon, knowledgeable in the transcendental spirituality of the Amerindians from time immemorial. The Amazon rainforest is a greater challenge, requiring the need for even more regurgitation, and it is the place where Kate comes into complete understanding of internal and external life. Through his requirements of silence, meditation, and inner-world contact the shaman Armando guides Kate to in-depth objectivity and enlightenment through the careful dispensing of Grandmother yage, a frothy medicinal herb beverage that the ancient indigenous South American people used to cleanse the physical body so that contact with the spirit of origins and endings could not be impeded. The beverage also creates hallucinogenic dreams and helps Kate along her inward journey of self-discovery and Bobinsana, another medicinal beverage, helps her have lucid dreams.

With other seekers of enlightenment, Kate develops deeper compassion for humankind by listening to her peer travelers and their heartrending tales of life conflicts. Her greatest needs are to regenerate her spirit, explore other avenues to greater enlightenment, find renewed inspiration in the rescue of the globe from indifferent human behavior and come to terms with her true life’s purpose. Concluding that she no longer requires the Grandmother medicine, she advances to a higher level of sensitivity, helping others to make the necessary transitions and becoming a healer in the own right.

Kate’s live-in younger lover, Yolo, is a complex character but not the antagonist; he is more or like a parallel protagonist. Changing his name from Henry to Yolo, a Poewin Indian name symbolizing ‘a place in the river where wild rushes grow’, he feels his name is more suitable to his personality; he thus has in common
with Kate the changing of names. Kate had been the aggressor in their romantic encounter, pursuing him until he conformed to her desires. A charismatic, handsome, monogamous, sincere individual who embraces feminist, Yolo is an independent, self-sufficient successful artist. He enjoys the middle-class lifestyle of freedom, mobility, options, and choice. His flaws are unworthy of serious attention, but Walker’s creative impulse makes him a little less than perfect. He, too, has physical and spiritual life issues that require resolution, such as his addiction to tobacco and his disintegrating relationship with Kate.

In Kate’s empty house Yolo finds himself wandering about like a winding, twisting river. Kate’s house is clean, clear, and open; his house not far from hers is a repository for every collectible knickknack he manages to take home. She has given him hints that decluttering his life is appropriate, each year giving him hints that decluttering his life is appropriate, each year giving him a copy of Clear Your Clutter with Feng Shui for Kwanza. Each year he has ignored the suggestion. However, now Kate’s absence distracts his inner peace, causing him to contemplate change.

Yolo’s quest here too, for in Kate’s absence he realizes the importance of her presence in his life. His dreams as she had dreamed, and upon waking, he has a spiritual awakening, realizing that he is now part of her journey and will be forever. Also in her absence, Yolo intuitively empathizes with Kate’s compassionate yearnings and adopts a tone of self-analysis to preserve their relationship. His quest is a vacation in Hawaii, one in which he hopes to do the beach routine and read voraciously. A dead man interrupts Yolo’s peace, connecting him to mesmerizing living men who alter the course of his life’s path. He comes to a full understanding of universal truths in a place distant from his home with Kate, where the indigenous
people instruct him at the Sangha (gathering of men in a circle) to respect the
ancestral mores and guide him into a deeper understanding of life. His charge is to
resist smoking and eating toxic foods.

Kate Talkingtree, Walker’s protagonist journeys from being a solitary human
being into more of self-realization, secretly attending to her spiritual superiority. The
spiritual renewal of the protagonist is ventured through various rituals, guided by
American Indian practices and spiritual influences like the shamanic healing,
Buddhism, Fengshui, yoga and meditation along with natural/herbal and ancient
medicine. The long conversations with the Grandmother spirit, the plant-life
embodiment of Mother Earth, transforms Kate and she transcends the racial and
national identity, moving towards a universal identity and new-age spirituality. The
impact of Buddhism could be easily traced in the Grandmother spirit when Kate hears
the wilderness whisper to her:

You don’t understand about Buddha, said Grandmother. He would not
mock those who take up arms against their own enslavement.
Sometimes there is no way, except through violence, to freedom.
Living in violence is not the best use of life, however. And he was
interested in teaching that. How precious it is to have a human life!
How sad to waste it in something so grim and blurry. A thought can be
like a gun; it can slay the enemy. Music can be like a sword; it can
pierce the heart of the enemy. Dance can kill. What needs killing is not
the person; what needs killing is his or her idea that torturing another
person will create happiness. (*Heart*, 196-197)

The practice of nature-worship highlighted in the novel points to the
environmental ethics and the concern for destruction of nature at the behest of the
humans. The cleansing rituals through the hallucinogenic medicine are like baptism,
proceeding towards a new life or a rebirth at the integration of the mind, body and
spirit.

Kate feels she has “reached an impasse on the Buddhist road” (*Heart*, 5). Her
mind is no longer lucid and she is troubled by many thoughts, she cannot meditate.
She begins dreaming unusual images. This act of reflection and awareness is kairic in
that it constitutes a decisive turning point in her life: the right time has come to undertake
and important transformation to disentangle the knot of a stifled mind, body, and soul.
Kate first decides to leave her younger lover Yolo. When she departs, he has a dream
in which he is lost and asks a spirit: “Which way to the river?” (*Heart*, 18) - thereby
realizing that he, too, must embark upon his own journey. Prior to the trip, when her
therapist asks her about her reason for going, Kate responds in a kairic mode:
“I cannot believe my dry river, that we have been discussing for months, and that is
inside me, is unconnected to a wet one somewhere on the earth. I am being called”
(*Heart*, 21-22). As she begins to let go of memories of her multiple marriages and
abusive partners, she feels ready for the journey and prepared to face her age, her
graying hair. She embarks on another trip to South America, down the Amazon River,
where she meets a shaman. When Kate takes a hallucinogenic medicine known as
Ayahuasca, or yagé, she asks, “for help for the humans of the planet and for the coming
generations and for the animals and plants and rocks. She asks that she be guided to
knowledge of how to act in the world for the highest good of all” (*Heart*, 62). Kate’s is a
deeply ethical attitude, embracing not only the self, but the surroundings as well.

The novel is replete with American Indian influences, such as shamanistic
healing practices and the worship of nature, which, for the New Age and Neopagan
environmental ethic, is concerned with work to undo the damage that society has inflicted on the planet. New Agers and Neopagans organize retreats to facilitate spiritual growth and a sense of supportive community through cleansing rituals and the sharing of personal tales of trials and tribulations. When Kate returns from her retreat and meets with Yolo, they are both changed, but still in love with one another. Their separation and spiritual quest is kairic, for it helps them realize and appreciate the feelings they have for one another and to continue being together. Yet the world has changed as well: “they bombed eight different places in the world while we were gone” (Heart, 38) and “the world has never been in worse shape: global warming, animal extinctions, people fucked up and crazy, war” (Heart, 39). Amidst this havoc, they live their lives in a blue house, blue being “the color of water and space and eternity … Among Buddhists, blue is the color of healing” (Heart, 40). Kate learns anew how to sense and experience the numinous and the sacred around her. Through the agency of shamans, kahunas and healing rituals, Kate and Yolo feel spiritually regenerated. Yolo has stopped smoking and Kate has abandoned her concerns of aging.

Kate practices old world traditions and New Age philosophy using meditation, ancestor worship, reincarnation, medicinal and hallucinogenic plants and ecological responsibility to transform her physically and to acquire a greater understanding of her role in the universe. Meditation being a key initiative in the New Age principles requires complete absence from distraction as a prerequisite to soliciting the presence of divine energy. Kate uses meditation as a vehicle for understanding her inner world and comprehending the physical world around her. Ancestor worship involves respect and reverence for deceased relatives, who are not only members of the spiritual world but also mediators into the lives of the living. “Ancestors are influential in charting
the correct course of action for their living relatives, often communicating with the living through dreams and visions” (Bates, 174).

Through her dreams, Kate contacts the spirit of her mother. As an ancestor, her mother helps her to overcome the issues that burden her. Another widely accepted belief in New Age theory is Reincarnation, transmigration of souls. It means human spirit passes into another body following decomposition of the human body. Kate has had many explorations involving the human soul. While the character does not articulate the reincarnation path, her practices indicate that she might be a believer. Medicinal and hallucinogenic plants are commonly used among indigenous people and by some who embrace New Age theories for the purpose of mind expansion. For example Kate uses medicinal herb, desert thistle weed to calm her queasy stomach. She also uses mushrooms to help her through periods of overwhelming grief etc.

Alice Walker realizes this objective in this novel, which is also an evidence of the author’s commitment to womanism. Kate sets off on a spiritual sojourn, during which she discovers the medicinal and aesthetic quality of nature, the significance of human bonds, and the power of ancestor connectedness. Kate rejects institutionalized religion, materialism and the evils of violence and ‘uncivilized’ civilization. Her self-discovery is within the paradigm of womanist ethics. The early stage of black womanist self-development that empowers black women spiritually and renders them courageous enough to resist injustice is the positive assertion of their humanity against the onslaught of hostile forces.

Black women’s “struggle emanates from a deepening of self-knowledge and love” (Christian, 82). Kate undergoes self-discovery before discerning the paradoxes and dilemmas in the lives of others. Kate needs a change in her life although she is a
widely published writer. She maintains an over orderly house, being particularly fastidious about its upkeep. She has gone through several unsuccessful marriages. Discomfort and pain draw Kate’s attention to herself and she notices the ageing of her body. One day she hears her knees creaking like ‘unoiled door hinges’ and she finds the ‘wrenching pain in her hip’ almost unbearable. Ageing initiates a need for transformation. She dismantles her altar of religious paraphernalia upon which stood her gods and goddesses. In addition, her worldly, physical surroundings appear to be distant, unfamiliar, and uninspiring.

[They] mirrored a dissolution she felt growing inside herself. And though she had loved her home, her berry-colored house with starry blue trim, she thought frequently of selling it. She even thought of giving it away. … She could feel her house dissolving around her, as her parents dissolved when she day dreamed them. And there was a feeling of relaxing, of letting go, that was welcome. (Heart, 12)

Kate is no longer concerned about the condition of her house. She does not care about the leak in the bathroom, peeling paint or a door that remains ajar. For a reason unknown to her, she loses the inspiration to write. “Her pens... seemed to go empty on her. An unusual number of them... refused to scratch more than a few pale lines” (Heart, 12). Deep inside, she feels psychologically prepared for the coming spiritual renewal, “And there was a feeling of relaxing, of letting go, that was welcome” (Heart, 12).

Kate feels a deeper connectedness with Nature. She ingests an unknown yellow flower instinctively which soothes her stomach and begins to appreciate her natural beauty, especially her gray hair. After a discussion on hair dying and
Kate together with the other women associate gray hair with the wonderful colour of stone, water, sky, and rain. The trip to Colorado does not complete Kate’s spiritual journey but continues with a further sojourn to the Amazon river, during which participants drink “a frothy liquid that tastes like soapsuds” (*Heart*, 53), as preparation before swallowing a sacred medicinal plant yage, known as ‘Grandmother.’ The herb is believed to engender spiritual transformation and healing.

Womanists are not only concerned with self-growth and individual spiritual development, but they engage themselves in the struggle for the betterment of the black community. Kate as a womanist is conscious of the socio-political status of black people in America. She was a former activist in the Black Freedom Movement of the 1960’s and knows that most black people are marginalized from mainstream American society. She thinks:

> We’re considered second- and third-class citizens of a country whose government never wanted us. Except as slaves. We understand by now the world will be blown to bits, doubtless by this same government, before people of color get their fair share. We can’t afford health insurance, nor will it even ever be applicable, the way things are going. Nobody but us wants to be Black. (*Heart*, 59)

Kate is an advocate of reconciliation between black and white communities in the struggle for social and economic justice in America. This viewpoint is presented by her reference to a white woman poet Jane Stem Bridge, who was expelled by black activists from the Black Freedom Movement because some of them perceived her as a “mistress who’d caused them pain” (*Heart*, 96). It was their memory of the unpardonable atrocities of slavery that led to their hatred for the white woman, whom
they associated with racist and merciless plantation mistresses. Kate believes that these activists should have recognized that the poet’s “very Being, white and female and descended from slave owners though it was, might be a note of freedom” (Heart, 96). In addition to their concern with the situation of Black America, womanists focus on people’s pain, suffering and tribulations whatever their colour or class. They assist the heartbroken in their process of self-discovery and help to raise their awareness of social injustice. This unity with others is observable among several characters in this novel, who participate in the spiritual sojourn on the Amazon. After a time, Kate’s body does not respond to the medicinal herb, which is a sign that she has undergone spiritual renewal. She begins to experience inner peace, which radiates from her and attracts others. Suddenly, those around her on the journey begin to confess their life stories to Kate. She finds out that Missy was an incest victim of her grandfather, the result of which is her inability to establish healthy relationships with men. Lalika killed a man who raped her and attempted to rape a friend. Both women were then imprisoned and sexually assaulted over several months by guards and other inmates. Another person, Rick, an Italian immigrant, confesses to Kate that he comes from an affluent family that profited from selling drugs to black people. He reveals that, they could sell drugs to blacks but they were not themselves to be hooked on the stuff because if they became hooked on the stuff they couldn’t move up in American society’.

Yolo meanwhile goes on his own quest, to Hawaii, and to the woman he once loved. Both Kate and Yolo are changed by their experiences. In the novel, the dedication is to Anunu and Enoba, a shaman and her assistant, two women characters in the novel advising Kate on her journey of self-discovery. Anunu is the botanical
name of a medicinal plant on the Hawaiian Islands and Enoba is the name of a local tribe in Southeast Nigeria, West Africa. The novel begins with an acknowledgement of the immaterial essences that are constant companions to those with a questing spirit. Walker follows with two quotes; one from Marlo Morgan who assigns purpose to every element of the universe, “Everything in the universe has a purpose. There are no misfits, there are no freaks, there are no accidents. There are only things we don’t understand” (*Heart*, 100) and the other from Winnie Mandela who touts the freedom to dream, “So far, there is no law against dreaming” (*Heart*, 101). Walker also provides a prefatory genealogical background for the protagonist, who shares the name of Walker’s murdered paternal grandmother (maiden name Nelson). As a tribute to her memory, Walker says, “This novel is a memorial to the psychic explorer she [grandmother] might have become. It also made clear to me in the writing how much I miss her. And have always missed her” (Walker, xiv). In the afterword, Walker’s illustrative paragraph informs the reader about the South American hallucinogenic beverage that is the model for the magical drink Kate consumes to connect with her spiritual grandmother. In the end, Walker thanks those in her life who were instrumental in guiding her in the knowledge and understanding of the supreme secret.

The plot not only revolves around Kate in the forest, her vomiting friends and their inner space but it also shifts to Hawaii, where Kate’s lover is on holiday. He has found an old girlfriend there who is mourning the death of her son. These scenes have the emotional rawness that is one of Walker’s greatest strengths. Then, even these sections descend into sloganeering about the spiritual poverty of modern life, and about how poverty could be cured if one only eats the right things. When Kate’s
boyfriend returns from Hawaii, he too seems to have undergone an epiphany, which results in his trying to give up smoking. The two of them then plan a wedding, or rather, a circle to celebrate sharing their life together, and Kate uncovers the Buddha that she keeps in her altar room. In a story of explorative journeys, natural landscape and love, she has given herself the right tools to get her message across. Kate’s eventual sojourn in the Amazon jungle is spent with characters that have experienced pain or injustice of some kind:

rape, imprisonment, incest, bulimia, drug addiction. These characters are not fully developed but act as symbols of a universal discontent that Walker sees intensifying. ‘I believe all is up with us.’ (Heart, 69)

The eco-spiritual evolution of Kate, embracing not only the self but also the surrounding is well displayed when she says:

… for help for the humans of the planet and for the coming generations and for the animals and plants and rocks. She asked that she be guided to knowledge of how to act in the world for the highest good of all. (Heart, 62)

The self-transformation through the act of awareness brings about a turning point in Kate to disentangle the knot of a stifled soul. The realization of the inner appeal that emerges within her solitary being and the recognition of the opportunities for change are clearly reflected in her embracing of the Earth-centered womanist and democratic beliefs. She states,

I cannot believe my dry river, that we have been discussing for months, and that is inside me, is unconnected to a wet one somewhere on the earth. I am being called, she said (Heart, 21-22).
Personal religion, i.e. spirituality through the concept of kairos, a moment of spiritual insight, can be traced in the protagonist of this novel who also expresses the urgency for the enactment of change. Kate’s enlightenment and the spiritual awareness lead towards the pursuit of happiness, based on the awareness of an eco-centric self and a struggle for environmental concerns.

Walker’s narratives of personal and political activism, realized in her own life and engagements, illustrate the theory and praxis of womanist theology and spotlight the nexus of self-discovery, healing, and subsequent activism on behalf of local and global justice. This empowering potential of religion and spirituality is made visible not only to women, but also to men, for the liberation and empowerment of women is not possible without the liberation and empowerment of men.

Walker’s engagement in transnational and trans-cultural dialogue on marginalization and injustice has earned her numerous supporters as well as opponents. Richards traces a concept of transnational feminist/womanist practice in Walker’s oeuvre, which “views the experience of women more broadly than do local feminisms and at the same time recognizes the limitations of a global perspective that homogenizes difference” (Heart, 42). Walker, without engaging in comparative martyrology, explores traumas beyond the categories of nation and culture, thereby bringing to voice otherwise dispossessed and marginalized women.

In *Now is the time to open Your Heart*, kairos occurs in the form of either the numinous, i.e. spiritual or religious awareness, or religious conversion and enlightenment, leading to agency and actions toward the individual pursuit of happiness as well as communal struggle for social justice. The ethical dilemmas and choices effecting individual and community life are represented through the prism of the personal:
troubling parents, children, and/or romantic relationships, as well as the political: issues of colonization and its psychological effects, cultural appropriation, and reclamation. This novel portrays the significance of religion and spirituality in research on gender roles, as they designate leadership positions to both genders without condoning gender-specific distinctions within the religious ceremonies and rituals. In this novel, women shamans and medicine women exist on equal terms with men, shamans, and medicine men. Religion empowers and binds, as it positions an individual within a community of support and provides him or her with a purpose in the context of chaotic post modernity of fluid loyalties and ambiguous ethical systems. In an interview given to *New Internationalist Magazine* (2012), Alice Walker explains to Frank Barat how she relates to the entire Universe and its spirit. She explains why she is not lonely in this planet, emphasizing the mantra of connectedness in her sense of spirituality:

I am also closer than I’ve ever been to animals. Luckily I live in Northern California where many people love animals, especially dogs. I was given a small dog that seems to be my twin, in some ways. Though he is only six pounds, we are so much alike: curious, loving, happy with small things, wanting to play, smell things, go for walks that it is simply a wonder. We sleep together every night, and I want this feeling of closeness with animals, especially for the young, who seem to me to be, with all their inanimate gadgets, some of the loneliest people the planet has ever spawned. (Barat, 12)

Walker also connects her political stand to this earth-centered cultural tradition. In the same interview, she articulates how a political ideology could be derived from
indigenous wisdom, healing and Mother Leadership to conceive life and society in planet-respectful ways:

Women were considered quite capable of leading civilizations and of determining the healthiest direction for the group to take. Some of their ways were simple common sense… If a man and a woman decided to part, or if the woman wished him to depart, his shoes were placed outside the door. His fatherhood rights remained as long as he honoured them, but there was no way he could rule over the household since it was understood by all to belong to the woman and the children: this was their security, one that was fundamental to the stability of the entire group. (op.cit. xv)

Walker even explores the cultural and spiritual richness of aboriginal people and their shamanic traditions. She states clearly that her fictional venture, *Now is the Time to Open Your Heart* is a distinct marker of her interest in a healing, an ideology based on understanding the plants and nature. She discusses in her interview how a faith based on planet friendly approach cures and how this theme becomes the subject matter in her novels:

I have tried enough plant medicine myself to know it is a necessary and natural component of our healing; and Native people remind us it is always to be administered in ceremony. … If we go to the root of our drug addictions in so many cultures and countries around the world today, we will discover that humans have an instinctive need to rely on
natural medicines found in plants. … One of my novels, *Now is the Time to open Your Heart*, delves into this. (Barat, 8)

Thus, Alice Walker’s novel *Now is the Time to Open Your Heart* could be considered as a novel, which celebrates the social, cultural and political significance of Womanism. Kate, by connecting herself to the shaman and to the native tradition of Amazon, illustrates the possibility of building up a society based on the principles of cooperation, sharing of resources and conservation. Culturally, by connecting to the legacy and words of the unseen Grandmother spirit, Kate discovers the possibility of a women centered legacy of speaking for the well-being of the planet. She also weaves into the novel a political principle based on a system of governance that celebrates assimilation and environmental activism. Kate’s journey into herself is similar to the main manifestation of eco-spirituality - deep ecology as propagated by Carolyn Merchant and Val Plum wood. Her realization that her individual self and identity are parts of the inter-connected cycle of this cosmos makes her come to terms with her personal problems through an enactment of deep ecology - the spiritual awareness that the deepest part of human self is a part of the interconnected universe. Not only does she become aware that she is connected to all the lives and objects around her but that everything is connected to everything else.