“Alice Walker’s Womanist Fiction: Tensions and Reconciliations”

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Abstract

A theory formulated by Alice Walker, womanism focuses on the unification of men and women with Nature and Earth. This thesis explores womanism with regards to its specific concerns with African American women's rights, identities, and self-actualisation, and points towards its more overarching concerns with human relations and sexual freedom, as expressed in each of Walker's seven novels. The seven novels discussed in the thesis are *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970), *Meridian* (1976), *The Color Purple* (1982), *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989), *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992), *By the Light of My Father's Smile* (1998), and *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart* (2004). Although Walker introduces the term "womanism" in 1983, this thesis traces the development of the concept across her canon of fictional works. By analysing the novels written in the 1970s, I establish how the term came to be coined, and, by seeing through themes and issues addressed early on and how they can be mapped through analysis of her later works, I demonstrate how womanism went on to be further developed and complexly wrought.

This thesis thus examines how Alice Walker's own theory of womanism is reflected through the oeuvre of her fictional works, and considers where tensions arise in her application of what is intended to be a universalist, humanist, project. For, in many of her novels, it is women's sexuality and sexual power that are the focus, often at the cost of developing the potential of male characters' equivalent attributes. However, as will be argued, it is in Walker's later, less appreciated, works that womanism is more fully developed in its universal claims. The integration of spiritual themes and concepts into her narratives reduce or remove the tensions that arise in the reconciliation between woman and man, as well as between humanity and nature.

Contents

Introduction

Criticism is something that I don't really approve of, because I think for the critic it must be very painful to always look at things in a critical way. I think you miss so much. And you have to sort of shape everything you see to the way you are prepared to see it.

Alice Walker[1]

Why Alice Walker?

Alice Walker is best known for her Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *The Color Purple* (1982). One of the most significant female African-American writers working today – as a novelist, poet, short story writer, journalist, and activist – what distinguishes Walker from her peers are the themes she focuses on. Firstly, Walker puts much emphasis on female sexuality as a source of female freedom, and, even further, Walker explicitly illustrates female homosexuality. Toni Morrison, her contemporary, also accentuates female bonding and female friendship, however she never depicts female homosexuality, which Walker presents as the (positive) fruition of such relationships. For Walker, the female body and female sexuality are essential parts of a process of self-actualisation, and, as such, the treatment of this subject matter takes on a socio-political dimension. Walker, as not only an advocate of but once an activist in the Civil Rights Movement, crosses lines of taboo in her literary works with the aim of erasing them; she aims to effect change as much through her novels as with direct action.

The second theme that makes Walker so significant in African-American literature is the integration of spirituality in her works. With regards to this, the author writes: "Life is better than death, I believe, if only because it is less boring, and because it has fresh peaches in it. In any case, Earth is my home—though for centuries white people have tried to convince me I have no right to exist, except in the dirtiest, darkest corners of the globe" (*Only Justice Can Stop a Curse*). In a theme that advances over the course of her writing career, Walker argues for the necessity of religion in women's growth, and such a growth is reflected in the author's

[1] Qtd in *Alice Walker* by Maria Lauret; p 14.

own canon. It is with her fourth novel, *The Temple of My Familiar*, that Walker introduces religion into her fiction in a newly central way. Here, she incorporates Buddhist beliefs into her already evolving concepts of female freedom and female individuality, and the theme of spirituality would continue to be foregrounded in the works that follow.

Walker is an author who appears unpredictable for the diversity of themes that she addresses across her seven novels. Her first novel, for example *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970), deals with a male protagonist and the legacy of slavery, while her most recent novel, *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart* (2004), concerns a couple who undertake a pilgrimage. Here the female protagonist, Kate, goes on a river trip in order to find out the contours of the river within her; to know herself better. However, while these different themes may seem unexpected, or even irrelevant, at first glance, close reading across her canon reveals that Walker interweaves such themes in a manner such that connections between these ideas can be enjoyed, resulting in enriched readings of her works.

Nevertheless, within this myriad of thematic connections between her novels, there is one obvious common point in all of Walker's works: her interest in writing for/about women, in order to elevate women's position in society. In *Meridian* (1976), she writes about women's influential role in the Civil Rights Movement; in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, she explores the destructive effects of female genital mutilation; in *The Color Purple*, she makes her readers aware of the significance of female sexuality and the female's sexual body; while, in *The Temple of My Familiar*, a new church is established, in which women are the leaders, the preachers of a womanist gospel. This focus on women might pose a challenge for male readers, but it is an intentional challenge – Walker not only writes about women but perhaps she invites her male readers to know more about women. Her male characters are mostly irresponsible, careless, and brutal - yet while this may seem an unfair belittling of one gender in order to emphasise the praise towards another, it is notable that Walker always offers a ray of hope for

male characters at the very end of her novels, whether it be Grange in *The Third Life*, Truman in *Meridian*, Mister in *The Color Purple*, or Robinson in *By the Light of My Father's Smile*. Walker might exaggerate the negative side of her male characters by depicting numbers of unsuccessful black males in her novels, but as a writer she does so in order to draw her readers', and especially her male readers', attention to the point that there is need for them to change in regards to their relation to women.

The present thesis focuses on tracing female bonding across Walker's novels through the lens of womanism. There are various types of female bonding shown in her novels, some of which help female characters to forge their individuality; however, there are some female connections that are apparently constructive but actually aim at destroying female selfhood and female self-actualisation. The following sections cover four areas: firstly, what is womanism and how it is related to female bonding; secondly, how Alice Walker's works have been influenced by other African-American writers such as Zora Neale Hurston, Paule Marshall and Toni Morrison; thirdly, Walker's narrative style will be discussed; finally, I will provide a chapter outline of the thesis.

Womanist Ideology and Its Relation to Female Bonding

Walker introduced the new term 'womanism' in 1984, by way of her non-fiction book, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*.[2] "Womanist is to feminist", Walker writes, "as purple to lavender" (xi). Womanism and feminism are related to each other; however, the former exhibits features that feminism lacks. In *The Womanist Idea*, Layli Maparyan writes of this passage, noting that while purple is the analogue of womanism, the lavender analogue Walker attributes

[2] Alice Walker first used the word 'womanism' in 1979, in her short story "Coming Apart", found in the collection titled *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down*. She would use the word for the second time in her review of "Gifts of Power: The Writings of Rebecca Jackson, Black Visionary, Shaker Eldress". Walker writes: "the word lesbian may not be suitable (or comfortable) for black women who surely would have begun their woman bonding earlier than Sappho's residency on the Isle of Lesbos. Indeed I can imagine black women who love women (sexually or not) hardly thinking of what Greeks were doing; but instead referring to themselves as 'whole' from 'wholly' or 'holy' males. My own term for such women would be 'womanist'" (67). It is with *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, however, that Walker defines the term with precision.

to feminism is also: “a color that has historically been associated with lesbianism’, given this, she writes that Walker’s sentence ‘is often interpreted as a suggestion that womanism is a more intense (literally, more saturated) form of woman-centerdness than is lesbianism” (21). The term has been introduced in one page, but through this brief introduction Walker makes womanism stand as a new term, although still sharing some common elements with feminism.

Working on Walker can be a challenge for, as mentioned, her novels are like a river, and these twists and turns apply to her treatment of this concept of womanism as much as they do any other theme. Walker introduced womanism in her non-fiction text, but her novels sometimes depict themes which appear to oppose her definition of the term. There are different types of female bonding in her works, some are functional and lead women into self-actualisation, and some are dysfunctional. An example of dysfunctional female bonding, and one that is consistently depicted in her novels, is that of the mother-daughter relationship. The mother-daughter relationship is the first, and the most significant, relationship in a woman’s life; however, Walker’s female characters largely do not benefit from this primary female bond. The narrative quest is such that the female characters, like Celie, Meridian, Susannah, who do lack success in this initial act of female bonding aim to fill this gap later in life; they are looking for a surrogate mother. Sometimes this surrogate mother can be a singular person, as Shug is for Celie in *The Color Purple*, or it can take the form of a broader community, such as the Civil Rights Movement for Meridian, the title-bearing character of Walker’s second novel. This thesis uncovers how these female characters, either in or reaching adulthood, attempt to replace their failure to achieve a substantial bond with their mothers by way of developing female bonds to various degrees—whether as friendships or open sexual relationships with females or males—in later life. It explores how the development of Walker’s concept of womanism can be traced in her works, and aims to answer several questions: how the theme of women’s individuality as born out of sexual freedom, and the theme of spirituality in the development

of women's selfhood, both relate specifically to womanism; how her male characters are constructed as benefiting from and/or are harmed by the employment of Walker's womanistic ideology in her narratives. These are of the questions and issues this thesis will try to explore and answer in the following chapters.

Alongside Alice Walker, Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi and Clenora Hudson-Weems have attempted to develop the concept of womanism. Ogunyemi's article "Womanism" (1985), offers the following definition of the term:

> More often than not, where a white woman writer may be a feminist, a black woman writer is likely to be a "womanist". That is, she will recognize that, along with her consciousness of sexual issues, she must incorporate racial, cultural, national, economic, and political considerations into her philosophy" (64).

As such, Ogunyemi links womanism to intersectional issues that elevate the concept above what she determines as mere feminism. Ogunyemi also recognises Walker's womanism, though states that she conceived of the notion independently of the novelist: "I arrived at the term 'womanism' independently and was pleasantly surprised to discover that my notion of its meaning overlaps with Alice Walker's" (72).

In her book, *Africana Womanism*, Hudson-Weems also addresses the term 'womanism', and takes an even stronger stance than Ogunyemi in contrasting it with feminism. This to the extent that Hudson-Weems defines womanism by way of a rejection of feminism:

> Africana woman does not see the man as his primary enemy as does the white feminist, who is carrying out an age-old battle with her white male counterpart for subjugating her as his property. Africana men have never had the same institutionalized power to oppress Africana women as white men have had to oppress white women (25).

As is suggested, Hudson-Weems's attitude toward feminists and feminism is quite radical in that she identifies it as a white-specific concept that has no direct bearing on 'Africana' lives. Further, as Layli Maparyan writes in *The Womanist Idea* (1993):

> In Hudson-Weems's view, any endorsement of white feminism or collaboration with white feminists by Africana women is, by definition, a misguided and self-destructive act that will harm both the Africana woman herself and the larger Africana community in which she is embedded by immersing her in a toxic consciousness and making her and her community vulnerable to exploitation (27).

Unlike these other womanist thinkers, however, Walker's womanism embraces the late-20th century feminism and black feminism that emerged contemporaneously with her own writing, and further embraces men, women, and also entire peoples, regardless of race, gender, and colour. As is clear, then, Walker's concept of womanism is broader than that of Oguntemi and Hudson-Weems and, as such, provides a substantial area of exploration, which underpins this thesis. To address some of the aspects listed above, we will begin with Walker's statement that a womanist is "a black feminist" (*In Search* xi). Black feminism emerged as a branch of feminism, since black women were neither recognised as equal to black men, nor to white women. As bell hooks writes: "When black people are talked about the focus tends to be on black *men*; and when women are talked about the focus tends to be on *white* women. Nowhere is this more evident than in the vast body of feminist literature" (*Ain't I A Woman* 7). In 1852, at the second annual convention of women's rights in the US, Sojourner Truth wanted to speak but she had been prevented – due to her being black. She then "bared her breasts to prove that she was indeed a woman" (*Ain't I* 159). The sexism and racism of the 19th century made black women stand up against oppression; the reason why they were unable to rebel against their oppression earlier is because, as bell hooks makes clear, "we [black women] did not see

'womanhood' as an important aspect of our identity" (*Ain't I* 1). Following this recognition, black women decided to claim their rights from the white supremacist society. The reason for the emergence of black feminism, then, is not because feminism itself ignores black women, but because white society as a whole, whether male or female, tended to erase "blackness" itself, as exemplified in the example of Truth. bell hooks continues: "in 19th century white public, the black female was a creature unworthy of the title woman; she was mere chattel, a thing, an animal" (159). Maythee Rojas agrees suggesting that:

> Part of the project of feminism has been to put women's stories at the center, to understand the world through the perspective of women. But often the generic "women" has meant white women. Consequently, feminism has not always been embraced by women of color (*Women of Color and Feminism* ix).

From the perspective elucidated here, there is nothing wrong with feminism itself, as it urges equal rights for women, but it is just some white advocates of feminism who are problematic, in that they ignore black women's issues. As such, black feminism exists to draw specific attention to black women's concerns, arguing that they should be regarded as distinct from those of white women and should, therefore, not become subsumed into the same demands for rights that white women claim. Black feminism does not bring a fundamental change into the term 'feminism', for, in theory, both of the terms, 'feminism' and 'black feminism', advocate women's dignity and power. Instead, black feminism attempts to affect powerful change to the discourse espoused by white practitioners of feminism, and white society as a whole, arguing for a more specific focus on diverse and differential women's needs.[3]

Womanism however has some features which distinguish it from black feminism and feminism. To return to the broadness of Walker's concept of womanism, Walker's term

[3] Black feminism is an intersectional term which draws attention to racism as well as sexism. See Kimberley Crenshaw's "Mapping the Margins"; pp1245-1251. See also Barbara Christian on postmodern issues of black feminism in *New Black Feminist Criticicm*; pp.7-15

includes detailed exploration of hetero/homosexuality and spirituality, which are less emphasised by other black feminist critics. Walker believes that sexuality is as crucial as spirituality for women's attainment of individuality and freedom. And Walker gives priority to female bonding over female-male relationships. Her definition of womanism argues for: "a woman who loves other women sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength" (xi). The womanist, according to Walker, then, is a woman who engages more intently in female bonding as opposed to heterosociality. However, Walker does not fully exclude opposite sex relationships, stating also that a womanist "sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually" (xi). Womanism is not against heterosexuality/sociality, instead the point here, as suggested by the 'sometimes' of the passage, is that a womanist tries to find individuality in women's company most of all, with less reliance on developing relationships with men. According to Walker, women should not model themselves on men, and should instead value "women's emotional flexibility" (xi). A womanist cries and does not consider it to be a sign of her weakness, but instead as a natural emotional reaction. Recalling bell hooks, who said that historically black women were silent because they "did not see 'womanhood' as an important aspect of our identity" (*Ain't I* 1), Walker's womanism places most emphasis on this historically undervalued womanhood and foregrounds the value of its associated emotions and thoughts. As with Audre Lorde, who writes in *Sister Outsider* that: "if we [black women] do not define ourselves for ourselves, we will be defined for others for their use and to our detriment" (99), Walker's womanism advocates women to reconstruct and evaluate their own histories and social emplacements for themselves, through their own perceptions. It is by doing so that women can help each other and back each other, developing the power to release themselves from patriarchal and racial oppression. bell hooks, in *Communion*, writes: "Most women search for love hoping to find recognition of our value. It

may not be that we do not see ourselves as valuable; we simply do not trust our perceptions" (121). Womanism wants women to love themselves and search for love within themselves, rather than looking for it in the world outside. And this search for the self is aided by interaction with other women. This is demonstrated, for instance, in *The Color Purple*, where the homosocial love between Shug and Celie helps the latter to free herself from Mister's dominance and to stand on her own feet, living for her self rather than existing as an object that serves patriarchal purposes. Through Shug's help, Celie comes to understand her own body and sexuality, which leads her to sexual-self-awareness. And this acceptance of the physical empowers acceptance of the mental and emotional; as bell hooks writes: "female self-love begins with self-acceptance" (107). As soon as Celie recognises and accepts her body she sees herself as an individual being. This sense of ownership over her physical body helps Celie to develop her self-confidence. This is also demonstrated, on an opposite track, by Walker's character Tashi in *Possessing the Secret of Joy.* Due to her being sexually mutilated, Tashi finds that she cannot have the same sense of belonging as seen in Celie. This lack, her inability to fully embrace the female body which has been partially taken from her, means that Tashi is unable to find peace and stability within her life.

bell hooks further states in *Communion* that: "the more we love our flesh, the more others will delight in its bounty. As we love the female body, we are able to let be the ground on which we build a deeper relationship to ourselves—a loving relationship uniting mind, body, and spirit" (120). This mind-body-spirit unity is what Walker emphasises in *The Temple* and *Now Is the Time To Open Your Heart*. Fanny, in *The Temple,* appears as a masseuse who tries to create this link between body and spirit. She massages Carlotta, another female character, and through both caressing her body and engaging her in conversation, Fanny tries to heal her mental wounds as well as her physical strains. Walker also expresses this unity between body and spirit in *Now Is the Time*, through Kate who goes on a river journey through the deep

Amazonian forest. On this trip, she and the other passengers take a special drink which makes them vomit and is believed to purify the body. After getting physically purified they gather together and each one relates his/her story to others who listen and then place their hands upon his/her body and pray for them. In such later works, Walker attempts to link womanism to Buddhism, and in these examples links body with spirit. Interestingly, bell hooks also says that "any woman eager to learn the art of loving can start, as the Buddhist teachers say, 'right where you are' by being self-loving" (*Communion* 105).

As has been suggested, along with self-loving, womanism advocates to women the developing of female bonds, which aids such self-love. Female bonding starts at the earliest stages of a girl's life, with her mother. In *Black Feminist Thoughts*, Patricia Hill Collins also places great emphasis on the mother-daughter relationship within African-American families: "The mother/daughter relationship is one fundamental relationship among Black women. Countless Black mothers have empowered their daughters by passing on the everyday knowledge essential to survival as African-American women. Black daughters identify the profound influence that their mothers have had upon their lives" (102). Collins describes the tracing of the African-American mother's role throughout history to be a most challenging task. This is because: "[u]ntil the growth of modern Black feminism in the 1970s, analyses of Black motherhood were largely the province of men, both White and Black, and male perspectives on Black mothers prevailed. Black mothers were accused of failing to discipline their children, of emasculating their sons, of defeminizing their daughters, and of retarding their children's academic achievement" (173). However, black feminist women writers have also suggested the potential flaws in such bonds, suggesting that some mother-daughter relations can be marked by jealousy and competition. "Plenty of talented, successful, powerful women" bell hooks writes, "compete in unkind and cruel ways with their daughters" (*Communion* 123). This competition can also result from the context of the patriarchal value-system, whereby a young

woman often receives greater attention and love than offered to an older woman. This notion that successful mothers try to thwart their daughters' quests for achieving further levels of success and happiness is expressed in Walker's novels. In *Meridian*, the destructive mother-daughter bond is depicted through Meridian and her mother, Gertrude, a successful teacher and a financially self-sufficient woman, who never recognises or supports Meridian's achievements. On the contrary, she only reproaches and discourages Meridian in her decisions. It is interesting that another contemporary title character of Toni Morrison's, Sula, is never supported by her own mother, nor her grandmother, despite being a powerful female. As the matriarch who holds the family's purse strings, Sula's grandmother does not want Sula to become more powerful than herself.

Such novels also strive to demonstrate that black women have been doubly oppressed by both racism and sexism. Some characters, problematically, try to link themselves to power, in the hope of sharing in it, and, as such, give priority to men. This, in turn, prevents women from developing functional female bonds, since in stories such as *The Third Life* and *Sula*, this privileging of men causes competition among women to win a man's love. Sexism degrades women, yet a paradoxical result in Walker's fiction can be that black women come to value masculine attitudes, and whatever else relates to masculinity, and they consequently look down on their fellow women, womanhood, and feminine attitudes. In *The Color Purple*, Celie's mother implies this message when she expresses to Celie that having a man of her own is itself of value, and a similar example can be found in Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, when the grandmother pushes Janie to marry. Gerda Lerner writes more generally of this in *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness*:

> because of educational deprivation and the absence of a usable past, tended to rely more heavily on their own experiences in developing their ideas… wifehood and motherhood were the experiences most females had in common with other

> females. But wifehood, under patriarchy, involved women in competition with other women, both to secure and find a man who would offer them support and protection and, once they have married him, to hold him (119).[4]

In the case of African-American mothers and daughters in many of these novels, mothers defeminise their daughters and make them objects determined by males.[5] However, Walker responds to the role of the mother in these poisonous relationships in *In Search* when she refers to this scenario as "women's folly" rather than "women's wisdom". Walker writes:

> Such advice does not come from what a woman recalls of her own experience. It comes from a pool of such misguidance women have collected over the millennia to help themselves feel less foolish … This pool is called, desperately, pitiably, "Women's Wisdom". In fact, it should be called "Women's Folly" (364).

In *Meridian,* Walker depicts the title character as undergoing tubal ligation in order that she give sole attention and energy to her inner and social self. Walker's womanism is also in accordance with this idea since it gives priority to women's power. In order to be powerful, women need to become self-actualised and even self-centred. Even having a child can act as an obstacle in this process, as suggested in *Meridian.*

In her novels, Walker, after showing that mothers can also be encaged by patriarchal ideology, often presents her female characters as searching for a surrogate mother that would fill the gap left by the dysfunctional mother-daughter relationship. The surrogate mother in Walker's novels can be actual or symbolic; sometimes it can be another woman, as with Shug for Celie; or even the mother earth, as it is for Kate in *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart*. The search for female role models can also be observed in Walker's literary career as well.

[4] See *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness* by Gerda Lerner; pp. 116-137.

[5] See *Communion* by bell hooks; 127-130, to understand the extent to which a mother can be a force in her daughter's life that leads her to being a victim of sexism. hooks writes: "most shocking to me was the reality that many of these successful moms were advocates of feminism" (127-8).

Carolyn Heilbrun, in *Reinventing Womanhood*, writes of this phenomenon in general terms: "women literary scholars set out to bring before the consciousness of their critical and scholarly colleagues the work of formerly unknown women, new interpretations of the life and work of women writers, and a sense of relationship between the major literary women of the past" (93-4). The search for this figure is more challenging, even, for African-American women writers. For Walker it is Zora Neale Hurston, whom Walker accepts her as her literary role mother. In *In Search*, she published two articles about her and mentions her numerous times throughout her book.[6]

In Walker's novels there are different types of female bonding; on the one hand, a functional bond that leads women to self-empowerment and self-actualisation, on the other hand, a dysfunctional bond that prevents women from attaining liberty and individuality. Functional female bonds are less commonly portrayed than the other, since Walker wants to criticise 'women's folly', and the depiction of failed, or conflicted, bonds also enables the author to magnify her message more transparently. However the few examples of functional female connections are so comprehensive and ground-breaking that their depiction compensates for its lack of presentation elsewhere.

As discussed earlier, achieving a functional female bond that leads a woman to emancipation from patriarchy is itself a challenge, since some women under the influence of patriarchy do not give much credit to each other, but rather compete in order to win male support and attention. In this context, entrapped mothers are unable to offer advice or models to their daughters that will set them free from the chains of patriarchy. This is why replacing the mother with non-familial women in bonds of friendship becomes important. Janice Raymond writes of this in popular, broader feminist terms:

[6] See *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* by Alice Walker; pp. 93-119

> The origins of female friendship are in female freedom, an important aspect of which is the freedom to be for women. It is important to a genealogy of female friendship that women claim this freedom to be primary to our Selves and each other in some way. The ways in which these primary aspects are increased and intensified enhance the originality of female friendship (*A Passion for Friends* 37).

In her definition of womanism, Walker places great emphasis on this point that female bonding should be progressive, with the purpose of helping women in these bonds to grow as individuals. hooks writes: "before women can create abiding love with one another, we must learn to be truth tellers, to break with the sexist notion that a good woman never tells what she really thinks" (*Communion* 136). A female bond is functional when women are honest with each other, beyond patriarchal masks which threaten to create rivalry over trust. Shug and Celie's bond is one of the most outstanding examples of functional female bonding in Walker's novels. As discussed below, Shug and Celie embody a womanist ethics and practice.

Walker's most recent novel, *Now Is the Time*, demonstrates this – presenting us with a group of people who share their problems, and pray for each other, rather than taking advantage of weaknesses in their acquaintances' lives. *Now Is the Time* suggests such honest sharing of pain between women as an opportunity for them to instead help each other, to encourage one another to stand up and defeat the problem. This is also seen in *Meridian*, where Walker begins with an image of female competition for winning a man's love, yet develops the plot so that Meridian and Lynn, who first meet each other because of their triangular relationship with Truman, can put their common problem aside and create what becomes the first interracial female bond to be depicted in Walker's work.

In establishing a womanist discourse in her novels, Walker often employs a strategy of negative exemplification –of failed women's relationships littering the path to realising

womanism. This includes instances of dysfunctional female bonding, beyond that between the mother and daughter. Josie in *The Third Life* is one of those women who spends her life competing with Mem, Ruth, and Margaret – the other female characters of the novel – to win either Grange's or Brownfield's love. hooks describes this brand of destructive female bond in *Communion*:

> Girls compete often to the death, and by that I mean to symbolic murder of one another. All this essentially woman hating behavior continues into adulthood. It is woman-hating because it is rooted in the same fairy-tale logic that teaches us that only one female can win the day or be chosen. It is as though our knowledge that females lack value in the eyes of patriarchy means we can gain value only by competing with one another for recognition (131).

Dysfunctional female bonding can be as destructive as when Celie suggests that Harpo beats Sofia in *The Color Purple*. At the beginning of the novel, Celie is very much chained down to patriarchal ideology, to the extent that not only is she an object in Mister's hand, but Celie wants to mirror Sofia's aggression in order to be a strong woman like her. This involves the adopting of masculine traits, as discussed earlier. Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, however, gives us the fullest expression of a dysfunctional female relationship: Tashi is circumcised by another woman and, during this process, her own mother holds her down, so that M'lissa, the circumciser, can do her job.

Returning to Walker's definition of womanism, we note also that, although patriarchal thoughts have been damaging to women, womanism embraces men as well as women in order to fully respond to patriarchy. Womanist interaction with men is valued for its helping women to have a better understanding of themselves though such relationships (where Morrison for example, in *Paradise*, suggests self-knowledge through the isolation of women from men). Walker states that women can be attracted to men "sexually and/or nonsexually" (xi). This

shows that womanism is not exclusively about same sex female love, heterosexuality is also considered - but in a manner that should lead to the strengthening of women. The main purpose of womanism is to lead women out of patriarchy and masculine hegemony, and this cannot be achieved until black men accompany women on this path. Although womanism includes heterosexuality, it does not endorse hegemonic opposite-sex relationships. Some feminists like Diane Richardson believe that "the hegemonic form of heterosexuality is marriage" (*Theorising Heterosexuality* 40), and this seems echoed in much of Walker's fiction. It is only Walker's later novel, *The Temple of My Familiar*, that re-establishes and opens the concept of marriage according to womanism. Fanny is married to Suelow and loves him, however she wants to have the ability to express her own individuality, especially when it comes to sexuality. This is to say that marriage ought not to be restrictive to a woman's sexuality – she may love one man, but can also love others. The heterogeneous heterosexuality of womanism requires that the female body is not under a male's control, and that women have sexual freedom of expression throughout their lives. This is to say that women should have the power of controlling their body and marriage should not dominate their sexual expression, where commitment would mean loving one person only. And it is this womanist approach to marriage that Walker depicts in *The Temple*.

Sexuality itself is a very significant aspect of womanism. Women's sexual awareness can help them regain their individuality and self-empowerment. In *The Color Purple*, it is only once Celie comes to understand her own sexuality, with the help of Shug, that she stands up against male hegemony and rebels against her husband, Mister. When marriage becomes an obstacle to a woman's empowerment, Walker rejects it and gives priority to her characters' self-actualisation. Walker not only wants her female characters to be sexually free, but also wants them to use their sexuality as a source of power. Shug, as depicted in *The Color Purple*, exemplifies this point; she uses her sexuality to attract men to and to control them. Audre Lorde

addresses this: “the erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognised feeling” (*The Audre Lorde Compendium* 106).[7] In *Possessing*, we see that patriarchy aims to suppress female sexual power by directly targeting female genitalia, destroying them as they imagine the clitoris and female sexual pleasure as a threat to male sexual power. Walker’s interest in female sexual freedom and sexual power can be traced in all of the novels.

In Walker’s works, however, where sexuality is a form of power for women, it is depicted as the Achilles’ heel of men. bell hooks writes in *We Real Cool*: “sexuality has been the site of many a black male’s fall from grace. Irrespective of class, status, income, or level of education, for many black men sexuality remains the place where dysfunctional behavior first rears its ugly head” (63). This is seen in Walker’s novels, wherein men, ‘irrespective of class, income, or level of education’, are found to be sharing in this failure. This can be seen as part of Walker’s strategic communication of womanism through fiction: that the author wants readers to be aware of this point and to try to counter such failures. hooks writes: “In the iconography of black male sexuality, compulsive obsessive fucking is represented as a form of power when in actuality it is an indication of extreme powerlessness” (*We Real Cool* 68).[8] Through the depiction of men as slaves to their sexual desires, Walker urges her male readers to take this matter seriously, to start growing up – the central progressive aim of womanism - and to empower themselves. A womanist should be “interested in grown up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up” (*In Search* xi). It also hints that womanism does not, or will not, accept these men until they change themselves. There is only one example of a womanist man in all of Walker’s novels. In *Possessing*, Pierre, as only a young boy, does not show the sexual

[7] See *The Audre Lorde Compendium* by Audre Lorde; pp. 106-118 where she discusses the differences between pornography and female sexuality as a source of power. She states: “pornography is a direct denial of the power of the erotic, for it represents the suppression of true feeling” (107).

[8] See also bell hooks’s *Black Looks*; pp: 87-114. The portrait of black masculinity … constructs black men as "failures" who are psychologically "fucked up," dangerous, violent, sex maniacs whose insanity is informed by their inability to fulfil their phallocentric masculine destiny in a racist context” (89).

voraciousness of the other males featured in Walker's prose. However, in most of her works she also leaves a ray of hope for her male characters so that they can, like her female characters, eventually attain their individuality and liberty.

Although female bonding is valued by Alice Walker, bell hooks, and Audre Lorde, the way Walker looks at female homosociality/sexuality differs from the latter two thinkers. The ultimate point of womanism is to reunite all creatures and to help them have a better understanding of themselves and the world around them, both aspects resulting in an attainable peace. In this respect, womanism considers men, as well as other forms of creation, as an essential part of the healing process, whereas hooks and Lorde can be found to sometimes exclude men from this circle and to consider men as women's enemy. For instance, in *Sister Outsider* Lorde writes, "black men's feelings of cancellation, their grievances, and their fear of vulnerability must be talked about, but not by black women when it is at the expense of our own 'curious rage'" (114). Lorde, then, does not believe male concerns are unimportant, but promotes a feminism which values female empowerment, to which men are cast as outsiders. This is in contrast to womanism, which looks at women, men, and all creatures in a circle by which one's love, peace and happiness are interconnected with that of others. According to womanism, one cannot have his or her own world and claim a happiness that ignores that of others. Womanism is about love and love among women is essential to the process of attaining peace according to womanist ideology. However if men become excluded from this circle of love then this circle cannot go round. This is where bell hooks and Audre Lord differ from Alice Walker's notion of womanism, as well as that of Maparyan's and my own understanding of womanism.[9] I understand womanism as a term which wants to bring men and women together rather separating them. womanism focuses on the interconnectedness of all creation

[9] I earlier cited a quote from bell hooks which shows her viewpoint towards women's heterosexuality, but for further reading please refer to bell hooks *Communion*; pp. 33-45.

with the main focus on women. The common point among these different understandings is that women should seek and enjoy female community.

To discuss female bonding within the womanist fiction of Alice Walker is to address female homosociality and homosexuality. Walker's works include lesbian characters like Celie, Shug, Pauline, Susannah. Although some of these characters, such as Celie and Shug, have sexual or non-sexual heterosocial relationships, they choose and prefer to be engaged in the intimacy of a female community rather than a male community. They feel safe and supported within the female community, especially Celie, given that her choice of being among women is partly due to her fear of men. Celie can be regarded as lesbian since due to her circumstances she is in women's community and she feels empowered among them. Although bell hooks, Audre Lorde and Walker all value women's interconnectedness, these three theoreticians each look at lesbianism differently. hooks and Lorde want to give priority to female bonding even if it excludes men, while Walker sees lesbianism as a healing process to reunite with all creatures including men. In womanist thoughts, lesbianism exists as a step towards understanding, in a process that may include homosexuality, homosociality, heterosexuality, and heterosociality, In this reading of womanism, lesbianism is part of womanism, however womanism's ultimate goal is to reach a better understanding of one's self and the surrounding world. Critics like Cheshire Calhun believe that "lesbian thought becomes applied feminist thought". She continues, "lesbian theory and feminist theory are one and that one is feminist theory" (Separating Lesbianism 559). Although both lesbian and feminist theory accentuate female bonding and female friendship, they differ from womanism in this sense that the latter attributes a spiritual dimension to this female bonding. Lesbianism and feminism in 1970s were to claim women's freedom in society so they have more of political aims. Heterosexuality as a social and political norm in a patriarchal society was meant to be re-examined in order to bring women sexual awareness, whereas womanism looks at

lesbianism as a medium to reach its ultimate goal which is unification of creatures. As such, while one can state that Celie's engagement with the female community renders her a lesbian, the spiritual aspect of this lesbianism within the womanist concept is emphasised at the end of the novel, which finds Celie, on the verge of self-actualisation, addressing her letter to all creatures. Through lesbianism, Celie achieves a better understanding of her self and the world around her. She is remains lesbian when she appears in the following novel *The Temple*, where this spiritual aspect is heightened, thus making her a womanist character par excellence.

With respect to the previous point, we recall that Walker's definition of womanism states that womanism is "committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female" (*In Search* xi). And Walker, most explicitly in her later novels, tries to embrace both males and females, through the employment of religious themes. Such works suggest that if both men and women are sheltered by religion they can both be free and live together in peace. Walker introduces a womanist religion that incorporates tenets of Buddhist beliefs in *The Temple* and in *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart*. In the first one, Walker re-introduces Shug as a woman who has her own church, and whose Gospel gives a lot of attention to women and family union. Shug's Gospel is, like womanism, for 'wholeness of entire people' (see chapter three). In the later text, Walker uses Buddhist ideology to show how men and women in the modern world can change their thoughts and love each other (see Chapter Six). However, in the texts preceding these, especially *The Color Purple* and *By the Light of My Father's Smile*, Walker shows how a patriarchal religion like Christianity can widen the gap between men and women, and can also be damaging to entire peoples. Sheile Collins argues: "patriarchalism refers to a metaphysical world view, a mindset, a way of ordering reality which has more often been associated with the male than with the female in western culture" (*A Different Heaven* 51). Walker wants to change this mindset so that both men and women can benefit from the same equal rights, such that none is superior to the other. Jacquelyn Grant, in her book *White*

Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus, writes: "providing the social context for the development of Christiology, patriarchy virtually insured that women's questions would be irrelevant to Christiological concerns. If women are indeed to be saved, they must begin to re-articulate Christiology starting from the questions which arise out of their experience" (83). Through Shug in *The Temple*, Walker tries to establish a religion which is about and related to womanism and womanist experiences, and which clearly demonstrates her interest in the three issues described by Layli Maparyan, who writes: "womanists are simultaneously concerned with rectifying the relationships between humans and other humans, humans and nature, and humans and the spirit world" (*The Womanist Idea* 35). The present thesis; however, mainly focuses on the relationships between humans and other humans, will also briefly look at the other two types of relationships that Maparyan points out.

Alice Walker in African-American Literature: The Rise of Women Authors

Female authors in African-American literature have struggled to have their voices heard in literature. They have had to endure a long path in order to reach where they stand at the present time: ranging from authors of slave narratives such as Laura Haviland and Martha Jackson, to Zora Neale Hurston and from Hurston to Alice Walker. Hurston writes right after the Harlem Renaissance (1918-1930), when African-Americans had founded a rich culture of contemporary music and literature.[10] Yet Hurston's writing itself is a turning point in African-American writing since she begins a new path for African-American *women* by writing about women who, at that time, were still suffering the pressures of patriarchy. Most of the great African-American authors of Hurston's era were men like Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright. It was a challenge for Hurston to write about women, who did not have a voice within the American South, let alone in black communities, in general. Following this period, women

[10] Some critics would expand this period somewhat, including Hurston within the Harlem Renaissance.

authors managed to raise their voices and follow what Hurston had started almost a half century previously. The most prominent African-American female authors of this period, which extends into the present, are Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, both of whom take huge steps to communicate the voices of black women. Walker regards Hurston highly, citing her as an inspiration to write her own works. In the aforementioned, *In Search of our Mothers' Gardens*, Walker writes that "the quality I feel is most characteristic of Zora's work [is] racial health, a sense of black people as complete, complex, undiminished human beings, a sense that is lacking in so much black writing and literature" (85). The quote demonstrates a connection between the two authors in terms of attempting to promote a wholeness in the African-American female self. And just as Hurston influenced the subsequent generation of African-American female authors, she herself had also been influenced by the female writers that preceded her – those who wrote slave narratives.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, the focus of African-American literature was mainly on the communication of slaves' narratives. African-Americans hardly had a voice within a white supremacist society of the US. In his book, *Chaotic Justice*, John Ernest writes that such slave narratives "are performances devoted to representing an absent subject—not only the historically and culturally isolated narrator or the narrative subject, but also and more importantly the variable dynamics of racial construction, identification, and positioning that are rendered virtually invisible in a white supremacist culture" (77). It was at this time –the mid-19th century- when slavery was at its peak, that African-Americans were so dehumanised that they were "sold by receipt" (Lerner 9). Even mothers were sold away from their daughters. Solomon Northup, in his *Narrative of Solomon Northup,* writes: "Freeman out of patience, tore Emily [the daughter] from her mother by main force… 'Don't leave me, mama—don't leave me'" (qtd in Lerner, *Black Women in White America* 12). Black women, in both their lives and their sexuality, were under the control of their white masters. "Under slavery, black women

were savagely exploited and unpaid workers… black women bred children to the master's profit and were sexually available to any white man" (Lerner, *Black Women in White America* 45). The first half of the 19th century was a dark time in African-American history and slave narratives relate the stories of these slaves, which were often dictated to a white amanuensis due to their lack of access to education.

By the beginning of the 20th century the situation of black women had not improved much. Women were treated as sexual objects. For instance, 'a Negro nurse' recounts how, while working as a servant in a white man's house, she was sexually abused by the employer, only to be interrupted by her husband. Following this intervention, "the police judge fined [her] husband $25". She writes: "I was present at the hearing, and testified on oath to the insult offered me. The white man, of course, denied the charge" (qtd in Lerner, *Black Women in White America* 156). By the mid-twentieth century however, African-American literature begins to proliferate, and authors like Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright are writing about black people's civil and social rights, infusing their prose with activist sentiments. Zora Neale Hurston, who emerged even before those male authors, further focused on the African-American woman's emancipation from sexism and racism. Innovative and prescient, her work formed a model for Walker.

Influences on Walker's Work

Alice Walker has been influenced by many authors from 18th and 19th-century English literature and also many African-American authors. However, I will briefly discuss the influence of three key female African-American authors, Zora Neale Hurston, Paule Marshall, and Toni Morrison. When discussing the influences on Walker, addressing Zora Neale Hurston is inevitable. Alice Walker identifies Hurston as a significant author, praising her on many occasions. In *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, "Looking for Zora" is about Walker's attempt to find Hurston's hometown and to describe the way she lived. In this, Walker recounts the extreme measures she takes to gather any snippets of information about Hurston, going so

far as ordering a headstone for the late author when she finds out that her grave lacks one. She even introduces herself as Zora's niece when she meets people who might know her. Walker says "I hate myself for lying [...]. Still, I ask myself would I have gotten this far toward getting the headstone and finding out about Zora Hurston's last days without telling my lie?"(110). This demonstrates Walker's passion towards Hurston, her wish to better know this writer who is so important to her. Maria Lauret, in her book on Alice Walker, writes that: "Hurston then is not only a role model and ancestor, but a legitimating presence for Walker in African American literary tradition" (*Alice Walker* 15). Walker's enthusiastic search into Hurston's life appears as a quest for her own ancestors; the truth behind the lie is that she knows Hurston is only her 'literary mother', and that it is this writerly closeness that causes Walker to tell this lie. In an interview for "Authors at Google", Walker states that Hurston "is the literary foremother of all of us", and, in so doing, Walker further expresses the great influence of Hurston on her works (Talks@google).[11]

Harold Bloom writes that "the anxiety of influence comes out of [...] creative interpretation; [...] there must be a profound act of reading that is a kind of falling in love with a literary work" (*The Anxiety of Influence*, xxiii). Walker also expresses this sentiment when she states the significant impact Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* continues to have on her: "Reading *Their Eyes Were Watching God* for perhaps the eleventh time, I am still amazed that Hurston wrote it in seven weeks; that it speaks to me as no novel, past or present, has never done" (2). It is also worth mentioning that both Walker and her precursor, Hurston, are southern writers. In *A Web of Words: The Great Dialogue of Southern Literature*, Richard Gray states that writers who are part of, or experience, a shared ideology demonstrate similar linguistic habits; they may construct similar characters and draw on common themes and

[11] Talks at Google. 05 11 2010. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MGYCTUTXdKE>.

images (65). As will be discussed in the following chapters, since Walker and Hurston originate from the same region, they are undoubtedly influenced by their experiencing of the ideologies inherent in that place, resulting in some shared themes – like female friendship and women's folly - and also characters of similar types. However, the way that Walker uses these components in her work is different from Hurston. For example, Walker picks up the idea of realising identity through voice; in so doing, she fully develops an idea that was touched upon by Hurston. In *Their Eyes* this notion is depicted through the oral culture used to tell family and cultural narratives, but Walker does this through stressing the power of the written word, often in letter-writing, which is an ancient form of communication and self-expression. The literature of each period "in part denounces and renounces its past" (*Stealing the Language* 10); Walker is not imitating or overshadowing her 'literary foremother', but is instead in dialogue with Hurston. To demonstrate the influence of Hurston on Walker in more detail, I will compare Hurston's *Their Eyes* with Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* in chapter three.

Hurston's *Their Eyes* relates the story of Janie and her quest for self-realisation. Walker writes: "I would choose … Zora's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* because I would want to enjoy myself while identifying with the black heroine, Janie Crawford, as she acted out many roles in a variety of settings, and functioned (with spectacular results!) in romantic and sensual love" (*In Search* 86). Not only was Hurston a pioneer with regards to writing about African-American women in general but also, according to Mary Young, she "changed the focus from African-Americans in the urban North to the 'folk' in the rural South" (*Mules and Dragons* 59). As discussed, this reginal element marks Walker's work as well.

But male authors can also be traced in Walker's oeuvre. Ralph Ellison is an icon whose most remarkable novel, *Invisible Man* (1952), is one of the greatest novels in literature, not just in literature that claims equal civil rights for black men. The novel relates the story of Invisible Man, who lives underground in order to elude white society. He writes about the troubles he

faces in the white supremacist society. "Invisible Man has become a classic of modern American fiction, wrote compellingly of the experience of African Americans in a society that has tended to ignore their problems" (qtd. in *Icons of African American Literature* 187). The invisibility that Ellison depicts in his novel is still employed as a term relevant to African-American literature today. In Walker's works, Grange, for instance, in *The Third Life,* demonstrates this tendency to be invisible in the Southern society he lives in by moving to the North – as explored in Chapter One of this thesis. Ellison's main focus is on African-American males, however, and he does not pay much attention to women in his novels. African-American women were still being ignored within the patriarchal focus of African-American literature of the time. Yet, as discussed later, authors such as Ellison developed crucial thematic and stylistic pattern as which Walker both engages and moves beyond.

Richard Wright, similar to Ellison, focuses on African-American males and writes both for and about them. His most famous novel is *Native Son* (1940), which tells the story of a black man, Bigger Thomas, who is unable to defend his rights in the white supremacist society. After Bigger accidentally kills Mary Dalton, a rich white girl, he is arrested and is sentenced to death. Wright in this novel shows that black men are doomed and condemned in the community of whites. Joyce Ann Joyce in "The Tragic Hero" writes: "Wright, like the many tragedians before him, begins *Native Son* at a point in which the elements of his hero's past have already conspired to bring about Bigger's ultimate defeat" (70). The two books, *Invisible Man* and *Native Son*, offer very few rays of hope for black men to regain their manhood and, given the patriarchal nature of America at this time, power within their society. Wright, like Ellison, shows that black men are not recognised as citizens equal to whites, so the only way to survive is, as Ellison suggests, to be invisible to white people; otherwise, they will be killed. These themes are further explored here in Chapter One, on *The Third Life*.

Crucially, the 1950s saw the emergence of another prominent female author, Paule Marshall, who, like Hurston, would focus on African-American womens' lives. Her most famous novel, *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959), discusses African-American family issues in expansive detail. *Brown Girl* illustrates a family which is under the influence of failed patriarchy; the father of the family, Deighton, is, like Invisible Man and Bigger, unable to situate himself within white society and thus acts as an obstacle to his wife, Silla, who has a stronger will and is determined to improve the family's situation, especially financially. They have two daughters, Ina and Selina. The first is completely submissive; however, the second, Selina, wants to be an individual, self-dependent woman. Marshall shows that patriarchy does not necessarily reside solely within a man's attitude since, in this novel, Silla hampers Selina's assertion of her liberty and individuality. "Selina's confrontation with her mother", Eugenia Delamotte writes, "is set in one of the central places of silence in the novel" (18). Marshall shows how women hamper each other to gain self-power. She interweaves the themes present in the writing of Hurston, Ellison, and Wright, into her own work, which deals with black male issues as well as those of women. This novel, in particular, discusses the black male's inability to assert his voice within the white supremacist society, as well as the suppression of women both within society and within the family. Hurston, in *Their Eyes,* suggests that female bonding can be a way for women to find their individuality and Marshall, although confirming this point, explores the difficulties in building female connections. Marshall unveils the problems that women face within their families, not only in terms of fatherhood but also motherhood. And by exploring how mothers can act as obstacles in their daughters' quests for liberty, Marshall further suggests that female individuation needs to be fought for, and that this fight should start within the family and then continue into the wider society.

In *Stealing the Language*, Alicia Ostriker writes: "At the same time much of their [poet's or writer's] vitality derives from an explosive attempt to overcome mental and moral

confinement, they identify with these grandmothers, and this effort has both thematic and formal consequences" (10). Alice Walker was arguably influenced by Paule Marshall in her success in overcoming such mental and moral confinements, in particular her attempt to assert her own literary voice. Whilst traces of Marshall's *Brown Girl* can be clearly observed in Walker's *The Third Life*, the latter author's perspective can be markedly different from Marshall's. Both novels portray African-American families struggling with financial problems. In *Brown Girl,* Marshall emphasises the power of Silla as a black woman who leads the family out of crisis, and she also shows her partner to be confused and baffled, which renders him useless in providing any help to his wife. Although Walker raises a similar scenario in many of her novels, she develops this issue in a much broader sense. Walker shows that black men are not born irresponsible and cruel, rather that they become this way as the result of social injustice, in which black men are degraded, belittled, and exploited, forced to obey their masters, and to accept their inferior status. In other words, Walker depicts black men as sacrificed by society; they are filled with resentment and hatred, which they then pass on to, and express towards, their family members. Although they care for their families, they cannot express their love and affection. Therefore, Walker goes beyond Marshall's characterisation of the failed 'man of the house', by showing us more explicitly the reasons why black men are not able to support their families and to provide for their needs.

The necessity to fight, later on, is developed in the work of other African-American female authors that came after Marshall, writers such as Walker and Morrison. These two writers emphasise this concept in two different ways. For instance, through Celie in *The Color Purple,* Walker shows that individuality is never achieved until one stands up against oppressors, in this case the male characters of Mister and Pa. Under the control of these two men for much of her early life, it is through her female connections with Shug, Nettie, and Sofia, that Celie manages to regain her self-power, to the extent that she comes to threaten

Mister with death. Marcellus Blount, in "A Woman Speaks", writes: "the female protagonist rises above the men who exploit her, when she learns how to negate the insensitive and domineering voices of men" (119). Once she learns how to fight, Celie becomes free. However, Morrison's female characters do not often engage in fights that take the form of direct confrontation, as just described. For example, in *Paradise*, Morrison depicts a group of women living together in a rural area far from society. These women form a small community in which they exercise their own rules. Morrison suggests here that women in an oppressive society can attain their own individuality only if they detach themselves from wider society and build their own community. Nevertheless, despite the difference between confrontation and seclusion, these two types of fighting that Walker and Morrison depict in their novels are both based on the foundation of female bonds, without which women will not succeed as individuals. So often in Morrison and Walker's novels, female friendship becomes one of the most urgent needs for women as it is through such friendship that they can assert their individuality in their society, whether the wider one or a secluded community.

These two writers share a focus on common themes, yet although Morrison and Walker write about similar issues, they develop their ideas differently. As they look differently into various linked issues, and because they are continuously changing and developing them across works written along the same time period, it is fair to say that these authors are in dialogue with each other. They do not necessarily influence nor contradict each other, but their texts sometimes support and expand upon one another's ideas. Throughout the chapters of this thesis, the common themes that these two authors develop will be discussed, and it will be considered how Walker and Morrison are developing their similar points differently across their work.

As has been demonstrated, then, African-American literature has been much developed and expanded in terms of subject matter and voice since the time of slave narratives. However, Walker manages to claim her own place within the lineage of African-American writers, a

place that makes her an outstanding author of her own era. Yet Walker's work receives a varying range of critical assessment. Her third novel, *The Color Purple*, won the Pulitzer Prize and received high praise from reviewers and scholars alike. However, her earlier and later works did not garner the critical attention of *The Color Purple*. Some critics appear to expect all of Walker's novels to be as complex and satisfying as that work, and, consequently, castigate Walker with harsh critiques of her further efforts, as detailed below.

Narrative Style

Walker's style varies from novel to novel. In her work, Walker chooses a particular style which is in accordance with the theme of the particular novel. Her most distinguished style can be observed in her celebrated novel, *The Color Purple*, which is written in epistolary form. Celie, whose voice is silenced by patriarchy, finds it through her writing. In "A Woman Speaks", Marcellus Blount writes: "in writing what might be called 'a womanly text,' Alice Walker assembles the conventions of black women's fiction. In particular, she has chosen to dramatize the process whereby a female character comes into her own and acquires a voice she can use to define and express her identity" (119). In the situation that Celie is in, writing is the only way to express herself, and further gives her the realisation that she can use this ability to complain to God for the miseries she is going and has gone through. The epistolary was a very popular literary style in 18th and 19th century English literature, which Walker revives in order to give a voice to her African-American female characters.[12]

Before *The Color Purple* appeared, Walker published *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970) and *Meridian* (1976). The two novels share a common theme: that of African-Americans' struggles to attain their social position in their societies, though they cover different time periods. *The Third Life* echoes the Great Migration, the movement of African-Americans

[12] In her interview with Rizwan Khan on Al Jazeera English TV, Alice Walker says she "loves Charlotte Bronte and Jane Austen". Influenced by these writers, Walker continues to depict female friendship in her works as well, albeit along a different route, by portraying a more intimate, lifelong female closeness. —. Rizwan Khan, Alice Walker. (15 October 2007). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wFyE7gyW5dk>.

to the North in search of better wages and prosperity, as will be discussed in the first chapter of this thesis. *Meridian* is about the eponymous female character, who is an activist in the Civil Rights Movement of the nineteen-sixties. Aside from a shared theme, however, these two early novels differ greatly from each other in other respects. For one thing, *The Third Life* is the only Walker novel that features a male protagonist as its central character. *The Third Life* is important because it offers a microcosm of the portrayal of male figures that will feature in her later works. Grange, the protagonist, is a very brutal, irresponsible, and violent man who undergoes many changes, becoming, by the end of his life, kind and caring. The male characters in Walker's later works are similar to Grange in this sense. For example, in *The Color Purple*, Mister is very ignorant and merciless; however, he becomes very mild and harmless by the end of the novel. Walker always leaves some ray of hope for her readers; that even her brutal male characters can change in the course of time. As such, although she mostly offers exaggerated negative characterisations of her male figures –most of them as irresponsible, lost and patriarchal- she gives them this chance to change.

In her first two novels, Walker's female characters find similar issues with the expression of their own voices within patriarchal society. In *The Third Life*, all of the female characters except Mem are mostly silenced, and the only occasions in which they talk are when they aim to attract a man's attention. For instance, throughout the novel, Josie is always doing everything possible to attract a man's attention. Mem, who is the only female character who wants to go against the stream, gets killed by Brownfield for raising her voice to him. Similar to Mem is Meridian in Walker's second novel. She joins the Civil Rights movement and through the movement she exercises her own voice within the patriarchal society. In these first novels, then, Walker outlines a line of progression concerning the woman's use of her voice for the attainment of individuality and liberty. This progressive line reaches its peak in *The Color Purple*.

In the novels that follow *The Color Purple*, Walker tries to engage the theme of female bonding with those of social norms, spirituality, and religion. In *The Temple of My Familiar,* Walker features some of the characters that appeared in *The Color Purple* along with the characters of this new narrative, such the theme of female bonding is retained yet expanded in a broader sense to spirituality. Walker's fourth novel is her most voluminous work, with many ideas, themes, and, as suggested, characters; however the whole novel revolves around one single topic: womanism. *The Temple*, as written by the author who introduced the concept of 'womanism', expands and explores this term in more detail. It is in my fourth chapter that I explicate how this is the case, whereas other critics have expressed the idea that there is no guiding or central occupation in the novel. Ursula Le Guin comments: "A hundred themes and subjects spin through it, dozens of characters, a whirl of times and places. None is touched superficially: all the people are passionate actors and sufferers, and everything they talk about is urgent, a matter truly of life and death" (12). It seems that Le Guin prefers to deny a central theme in the novel, since a novel with, as Le Guin says, a "hundred themes" will look more like an encyclopaedia. On the other hand, Ikenna Deike writes:

> *The Temple of My Familiar* can be read as a romance of the development of the human psyche in which the human ego strives consciously and unconsciously for wholeness. Man as separate from woman, humans as separate from animals, one race as separate from another, the old as separate from the young, the mind as separable from nature, the present as cut off from the past--all that foists a gribbled, self-destructive narcissism, a half-personality at best (136).

Though dismissing the success of the endeavour, Deike's reading of *The Temple* leans closer to Walker's concept of womanism, even if not outright identifying it, since womanism emphasises the 'wholeness' that Deike describes. And as the passage above suggests, with this

novel Walker begins to stress a theme that will continue into her other novels. This new trend is Walker's stronger interweaving of womanism with spirituality. Further developing current criticism on this novel, as communicated in chapter two here, is that in *The Temple*, Walker's womanism is applied in a manner that re-establishes, or reconfigures, the concept of marriage. According to womanism, marriage should not act as a barrier to women's quest for individuation but rather should be a means which leads women into liberty. The traditional concept of marriage which brings commitments is rejected in womansim, and couples should be together only if they respect each other's freedom.

In her fourth novel, Walker continues developing her preoccupations. *The Temple*, which introduces Walker's newly prevalent religious focus, has many characters and themes. This appears to be confusing to some critics, however Walker picks this particular approach in order to show how her womanist religion can embrace all creatures and, as in womanism's aims, can be committed to the wholeness of an entire being.[13] The narrative voice changes throughout the novel from character to character, as well as the setting and time of the events that take place across the work. This comprehensive time span is in accordance with the main theme of the novel, which emphasises the concept of wholeness.

Walker's fifth novel, *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, also has received less attention than *The Color Purple*. Some critics have discussed *Possessing* as an isolated and unusual work which stands on its own in Walker's oeuvre; however, I suggest that there is a trend in Walker's novels which is established in her debut, *The Third Life*, and continues through *Possessing* and to her latest published fictional work, *Now Is the Time To Open Your Heart*. And the trend is

[13] In "Afracentric Visions", Doris Davenport writes: "the book has an encyclopaedic intertextuality of its own" (14). In "Alice Walker's The Temple of My Familiar as Pastiche" Bonnie Braendlin describes the work as: "An unconventional, non-narrative text, the novel may be read as pastiche - a juxtaposing of the profound and the mundane" (50). In "Toward a Monistic Idealism" Ikenna Dieke writes: "Of crucial significance to the theme of monistic idealism, or the idealism of essential communion, in *The Temple of My Familiar* is the nature of language. In the novel every major narrative movement embodies a traditional convention of language, especially the art of conversation raised to a ritual act of phatic communion" (512). See also chapter four of this thesis.

the thematic development of Walker's concept of womanism. In her review of *Possessing*, Nelisiwe Zondi writes: "I was impressed by the choice of Walker's narrative voice. The story is told directly and apparently at random, without classification, and the text's structure derives from each character's free association with another and not from an intervening narrator" (52). This is of course a valid point which shows Walker's outstanding ability as a novelist; however, Zondi does not relate this point to the concept of womanism, that is, how this seemingly random manner of narration goes along with the main theme of the novel. Tashi, the main character of *Possessing*, suffers from an ambivalent concept of place. Tashi is born in Africa, and raised in Africa but after undertaking circumcision – or female genital mutilation – she travels to America, where she finds that she cannot identify herself with the women there who have not been circumcised. Christine Hejinian relates the concept of circumcision to psychoanalytic theory: "Freud's theory of castration anxiety has always been somewhat of an intellectual exercise for me. Jung doesn't develop this theme in the way Freud does, who gives it a central role in the drive to resolve the Oedipus complex and form a superego, in both sexes" ("Rights of Passage" 62). Hejinian has cleverly discussed with recourse to psychoanalysis how sexual mutilation destroys Tashi's psyche; yet at the same time Walker, through the distorted narrative style of the novel, reveals how distorted and scattered Tashi's psyche is. But there are also many women in the novel who have been circumcised within the same African culture and place, but as far as Walker articulates, do not have the same psychological issues that Tashi does. Tashi's unique relationship to place in the novel, displaced both spatially and physically, causes Tashi to develop a distorted psyche, one which leads her to death at the end of the novel.

Walker's style is further disruptive in *Possessing*, with short sections and a narrator that is hard to pin down. Walker chooses this particular narrative style in order to echo Tashi's mental distortion, and to convey the message that female sexual mutilation can damage its victim both physically and mentally. *Possessing* is Walker's unique novel in this respect, for

here she solely focuses on one specific social patriarchal practice, and her abhorrence towards it.

The last two novels by Walker share distinctive similarities, as they both explore the role of religion and spirituality in human –especially woman's– life. Both of these novels are didactical in approach, which is encapsulated by their narrative style. *By the Light of My Father's Smile* (1998) and *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart* (2004) have clear, well-organised narrative styles that are easy to follow. *By the Light* aims to show us how Christianity fails to recognise female sexual freedom and its patriarchal aspects aimed at the female body. For instance, Robinson slashes his daughter Maggie because she has a sexual relationship with her boyfriend, which is a taboo according to Christian ideology (though is an act that can be found to have been perpetrated by many of its practitioners). Again in this novel Walker emphasises the necessity of patriarchal change through her male character, Robinson. He takes up this opportunity to change whilst inhabiting the world of dead. Robinson manages to change his mindset, and, in particular, his misogynistic religious beliefs, after another deceased male character, Manuelito, meets him and questions his views.

Walker's most recent novel, like *By the Light*, employs an elliptical and diffuse style and the didactical sense of the novel is clear. Here Walker again focuses on religion and explores how a religion would be if it were practiced in accordance with her womanist ideas. Walker's style in all of her works is selected according to the theme of the work, and these two components of style and theme are always interwoven neatly within each other.

Walker's final two novels have received even less critical attention. Pamela June believes that "unlike her first five novels, particularly the Pulitzer Prize–winning *The Color Purple* (1982), *By the Light* was poorly received and quickly dismissed" ("Subverting Heteronormativity" 600). However, unlike the dismissive critics, June goes on to discuss how in *By the Light of My Father's Smile* Walker attempts to question heteronormativity. In *The*

Temple Walker attacked the social concept of marriage, and in this subsequent novel she tries to re-consider the concept of heteronormativity. But the question remains how religious themes are integrated in *By the Light*, and how Walker relates such themes to womanism. Does Walker reject religion or does she subvert religion, in the manner that she subverts heteronormativity? Gayle Pamberton writes: "*By the Light of My Father's Smile* is so unreal; it is highlighted by its stylized language, as if in translation from the Spanish, the Greek, the dead" (21). Again Walker's employment of a different style in her prose is being questioned by the critic, just as the myriad of themes in *The Temple* had been. The critical response to *Possessing* shows that critics seem to better appreciate Walker's narrative intentions if she writes in a consistent, coherent style, as in for example *The Color Purple*. Here, Palmerton claims, in a negative light, that *By the Light* is 'unreal', yet to return to June's arguments, I would suggest that Walker wants to show that heteronormativity is 'unreal', hence her employment of a diffused prose style in this text. By homing in on the themes of each text and aligning to stylistic choices, one can begin to understand the differences in Walker's style and language across different works.

Walker's last novel to date, *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart*, has received the least critical attention of all her works. *Now Is the Time* is perhaps Walker's most singly focused novel in that it explores spirituality among the characters of her novel. Buddhism, which first appeared in Walker's work in *The Temple*, is here foregrounded and gives a new angle to womanism, allowing Walker to expand her concept of womanism under this broader religious framework. In her review of the novel, Agnieszka Lobodziec writes: "The initial 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" (39). This serves as an apt summary of Walker's approach - *Now Is the Time* is Walker's most recent novel, and she has not published a work of full-length fiction since 2004. Yet it is possible to see this novel as Walker's most inclusive, and as a kind

of career summation, as it encompasses its characters, locales, and quests for the discovery of self within a cohesive womanist and spiritual framework.

Other than Maria Lauret's updated volume of criticism (second edition 2011), there is surprisingly little comprehensive critical work on Walker's fiction. Yet, Alice Walker has clearly established her position in African-American literature and she has managed to be one of the most important writers of her time. Her third novel, *The Color Purple*, has also brought her fame and esteem within both African-American literary circles and as part of American literature in general. Walker uses a particular style for each of her novels as she tries to engage her womanist ideas. Yet her concept of womanism remains one of the controversial ideas of her era, which further establishes her key and distinctive place amongst African-American authors of her time.

Chapter Outline

The thesis contains six chapters and a conclusion. Each chapter focuses on one of Walker's novels, discussed in the chronological order of their publication date. The sixth chapter addresses the last two novels of Walker's canon together, for whilst they engage with womanism, they do not emphasise the theme of female bonding, which is one of the primary subjects of this thesis.

The first chapter is on *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970), which is Walker's only novel with a male central protagonist, and which explores the impact of the legacy of slavery upon Grange's family. This chapter explores how patriarchy mentally paralyses African-American males and how they leave their families behind in pursuit of foolish dreams; in Grange's case his dream takes him all the way to the North of the US, in an attempt to attain a better life for himself in terms of financial and social status. When Grange and his son, Brownfield, leave the South on different, separate, occasions, their abandoned families struggle to fulfil their basic needs for survival. Margaret, Grange's wife, dies; finding herself unable to stand on her own feet without her husband in a society where women are doubly oppressed.

Mem, Brownfield's wife, is stronger than Margaret, but since Brownfield is himself a patriarch, he cannot tolerate Mem's female power and consequently shoots her. Walker thus shows how patriarchy disables women and hampers them. *The Third Life* also implicitly emphasises the necessity of female bonding. The women of the novel are subjected to so much oppression, and so engaged with their basic needs, that they do not even think of building up the female bonds that could help them to overcome their plights. The novel ends, however, with some hope, albeit through individual self-determination rather than female bonding. For Mem's daughter, Ruth, emerges as an autonomous girl who does not even let her father, Brownfield, touch her. Walker's optimism can further be found in Grange's 'third part' of his life, where he becomes a kind and considerate grandfather to Ruth. The two points of hope coalesce here as it is through Grange's help and support that Ruth initiates her quest towards individuality and liberty. Although this novel is mostly about men and their irresponsibility, it also focuses on women and female bonding – both as neglected, as above, and as promising, as at the end of the narrative.

The second chapter explores female bonding both as negative and positive, for it focuses on how a dysfunctional mother-daughter relationship can affect a woman's life. *Meridian* (1976) is a novel about the African-American woman of the title, who struggles with great difficulty to gain her mother's love and attention, and ultimately fails. To fill this yawning gap in her life, Meridian joins the Civil Rights movement. This chapter discusses how the Civil Rights movement therefore acts as a surrogate mother for Meridian. Further, female relationships develop in this novel far more than they did in *The Third Life*. For instance, the characters Meridian and Lynn build up an interracial female bond. Lynn is a white woman and the wife of Truman. When Truman leaves her for Meridian, she comes to Meridian to fight with her and win Truman back. However, across their few meetings, Meridian and Lynn become friends to the extent that they almost forget that it is their conflict over Truman that

has brought them together. Truman is more educated than the African-American males depicted in *The Third Life*, however, he is still as emotionally and spiritually lost as Grange and Brownfield. Nevertheless, as with Grange, at the end of this novel Walker leaves the door open for Truman, letting him follow Meridian's lead by initiating a quest to have a better understanding of his own self and place in the world.

The third chapter of this thesis focuses on the different kinds of female bonding found in Walker's third and most famous, novel, *The Color Purple* (1982). It discusses the functional female connections between Celie and Shug, and between Nettie and Sofia, as well as the dysfunctional bond between Celie and her mother. By this point in the thesis we are able to identify that mother-daughter relationships are always depicted as a problematic point in Walker's female characters' lives. Celie, identifying with her mother, becomes an object of the patriarchal aims of Pa, and Mister, her husband. However, Celie overcomes this issue of her sexual exploitation by these men by taking on Shug as her lover and also surrogate mother. It is through Shug that Celie discovers the sexual part of herself, which Walker presents as amongst those discoveries that are defining for female self-determination. As such, this chapter explores how female sexual freedom plays a strong role in women's quests for empowered identities. Besides this theme, the novel also shows us that acknowledging family roots, and the broader history of African-Americans, are also essential for the self-development of African-American women. Walker further shows that a silenced character like Celie needs to fight to attain her voice, and this is what she learns from Sofia, Mister's daughter-in-law; thus benefiting again from bonding with other women.

Male characters are also discussed in this chapter in the sense that patriarchy damages men in the first place, and consequently goes on to damage the women in their lives. There are three generations of men in this novel. Pa, Mister, Mister's father, and Harpo. It will be discussed how patriarchy paradoxically emasculates men in Walker's fiction. However, as with

her preceding novels, Walker still leaves the reader with some hope that men will change, as, at the end of the novel, both Mister and Harpo change with regards to their treatment of women.

The fourth chapter concerns *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989), which is a turning point in Walker's body of work. For here she shifts from suggesting that the solution for women is found in their active interaction with each another, and their fighting cruel men, towards solutions that can be found through spirituality, another aspect of Walker's womanism. The novel borrows some characters from *The Color Purple* and also introduces new characters, which contributes to this being Walker's most voluminous novel. Through this novel, Walker wants to show how womanism can be for both men and women. For although female characters like Carlotta are damaged, and many of the men of the novel are still irresponsible, Walker presents Fanny's massage centre as a place in which, through conversation and physical touch, such damaged characters can link their bodies with their minds and be healed.

The fifth chapter concerns *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992), a novel which explicitly reveals the challenges that underlie Walker's definition of womanism. This chapter suggests that the novel shows us why womanism, though intended to be for all, is strained by the diversity found in reality. Here we find that the characters cannot build up any functional female bonding due to their coming from different places in the world, a difference that determines their culturally specific outlooks. Tashi, who is originally Olinkan, cannot develop a useful bond with Olivia, who is originally American, due to the way they each conceive of what is important in life. The chapter also explores how dysfunctional female bonding can be self-destructive. Women in Olinka help each other to go through the painful ritual of female circumcision, because they submit to patriarchal notions that the female sexual organ is dirty and is a threat to male sexuality. Walker shows how essential the physical body is to women's sexuality by devoting the entire novel to this point. Tashi undergoes the procedure and finds that she cannot recover from the trauma she has gone through after circumcision. Her friendship

with Olivia fails to alleviate her emotional pain, due to their culturally specific points of view. Female bonding, in this case, does not result in the unity and wholeness of self sought by Tashi. The novel ultimately stresses the importance of interlinked perceptions of bodily, cultural, and community bonds in developing a sense of woman's wholeness and identity.

Male characters are more positively depicted in this novel than in Walker's previous texts; however, they are still slaves to their own self-centred, sexual needs. The character of Adam, who has always been loving towards Tashi, is unable to cope with her trauma and thus turns to Lisette, with whom he begins an affair, and then a family. However, through Pierre, Adam's son from his new partner Lisette, Walker again shows that there is still some hope that men can change. This chapter further argues that male characters can fit within womanist ideas and show in Walker's texts they can overcome the Achilles heel of sexual desire.

The sixth chapter of this thesis then discusses *By the Light of My Father's Smile* (1998) and *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart* (2004). These two novels are, as mentioned earlier, mostly about spirituality and the role of religion in the lives of both women and men. These two novels thus explore Walker's claim that womanism is "committed to the wholeness of entire people, male *and* female" (*In Search* xi). Further, in contrast to Walker's earlier works, bar her debut, the emphasis is less on instances of strong and interactive female bonding here than it is on social ideology and spirituality. In *By the Light*, Robinson is a strict priest whose mindset is rooted in patriarchal ideologies, and through this character Walker depicts Christianity as working against women's sexual freedom. This is in contrast to womanism, which puts great emphasis on the freedom of female sexuality. The novel engages in a challenging conversation with Christianity, through which, at the end of the novel, Robinson changes his ideas. Thus Walker again shows that men hamper women's individuation by their ignorance and bias, and that they need to be changed. While the novel focuses on the dysfunctionality of Christianity, it also gives us the first long-term lesbian couple of her novels,

which brings us to the sole version of lasting sexual and romantic female-bonding featured in the work. And it is notable that Susannah and Pauline are the only couple in this novel who live together in peace without a single problem. Chapter six explores how the oppressive rules of Christianity are rendered useless by way of this relationship, since Susannah, who is Robinson's daughter, engages in her hidden lesbian relationship the whole time Robinson is alive. Through this relationship, the novel demonstrates the power of women: that they can even defeat a patriarchal ideology as strong as Christianity.

Unlike *By the Light,* Walker's most recent novel, *Now Is the Time* does not present the struggle between ideologies, instead focusing on the fulfilment that can be obtained by way of spirituality. The main protagonist, Kate, lives according to her Buddhist beliefs and, through a long journey, succeeds in joining a Buddhist group that heals her wounds. Significantly, Yolo, Kate's husband, also takes a journey and becomes a Buddhist, after she leaves him for her own, and is depicted as a male who appreciates women's freedom and individuality. This novel thus aims to demonstrate the precept that womanism applies to all of humanity, regardless of sex or gender. The sixth chapter further examines the didactic nature of this novel and how Walker's stylistic changes here underpin and reflect the themes of the novel.

Walker's novels embrace different aspects and strands of womanism. She starts her series of novels by expressing how the legacy of slavery mentally encages her male characters and how, in order to forge their masculine power, they exercise violence against the women in their lives. Further, in this context, women are seen to be weakened by competing with each other in order to win male attention, perceiving this to be the only way to attain security in a society in which women are doubly oppressed. However, Walker then begins to present ways in which women can empower themselves, often by means of female bonding. This becomes clear in her middle period works, wherein women unite and create bonds with each other, rather than depending on the support of males, and thus find themselves attaining self-determination

as individuals. Female bonding is not always functional however, and this is often depicted by the author through her characters' mother-daughter relationships, or through issues that arise from different cultural contexts. Walker's two most recent works, however, move away from female bonding in order to explore different facets of womanism. *By the Light* focuses on how religious ideology can limit the sexual freedom vital to womanhood, while *Now Is the Time* shows how the reconnecting of humanity with Nature and the spiritual can result in womanist aims – both male and female might attain freedom and individuality.

Womanism is a healing process which leads to human development. Womanism aims at making living a peaceful and productive activity. It starts with women but embraces all creatures. Womanism emphasises unification, gathering, talking, and communicating. It wants women to gather together and to talk through their problems. This circle of talk encompasses everyone, persons of any sex, gender, race, and creed. Such human interaction aims at inducing both the inner and outer change of the human being. Maparyan in *The Womanist Idea* writes: "the logic of womanism is this: when hearts and minds change, the world changes" (320). She continues

> Womanism exists to guide humankind along this path toward luxocracy through the permeation of the everyday sphere with love, harmony, care, interconnectedness, cosmic inspiration, and Spirit.[14] These are the attributes, the energies that cause human beings to abandon violence, conflict, exploitation, objectification, dehumanization, and materialism in favor of altruism, peace, healing, sustainability, collective self-actualization, and reverence (320).

Womanism, as Maparyan describes it, is a healing process that leads humankind to understanding and peace through unification and interconnectedness. In this respect, one

[14] Definition of "luxocracy" according to Maparyan: "Humanity is headed toward a form of social organization based on universal acceptance and expression of innate divinity, the inner light. I name this horizon of human social organization "Luxocracy"- rule by light" (320).

could conceive of womanism as both a process of healing and human development and a utopian prospect for social or political organisation.

My understanding of womanism is also similar to what is mentioned above, but focuses mainly on human relations since strong, functional, and supportive human connection can lead to change firstly in peoples' hearts and minds and secondly into the world. As long as humankind loves itself and lives in peace, the world it exists within will also attain such peace. These two, inner peace and outer peace, are interconnected. Womanism wants to consider one as a part of creation and one's own peace cannot be achieved unless the world around him/her is in peace. A womanist does not exclude anything or anyone but rather embraces all. This concept of womanism goes along with Maparyan's notion of reverence. Humankind should show respect to each other regardless of sex, gender, race, and belief, as well as to other creatures.

This thesis focuses primarily on female bonding and female friendship, secondarily on the female relationship with men, and thirdly, that of interconnections between males. The reason for this is that, since men actually come from women, I believe that we ought to give priority to understanding how functional relationships between women may be achieved, and how relations between women and men can be one of a liberating unity rather than a patriarchal bind. As Maparyan says in her talk with Denis O'Hayer, "women know how to bring people together… even when women have different opinions they know how to get into a mode that can bring people together" (4:20). When women value themselves and love each other they can spread this love to their surroundings. This is the main reason that this thesis gives more attention to women and the different kinds of female relationships found in Alice Walker's literature.

Chapter One

The Third Life of Grange Copeland: Masculinity and the Legacy of Slavery

Chapter Abstract

Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970) is predominantly concerned with socially disenfranchised African-Americans. It is Walker's only novel to feature a male protagonist, the eponymous Grange Copeland. Grange goes on a quest to find his masculine identity and distinctive place within the social order, but he does not succeed. He becomes another "invisible man", living alone in his house, detached from society. The female characters of the novel also deal with various struggles as both Grange and his son, Brownfield, leave their families behind to travel up North. There are various instances of dysfunctional female bonding which work to undermine the women's situations in the novel. Walker's first novel, however, ends with a new beginning for Grange's family. The third generation of this family is constituted by a young woman, Ruth, who, through Grange's help, becomes more self-empowered than any of the other male or female figures of the family.

Dysfunctional African-American Men

Grange as well as his son, Brownfield, are both mentally paralysed by the boundaries that the legacy of slavery imposes upon them. Their physical and mental freedom is restricted and they know that they are considered inferior by white society. This mental paralysis prevents them from living as respectable, decent men. For instance, as a sharecropper in Baker County, Georgia, Grange is essentially a slave; he works picking cotton, but ends up perpetually owing to the landowner and owner of the house as he tries to protect his family. Grange runs away from the South to the North to escape from the legacies and ongoing structures of slavery.

Although, after a long time, he manages to free himself, he can still feel its consequences. The same thing also happens to his son, Brownfield. He is treated like a slave, both in his family and within society. Brownfield receives neither love nor respect from his father, as Walker indicates: "His father almost never spoke to him" (5). Since Grange is unable to express his love to his family, this tragic father-son relationship makes Brownfield as hard as stone: "I loved my childrens [...] I loved your mama" the latter confesses to his daughter, Ruth, "I couldn' ever even express my love" (278). He is unable to show his love because he has never learnt it from his father. Dennis H. Wrong says: "man, that plausible creature whose wagging tongue so often hides the despair and darkness of his heart" (193). Brownfield is a true example of such a man as he is unable to assert his need to have a wife and children, and his inability to express himself deprives him of this benefit. He loses his wife Mem, as well as Ruth and his other daughters because he is so confused about his masculine identity that he is mentally paralysed and cannot show his true feelings and passion for them. His attitude towards Mem will be discussed later in this section.

Since the entrapment of slavery affects them mentally, Grange and Brownfield are never able to find freedom in their private lives, as their behaviour is the reflection of what they have been taught by society. Because society neither respects nor loves them, they do not respect or love each other; they are what they have been taught. Because of this, they consider themselves unable to accomplish any tasks in their lives, and tend, therefore, to be filled with rage, anger and sorrow throughout their lives, never finding peace. This is what happens to the black men in the *The Third Life*. Grange, who suffers from legacies and lasting structures of slavery in the South, goes after his dream to regain his masculinity and self-esteem. In the early years of his life, there is one particular occasion when Brownfield (whose own name echoes the situation of entrapment and personal lack of growth or actualization) observes his father's

acquiescence and subservience towards his master (9). This is when Grange even loses respect through the eyes of his son.

Masculinity in African-American society is, in the novel, generally related to men's authority, their position at the head of their families and their ability to support the family's basic financial needs. Indeed while this may be true of all men grounded in a patriarchal framework, the belief becomes more intense or powerful in African-American life due to a history of loss and lack of masculine empowerment. "Many men still yearn" Whitehead and Barrett write, "to perform and validate their masculinity through 'conquering the universe', but the aggressive, dominant, emotionally repressed behaviour that such yearnings engender are increasingly seen as (self)-destructive, if not derisible" (6). In this context, "the universe" is the African-American male's family.[15] When black men are unable to fulfil their aforementioned responsibilities and duties, they feel emasculated, and inevitably therefore try to re-assert their dominancy and power. When Grange loses these abilities, he is considered emasculated by himself.

Although Grange is a very oppressive character within his family, he is totally submissive to his boss, Mr. Shipley. His son realises this at the early age of six when his father takes him to his work place. His father tells him: "say 'Yessir' to Mr. Shipley," and Brownfield looked up before he said anything and scanned his father's face. The mask was tight and still as if his father had coated himself with wax. And Brownfield smelled for the first time an odor of sweat, fear and something indefinite" (9). Herein Brownfield begins to consider his father as neither his hero, nor as masterful as he used to be. Later Grange, feeling devastated and lost, decides to walk to the North to fulfil his dreams and ambitions to have a securer financial status

[15] For further information please refer to *The Masculinities Reader* edited by Stephen M. Whitehead and Frank J. Barrett pp. 1-26; also *The Masculinity Studies Reader* edited by Rachel Adams and David Savran pp. (77-79).

and more power. So he abandons his family, attempting to leave his problems behind while placing all the burdens on his wife's shoulders.

Early in his life, Brownfield understands that his parents are unable to provide the basic needs of the family. He feels ashamed in front of his cousins. One of his cousins, Lincoln, embarrasses him by dancing around him and singing: "You all are in debt twelve hundred dollars! And you'll never pay it" (11). Brownfield understands that even his relatives do not have such a depressing life, so his situation makes him feel different to other people. Everything in his life makes him feel ashamed and inadequate, so he either tries to change the situation, or escape from it. As a child who is also always being reproached and blamed by both Grange and Margaret, his mother, he does not have enough strength and self-confidence to alter the course of his life, and so inevitably he follows in his father's footsteps. The cycle of men's failures begins here, to be repeated generation after generation, as portrayed by Brownfield who follows the same path as his father. Brownfield also chases his dreams. In his daydream, he is "in a cozy comfort of his luxurious limousine, and in the faithful ministration of his loving imaginary wife" (22). Only in his dreams does he feel secure and able to achieve the love and affection that he so lacks in the real world. Having a proper job and a house are two significant factors in reinforcing the traditional notion of masculinity, and since Brownfield and Grange do not have either of them, they are emasculated and therefore lose their self-esteem and self-confidence. They abandon their families, making things worse for their families and themselves. For instance, when Grange leaves his family, his wife, Margaret, dies shortly after his departure since she is unable to adjust to living as a woman alone in patriarchal society. After the death of his mother, Brownfield leaves the South and the only thing he remembers is the misery that his parents inflicted on him. He feels completely abandoned and confused as he has to pursue his own dreams in the same society where his parents achieved nothing.

This is not the whole story of how the legacy of slavery leads to the dysfunctionality of black men in the novel. Walker also gives another example: Walt Terrell who is slightly different from Grange and Brownfield. Terrell is only mentioned in one paragraph in the entire novel, which seems a little strange, given that he represents such a different kind of man. Yet the brief description in the novel suggests that even he is not considered equal to white men. Walt Terrell is "the richest black man in the county" (244), while the rest of them are either employed like slaves or struggling with other post-slavery related issues. What distinguishes him from other black men is that he "returned hero from World War II, with the remains of bullets in his legs" (244). However Terrell's status is never considered a hero by black people. Terrell wants to marry a 16-year-old black girl, Rossel, although he is "as old as her father" (244). There is no romance between Terrell and Rossel to justify this marriage. Rossel only marries him because he is rich: "I'd rather marry the devil than get stuck with any of the stinking jobs" (246). In Rossel's mind Terrell is not a hero, and further is likened to a devil, demonstrating that the title 'hero' carries no meaning. He was a soldier in the army so he had a master to obey. This can be regarded as a form of slavery, as soldiers must follow their superiors and they cannot have their own individuality; as a "slave" in World War II, Terrell obeys his master and risks his life, so his white masters praise him and call him "hero" and bestow him with "polished medals" (244). Yet it is his obedience towards his white master, not his act of heroism that makes him a hero.[16] Perhaps he would be a truer hero if he supported Rossel and made a better life for her rather than simply marrying her for his own gain. The reality is that although he supports her financially, he takes her youth and her endless servitude in return. Therefore, although his prosperity makes him appear different from the other black men in the novel, in reality, like the others, he wants to take advantage of women and dominate

[16] It is worth noting that even during The Second World War the segregation of troops was controversial. Race issues and problems of fighting the "white man's war" persisted, leading to a renewal of propaganda efforts encouraging African-American recruitment, such as *The Negro Soldier*, a film by Stuart Heisler (1944).

them. His affluence encourages black women, like Rossel, to effectively sell their bodies and lives to him. The other difference between Terrell and characters such as Grange and Brownfield is that he thinks that he is in some respects superior to other black men. Fooled by the title of 'hero', he does essentially what white society did to black women in terms of slavery.

Such is the bewilderment of the black men in the novel that they find leaving their own land the only possible way to get rid of their problems. The black men in this novel find travelling their only chance to escape. Yet journeys of the male characters do not bring them peace of mind. The depiction of men in *The Third Life* might be seen as the early influence of male African-American authors on Walker, such as Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison, two prominent African-American novelists who mainly explored black men's lives in their works. In Ellison's most notable work, *Invisible Man,* the protagonist retreats to the basement of his house. This invisibility is also traced in Walker's first novel; both Grange and Brownfield run away from a legacy slavery and want to find a secure place to inhabit. Above all, they want to be rid of their families and everything which reminds them of their social responsibilities as fathers or husbands. They want to make their own choices and be masters of their own lives, which sends them searching for psychological and physical peace. Grange escapes from racist society, but even in the north he is not seen as a respectable human being. In *The Third Life*, Grange's journeys are much shorter than those of the Invisible Man. While Grange's journeys end when he finds out that the North does not offer him a better life, the Invisible Man continues his journey; throughout the novel he is always about to start a new one, which is always to a new place, as he never returns to a place he has already visited. The cycle of the Invisible Man's journeys is much wider and broader than Grange's, as it encompasses different geographical and spiritual elements; however, the common thread of these journeys is that neither Grange

nor the Invisible Man can find their ideal – or anything resembling their ideal – place or "home".

While in the North Grange observes a white couple in a park who are ending their relationship. When the woman, who is pregnant, is abandoned by her partner she clashes with Grange and despite being in the depths of despair, she nevertheless feels superior to a black man, calling him 'nigger'. When the clash happens between Grange and the white woman, she falls down and accidentally slips into an icy pond which she cannot climb out of, and dies. Even when she is about to drown, her arrogance prevents her from taking his hand (201). Walker very skilfully draws the story to this significant moment when a black and white hand touch each other and linger for a few seconds, demonstrating a very simple and basic human instinct: living and helping to live. "She reached up and out with a small white hand that grabbed his hand but let go when she felt it was *his* hand" (201).

The fear of contact and crossing the 'colour line' is noteworthy here. The rest of the story, which is the beginning of the third part of Grange's life, is the aftermath of this crucial moment of the novel which results in the white woman's death and Grange's complete hatred of all white people. Both Grange and the white woman are at fault: the woman's mistake is to refuse Grange's help and Grange's failure is his refusal to attempt to save her a second time. Grange "faced his refusal to save her squarely" (201). As soon as the woman releases his hand, realising that it is a black man's hand, both of them become typical of their respective societies; the white woman feels that it is demeaning to be saved by a 'nigger'. He realises that white people view him as mean; he draws back "his dirty brown hand and look[s] at it" (201), recognising that a white person would reject him, even at such a crucial moment. Her death is symbolic. This woman's identity is not revealed anywhere in the novel. So not only does Grange unintentionally end the white woman's life, an unborn child is also not to be brought

into the world. Since pregnancy indicates birth and life, by letting the woman slip away, Grange imagines that he is actually murdering all white people, including their future generations.

This moment turns out to be crucial in determining his life path. The death of a white person brings a new idea, which is that even white people are fragile, so consequently he believes that their power and dominance can be abolished. He wants all black people to be united and fight against white people, saying: "Don't teach'em [black people] to *love them!* ... Hatred for them [white people] will someday unite us" (203). He utters these words after disrupting services at the store front churches. Letting the women die causes Grange to impulsively speak out in public like a leader of people.

The death of the white woman is a turning point in Grange's life and causes a significant transformation in him; from this stage on he is filled with purpose and attempts to achieve his goals. This incident fuels him with enough hatred to carry on; he now wants to get rid of all white people and begins abhorring them, and right up to the end of the novel he cannot help but be consumed with hatred. However he knows that he cannot "fight all the whites he meets. For the time being, he would withdraw completely from them make a life that need not acknowledge them" (205). "The next stage of Copeland's transformation," Kelly writes, "begins when he stops hating altogether and decides to simply ignore white people" (172). However, it is more a case of Grange being so consumed by hatred that he can never think of anything else but hatred.[17] If he wants to ignore whites, there would be no point in his teaching his granddaughter, Ruth, and black people in general to fight against white people. The reality is that Grange is determined to defeat what he experiences as the rule of tyranny by white people and wishes to unite all black people. He begins practising this ideology by training Ruth

[17] In his review of the novel, Robert Coles proposes the same idea as Kelly: "Grange finds at last – in his third life, as an exile returned home – the freedom he has asked for" (106). The question is, how can he be free when he is filled with such hatred and rage?

to be aware of the danger that white power presents. This all goes to prove that Grange never stops loathing the power of white people, right up to his death.

Grange's goal, however difficult and single minded, recalls an important historical phenomenon, the Black Abolitionist Movement, which was an anti-slavery cause and founded mainly by black people. "Of the 450 subscribers", John Hope Franklin writes, "in the first year, 400 were blacks" (200). Obviously black people were considerably active in this movement and they played an important role in organising the movement's main body, the American Anti-Slavery Society. Likewise in the novel, Grange wants to be the founder of a movement against the ongoing legacies of slavery by uniting all black people to fight, while wanting the same for himself personally, that is, his own freedom and peace of mind.

Although the novel's setting and Abolitionism occurred in two different periods of time, they do share common points. Both the Abolitionists' and Grange's aims are to end slavery and a slave mentality, and they want equality between blacks and whites. In the story there is no trace of white people supporting Grange's ideology, while in the Abolitionist Movement there were a number of prominent white people who were actively supporting and leading it such as William Lloyd Garrison who, in *Liberator*, an anti-slavery newspaper, wrote: "I do not wish to think, or speak, or write, with moderation. . . . I am in earnest -- I will not equivocate -- I will not excuse -- I will not retreat a single inch -- AND I WILL BE HEARD" (Garrison). This white man's position could describe Grange's own decision and his attitude toward his newly found ideology. He too is 'earnest' and serious in his thoughts and he certainly wants to be 'HEARD', as he preaches loudly at the store front church. Yet Grange's ideology and single-minded focus brings hazards with it. In her review of the novel, Josephine Hendin argues, "Miss Walker disappoints by explaining Grange's conversion in political clichés. Has any man's soul ever been healed by politics?" (5). Politics, however, has healed Grange in this sense that in his third part of his life his viewpoint toward women has radically changed.

Eventually, Grange backs down, as he is genuinely alone within his society – except for his relationship with Ruth, whom he is training. She eagerly follows the news on television, and sometimes discusses it with Grange. She is one of the first black women in the Copeland family, and even in the black community in the novel, who will play a significant role in promoting black people's second emancipation. As Susan Willis in "Walker's Women" writes, "The novel ends on a note of affirmation — but not without uncertainty over the shape of the future. Ruth, Grange's granddaughter, is an adolescent and her future as well as that of the post -Civil Rights black community in the South cannot yet be told, but is, like the sixteen-year-old Ruth, on the threshold of its becoming" (88). While *The Third Life* ends with Ruth at the beginning of her path towards being an activist, Walker continues Ruth's journey in her next novel, by way of Meridian's life. As argued further below, this marks a shift in Walker's novels as she shifts from constructing the male protagonist in *The Third Life* to creating the female protagonist in *Meridian*.

Grange has made an intelligent choice by starting his project of emancipation with little Ruth. Ruth is an important part of his plan because he wants to teach future generations that white people are evil. She is his best choice to start his project as it appears she will be indoctrinated into hating them. When Grange stops preaching at store front churches, he begins his own speech with the words, "What I say is brang it out in the open and teach it to the young 'uns. If you teach it to them young, they won't have to learn it in the school of the hard knock" (204).[18] And indeed Ruth seems more than ready to take up his case: "I'd be bored stiff waiting for black folks to rise up so I could join them. Since I am already ready to rise up and they ain't, it seems to me I should rise up first and let them follow me" (252).

[18] This is the beginning of the preaching theme in Walker's works, a motif repeated in in her later works, as discussed later in the thesis. The peak of this trend can be observed in *By the Light of My Father's Smile*.

The hatred shown towards him by whites is subconsciously passed on by him to all the black people around him; he thinks of nothing but hatred. Indeed, *The Third Life* explores how hatred is destructive and defeats Grange.[19] He declares a war against all white people around him, acting out the role of general to Ruth and expecting her to obey him as his soldier. As part of Ruth's education he suggests that she spy on some 'white people' (181). They "lay concealed behind some bushes and on their side of the fence" (232) as if stalking their enemies; he even pushes Ruth down so she will not be seen by them. Grange turns his life into a battleground and trains Ruth to become his soldier. Grange feels safe in his own house, treating his house and his land as his territory where he can feel free. This is a classic motif in African-American writing, where heroes and heroines retreat into a space which is outside society at large.[20] Although Grange and the Invisible Man both inhabit a kind of 'neutral space', they are facing different situations. The scope of the term 'neutral space' is considerable here, as both Grange and Invisible Man are in two different kinds of 'neutral space': Invisible Man does not have any sense of belonging, while Grange does. Grange returns to the South, bound only to his own house and preferring not to have any interaction with the world outside. This separates him from the Southern community, his house becomes a space which is, on the one hand, isolated from the Southern society that surrounds it and, on the other hand, still different from the North. Therefore within the boundary of his house, he is neither in the North, nor really in the South –it is a space of his own construction and determination- it "enclose[s] freedom" (252).

The other difference between the status of their 'neutral place' is that Grange does not want to initiate another journey, while the Invisible Man does. Grange wants to train Ruth to

[19] The notion of hatred is a common motif in Walker's works as Meridian hates her mother in *Meridian*, Celie hates men in *The Color Purple*, Tashi hates the dominant thought of the society she lives in, in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, and Maggie despises of her father in *By the light of My Father's Smile*. All of these points have a considerable influence on each character's female bonding which will be discussed in the later sections of the thesis.

[20] See Valerie Smith on the world of "garret Spaces" in *Self-discovery and Authority in Afro-American Narrative*: pp. 15-44

follow his ideology and assures her that she will inherit his property and be free as well. He says to Ruth, "When I die this farm ain't going to be nobody's but yours. I done paid for it with every trick I had. The fence we put up around it will enclose freedom you can be sure of, long as you ain't scared of holding the gun. The gun is important. For I don't know love works on everybody. A little love, a little buckshot, that's how I'd say handle yourself" (252). Throughout the novel, Grange refers to the farm as a place where Ruth can find 'freedom', although it is worth stressing that this does not equate with peace, as Ruth should always be holding 'the gun'.

The connection between security, property and power is noteworthy here, as Grange is secure and authoritative in his own property, thus relating this space to the notion of masculinity. Owning land, having a proper job and having financial independence in dominant ideological frameworks bring authority to men, and so this territory helps him to feel like a 'proper man'. This feeling of security and power only applies within Grange's own property, however, not to the society in which he lives. His power is recognised only within the boundary of his house. Neither belonging to the South nor to the North, he feels dominant in this space and demonstrates his dominance through his teaching of Ruth. Within this relationship Grange feels more knowledgeable than Ruth and in turn, Ruth sees Grange as a person who possesses knowledge. Through Ruth, Grange can earn the respect he could not earn from Brownfield. Grange imagines he empowers his sense of masculinity. However, all that Grange wants to bestow upon Ruth is a farm and a gun: This is all the elder of the Copeland family offers the youngest. By implication, in Grange's ideology the next generation should fight to take revenge on white people, who he calls 'crackers' (4). He is more obsessed with hatred than love; in the first and second parts of his life, he hates himself, and in the third part, he hates white people. Throughout the whole novel Grange is always in a war, and at the end he is shot dead by his enemies, in this case, by white people. The end of the novel demonstrates that his theory that

"The gun is important" (252) does not actually work, ironically as his own gun did not protect him.

In the third part of his life, Grange seems like a caring grandfather to Ruth, but in his mind he is still bound by his former situation, as he still hates whites and their power and wants to take revenge on them. Lawrence Hogue writes that, "to live his 'third life', Grange returns South where things are different: he has psychological freedom. The soul searching, life experiences outside the South, and educational exposure allow him to define himself outside the dominant myths, conventions, and stereotypes" (Hogue 13). While Hogue has a point, Grange in fact never feels free, as in the third part of his life he asserts that, "The white folks hated me and I hated myself until I started hating them in return and loving myself. Then I tried just loving you [Ruth], and *ignoring* them as much as I could" (252). Grange is still in a mental battle, and as long as he is in this battle he cannot understand the concept of freedom. He is still trapped by the "dominant myths, conventions, and stereotypes" even in his later attitude towards white people. He may shift from inwardly-directed hatred towards outwardly-directed anger, but his ideology remains grounded in an oppositional and fundamentally divisive rhetoric. Grange dies with this battle still going on in his mind, so he never experiences a genuine freedom—his psychic and personal internalization of slavery's legacies remain dominant. However, his attitude toward women changes, as he bestows all of his attention on Ruth and wants every success for her. It is also through supporting Ruth that he is able to have a more balanced sense of his masculinity.

The Third Life presents us with the microcosm of a black family and its problems. Brownfield like his father, battles with the bitter facts of his life and he never succeeds in experiencing freedom and peace. Kate Cochran in "When the Lesson Hurt" points out: "Grange's rage against whites leads him to self-segregation, Brownfield's unfocused rage renders him a personification of bitterness" (83). Brownfield and his father both act and think

along the same lines, and share common troubles. Both escape from reality to try to achieve their dreams somewhere else. Neither can manage their family lives. Brownfield, like Grange, cannot care about his wife and his children - he even sinks to the depth of killing his wife, Mem.

These three stages of Grange's life reveal that he is, like the other black male characters in the novel, unsuccessful in this pursuit of masculine identity in white dominated society. His response is to escape from real life, and this tendency to desire escape, or to 'fly away' from a dire situation, is one of the core themes that crosses gender distinctions in a range of African-American writings, persisting to the present day (and in adaptations to film narratives, given the more recent example of the African American female characters' fantasy escape sequences marking for example Sapphire's *Push* (1996) and the film version by Lee Daniels, *Precious* (2009)). Escape is tempting, but the resultant invisibility can have a negative effect. Subjects are removed from social reality, so they become unable to face the problems in their lives, resulting in frequent failure and dissatisfaction.

African-American Women and the Lingering Impact of Slavery

Although in *The Third Life,* the main focus is on males and their need to achieve their own identity and self-respect, women and their relationships are also considered in depth. As black men in this novel are either absent, or dysfunctional if they are present, they fail to fulfil to the demand of supporting their families' needs. Therefore black women have to take on these responsibilities instead, and, in doing so, they struggle to survive throughout the novel, as demonstrated by the character of Mem. Because their minds are fully occupied by survival, a sort of self-imposed solipsistic state ensues, where they concentrate on themselves rather than asking for help from others. The sense of co-operation and support within the black community is therefore missing and, as a result, the female characters of the novel cannot have productive relationships with men nor with women. As Walker notes, "women and how they are treated colors everything" (qtd. in O'Brien 197). Female connection is viewed from two different

perspectives in the novel: firstly, how men's absence and irresponsibility affects it; and secondly, how women help or hamper each other in forging spaces for personal actualisation and social engagement.

Female-Male Relationships

In this novel, men do not consider their wives as equal partners, they only want them to acquiesce. Women are accepted only when they are maternal figures; otherwise they are rejected. Grange's wife, Margaret, and Mem are the two women that conform to this pattern. Throughout the novel, Margaret is only valued as a maternal figure, as she devotes herself to serving her children and her husband and complacently obeys Grange. "He [Brownfield] thought his mother was like their dog in some ways. She didn't have a thing to say that did not in some way show her submission to his father" (5). Margaret works hard and always bows to Grange's commands. "Margaret's murder and suicide," Trudier Harris writes, "are not defiance; they are a bow of defeat, a resignation to the forces outside. She is destroyed by forces that have dissolved her family" (246). After Grange's departure, her life becomes meaningless and she takes to walking the streets. Identifying with his father, Brownfield wants Mem to follow the command of her husband, just as his mother did. However, Mem is educated and more intelligent than Brownfield, and she cannot accept this stereotype; therefore Brownfield, throughout the novel, degrades her by laughing at her in public and attempting to destroy her self-confidence.[21] A harsh man, Brownfield cannot bear her dignified composure, so he objects to whatever she suggests. Mem wants a better life for the whole family and in achieving her goal she works hard, but Brownfield refuses her ideas and downgrades her work, consequently placing himself and the family in trouble. If he could consider Mem as an equal partner, he and the family could benefit from Mem's support. Brownfield threatens Mem:

> "I don't want any lip from you!"

[21] This is actually what Harpo in *The Color Purple* does to Sofia and none of them are successful in achieving any power throughout the two novels. See my discussion of *The Color Purple*.

> "I already told you," she said, "you ain't dragging me and these children through no more pigpens. We have put up with mud long enough. I want Daphne [their daughter] to be young lady where there is other decent folks around, not out here in the sticks on some white man's property like in slavery times. I want Ornett [their other daughter] to have a chance at a decent school. And little baby Ruth," she said wistfully, "I don't even want her to know there is such a thing as outdoor toilets". (110)

Mem stands against Brownfield rather sitting back and letting him ruin the lives of the children and her own. She autonomously states that she wants a better life for them. The difference between Mem and Brownfield is that Mem understands that slavery has ended and that she deserves a better life, while Brownfield is still mentally enslaved and, because he is oppressed in society, wants Mem to be submissive as it would make him feel powerful and masculine, at least in his own house. Reinforcing this idea in her discussion of masculine identity, Carolyn Heilbrun argues that often, "Men come to women looking for "narcissistic" phallic reassurance, not for intimacy, or companionship, or love" (33). Brownfield wants to affirm his masculine presence in the household so he can assume the position of power within his territory. Mem does not tolerate this, and so Brownfield murders Mem even though he loves her. According to Wrong, his "wagging tongue" (193), or his constant demand to be heard for control, has destroyed him.

Brownfield's decisions and his failures lead the family into a downward spiral. The result of killing Mem brings massive repercussions and he is sentenced to seven years in jail. Both Margaret and Mem are sacrificed by their lost men. The lack of masculine security in Grange and Brownfield shadows their family lives; their wives are the first losers, followed by their children. In this novel, female connections and bonds are not explored in any great detail; although Margaret is Mem's mother-in-law, they have no contact with one another due to both

suffering under the patriarchal structures imposed upon them by their husbands. In some of Walker's later works female bonds are stronger and more functional. For example, in *The Color Purple*, Celie and Shug share the same partner, Albert, but through their strong bond and mutual help, they succeed in overcoming this problem. Also, in another of Walker's later novels, *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, Olivia makes strenuous attempts to help Tashi with her troubles and hardships, although she is unable to achieve much. It seems that the idea of female bonding in Walker's novels grows gradually across her canon of works. In her earliest works such as *The Third Life* and *Meridian*, Walker hardly considers this point. However, in her later works, female bonding becomes a main theme. One of the reasons for this may be that, in her earlier works, Walker was more strongly under the influence of male authors such as Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright, as discussed elsewhere here, but subsequently, as she grew as an author in her own right, becomes more preoccupied with female connections and friendships.

One further woman in *The Third Life* whose destiny is significantly affected by men is Josie, Mem's aunt. Throughout the novel she searches for love, which she never finds. She is desperate for a man's love to achieve self-worth, despite already being financially independent and able to provide for herself. She attempts to buy men's affections, solving both Grange's and Brownfield's financial problems, providing them with shelter, with the expectation of possessing these males. Hogue writes:

> Despite the fact that she is constantly abused, misused, and abandoned, Josie is still able to care, to exhibit human qualities. After Brownfield kills her niece, she still visits him in prison. And even after Grange abandons her for Ruth, she still defends his honor to Brownfield. She is able still to "love in spite of all that had gone wrong in her life" (Hogue 58).

She refuses to accept that the men she sleeps with do not love her, but her money. The other point that Hogue raises is that Josie has been "abused and abandoned" by Grange, but that, "she still defends his honor". However, it is arguable that, rather than defending Grange's honour, Josie's defence of Grange is an expression of yearning for his love. In her eyes, receiving love and being accepted by men is the ultimate achievement; Josie is actually searching for the love and affection that her father denied her. To regain her father's attention, Josie spends her money, earned from running her hotel, on buying him gifts, but she can never win back his love. As she has never been approved of by her father, and she constantly seeks other men's love and approval.

In her first female-male relationship, which is with her father, Josie has a very miserable experience. She is rejected by him and deprived of his support; at the age of 16 she is raped by him and, subsequently, he refuses to let her stay in his house as if it were her fault. This represents a significant event in her life in that she is both raped and ignored by the first man in her life: the man who is supposed to protect her. In the 16-year-old Josie's mind, and in most narrative standards, her father should be a strong, hero-like figure; however, he destroys her; she is so traumatised that she cannot even "say his name" (49), nor talk about it with anyone, even Sister Madeline, at her church, from whom she asks for help (48). She says to Sister Madeline that "he rides me" (48). This situates her as inferior to her father. He rapes her to impose authority and masculine power upon Josie. A similar paternal rape takes place with Pecola in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, where the victim is also blamed. Pecola's mother accuses her of being pregnant and targets her as the one who is at fault. However, in *The Third Life*, Josie's mother lacks sufficient autonomy and is absolutely submissive to Josie's father: "Her mother was a meek woman, and though she rarely agreed with Josie's father she never argued with him" (51). Walker adopts a milder approach with the mother in comparison to Morrison's characterisation of Pecola's mother. Walker here highlights how Josie's father is

irresponsible and insensitive about what he has done to Josie. Not only has he raped her, he has implanted the notion that she is at fault for her "swollen body" (52). She is an "Overturned pregnant turtle underneath her father's foot. He pressed his foot into her shoulder." Josie herself internalises that it was actually her fault that she was unable to prevent the rape, and believes her father is correct to be angry with her. Therefore, she attempts to win back her father's affection: she asks "you want some of this, Pa? You want some of that?" (51). In one way, her kindness towards him legitimises her father's unforgiveable act and gives him more power and rights to demean Josie, to belittle her in her own eyes as well as those of others. When people around him (apparently his friends) want to help her, he says: "Let her be. I hear she can do *tricks* on her back like that" (53). While *The Bluest Eye* accentuates the mother's dysfunctionality in her attitude towards her daughter, *The Third Life* portrays the idea that the mother herself is a plaything in the father's hands. Josie is left alone with the sense of guilt that she could have prevented the rape, that she deserves her fate.

Raped by her father and later having sex with other men, the novel perhaps obviously does not mention whether Josie experiences sexual pleasure. Such pleasure plays a very significant role in women's self-realisation in Walker's later works, such as *The Color Purple*, *The Temple of My Familiar* and *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. For instance, in *The Color Purple*, even though Celie is raped by her stepfather and her husband, Shug tells her "you are still a virgin." Since she has not experienced sexual pleasure. Josie's inability to win back her father's love leads her to other men, to fill the gap that her father created. She sees herself as a fat, ugly girl whom no one loves, and considers herself unworthy of respect; when Brownfield shows her respect by telling her "yessem" (43), she says: "No need to yessem me," she said lazily. "The name is Josie. Fat Josie" (43).

The women in *The Third Life* are suffering from a lack of autonomy. Josie's mother is, like Margaret, also a dependent woman who seeks a man's support. The difference between

Josie and her mother is that she craves a man's love and is determined to achieve this at any cost, while her mother cannot be bothered to try. As long as she can survive and she has somewhere to live, she is happy. But as Josie was deprived of her basic needs in life, like a home and a father's love, she learned that she had to fight for her needs. Throughout the novel she is always proactive--fighting to win a man's love and attention, and this active desire differentiates her from her mother. However, none of these women truly realise their own individuality as black women, and instead only seek recognition in the company of men. The only positive outcome of Josie's first relationship with a man is the power to fight, but even this is used in a negative way that saps all her energy and enthusiasm, as she ultimately never wins her fight. Unlike Josie, Mem has the power to fight and wants to use this power to keep her individuality. She knows her value and does not need this to be recognised through a relationship with a man. As a strong woman, she wants a comfortable life for her family, including Brownfield and their children. Yet as a strong woman, she is punished for her sense of self-determination.

The novel presents these heterosexual relationships as failing to provide black women with their own sense of individuality and senses of self-worth. Such relationships worsen their situation and degrade their senses of their own humanity. They prevent black women from achieving their individuality and independence; even strong women like Mem and Josie, who are able to fight, end up as losers in the novel because of the dysfunctional female-male relationships. These women could lead their families out of their dire situations, as Mem tries to do, but are provided neither with the opportunity nor support to do so.

Female-Female Relationships and Lack of Autonomy

Female relationships are totally affected by the dominant patriarchal thought of the society presented in the novel. Accordingly, women should spend most of their time serving their families and working, despite their husbands seeming to avoid work. Because these women do not feel secure in society (being doubly oppressed) they feel they cannot trust other women.

Since the ability to win a man's love is considered the chief value of women, female characters of the novel tend to see each other as rivals rather than comrades. As a result, despite receiving nothing from men, they nevertheless tend to develop heterosocial, rather that homosocial relationships, silently believing that men are more powerful than they are and that they can find peace in male company. Margaret, the first woman to be introduced in the novel, is fully submissive to Grange. Margaret is very delicate and beautiful, yet she sacrifices these virtues for Grange. "Her skin was rich brown with a creamy reddish sheen. Her teeth were small and regular and her breath was always sweet with a milky cleanness. [Her hands were] long, thin, aristocratic with fingers meant for jewels. [She] had no wedding ring, however" (6). With such fingers "she work[s] all day pulling [fish] baits for ready money" (6), for her husband. In return, Grange wants to sell his wife "to get [himself] out of debt" (11). Therefore, Grange is actually using Margaret as bait and she spends the whole day trying to help him financially. However, Grange does not pay any attention to her. Margaret works all day during the week and at the weekends she is left alone at home. By the time Grange comes home, he is drunk and often threatens to kill her (14). As stated, Brownfield observes his mother's submission to Grange and sees her "as a dog in some ways" (5). There are no other women around to whom she can turn her for help. Although Margaret has a sister in the North who has a good life, she never receives any help or support from her –the South/North divide is not easily bridged.

Throughout the novel, women are not willing or able to develop any kind of female bonding relationships, although they are all considered to be outsiders in the black male community. As Heilbrun says: "Outsiders, however, may gain strength in their reaction to exclusion if they bond among themselves, offering each other comradeship, encouragement, protection, support" (38). This is not the case here. The few female connections depicted in the novel are instead rivalries concerning the winning of a man's love. For example, Josie is jealous of Margaret, Mem, and little Ruth, for their relationships for Grange and Brownfield. Every

one of these women is able to attract a man's attention, even for a short time, while Josie never achieves this. In order to find some worth in men's eyes, she attempts to degrade other women, as with Margaret and Mem. She tells Brownfield that the only reason Grange's family forced him to marry Margaret was 'a unused pussy' (81). She also gossips about Mem, and wants Brownfield to think that she is not faithful to him. Through the degradation of other women she aims to make herself more important. As such, Mem, Josie's niece, is not immune to her hurtful behaviour. However this female rivalry neither improves Josie's reputation nor degrades her targets. Both Grange and Brownfield, at least once each throughout the novel, express their love for their wives – albeit only after their deaths.

The inadequacy of mother-daughter connections in this novel all stems from the dysfunctionality of black males. They either prevent black women from asserting their own voices and individuality or ignore them as if to show that they are not worthy enough to live with them. The mother-daughter relationships in the novel are revealed to be insufficiently functional. As the mothers spend most of their time struggling to survive, this leaves them unable to shoulder their maternal responsibilities. There are three mother-daughter relationships in the novel: Josie and her mother, Josie and her daughter, and Mem and her daughters. As mentioned earlier, Josie's mother is a dependent character. Her mother's behaviour can, however, be viewed from a different angle; a black woman who is doubly oppressed in society, who lives with the sole aim of survival, cannot be confident enough to help her daughter. She is desperately in need of somebody to help her break free of a cycle of oppressive circumstances: unable to help herself, she cannot support her daughter.

Having never experienced a functional mother-daughter relationship, Josie cannot act as a responsible mother to her own daughter, Lorene. She never pays any attention to her own daughter, just as her mother behaved towards her. There is no conversation between them and the only time that she holds her close is when she wants to introduce Lorene to Brownfield.

She does not even show kindness as she "pull[s] her unwillingly and muscle[s] her arm close beside her, holding it in a pinch" (43). It is clear enough that there is no love between them, so the only possible reason that Josie introduces her to Brownfield is because of her own issues; she wants to see if her daughter is able to attract a man's attention. She uses Lorene simply to get an answer to her question as to why she is not loved by men; thereby demonstrating that her relationship with her daughter is also affected by her desire to be loved. The significant point about Josie's character is that she is keen on pursuing love, but without any clear understanding of what it is. No one has ever shown her love, not her family nor the people around her. With this in mind, she is unable to share love that she has been deprived of, with Lorene or anyone else. Besides, what she needs from love is protection, rather than romance. This is exactly what Meridian perceives love to be in Walker's second novel, which is discussed later in the second chapter.

The other negative aspect of these mother-daughter relationships, then, is that the daughters perpetuate their mothers' attitudes and beliefs; they do what their mothers teach them; just as Josie does not receive any love from her mother, she does not show any love for Lorene. Mem is the exception to the above cycles, differentiated from Josie and her mother in that she believes in her abilities and fights for her rights, whereas Josie's mother is a submissive character who assumes that she can only survive under her husband's dominance, while Josie, though independent of a husband, is a neglectful mother. Throughout the novel Mem attempts to make a good life for her family, but she fails in this as she is hampered by her husband. Though she does not have much time to spend with her children, Ruth takes a positive influence from her mother in that she wishes to carry through her own life. As Mem fights for her individuality and freedom, Ruth does the same.

The third generation of the Copeland family includes three girls: Ruth and her two sisters. This component of the novel reveals Walker's own interest in female empowerment.

The future of the family will be made by the decisions of these girls, so they will be in effect writing their own history. This notion also continues in Walker's second novel *Meridian,* in which the heroine is an activist in the Civil Rights Movement. As Walker's work reflects, in US history black men have long been treated as slaves, even after the end of slavery. In *The Third Life*, the black men are so fragile that they want to rid themselves of any responsibilities and pressures. This is down to the fact that they have been overburdened as a social group historically, and have now become 'crackers', as suggested by Brownfield's cousins (4). The description also fits Grange's thoughts and actions perfectly, as he is always carrying a gun to protect himself and is ready to fight, even when there is nobody to hurt him. Advising Ruth to carry a gun contradicts his wish to provide her with security (252). Grange is a man who wants to regain his sense of masculine power and he believes he can partly achieve this by holding a gun, but ultimately this does not guarantee anyone security. The gun is associated masculinity, but also with killing; it symbolises conflict, and clearly there is no peace in conflict. Keeping a gun does not even save his life, as he is (ironically perhaps) shot dead at the end of the novel. Walker's message, even early in her publishing career, suggests that to seek power and violence is to be locked in a self-destructive cycle –a cycle of both cultural and familial violence. It is up to the women in her works to seek an alternative route towards freedom.

Ruth's childhood is spent with her mother and her other two sisters, except for only a very short period of time, earlier in her childhood, which she spends with her father. Her childhood relationships do not include many male-female connections, until Grange comes into her life and becomes her support and surrogate father. After her mother's death, her life lacks female connection as her sisters are sent to the North and she lives with Grange. To fill this gap she attempts to approach Rossel, a black girl in her school, whose mother is dead and father an alcoholic. Albeit very short, this connection is nevertheless significant, as it is the only female bonding throughout the novel in which Ruth chooses to engage. Although Rossel is "the only

instance of one at school she likes" (243), Ruth has only spoken to her once, and for a short time. Ruth and Rossel are two black girls in similar situations; both are deprived of parental support and have older men to support them, as Ruth is supported by Grange, and Rossel is about to marry an older man who is "the richest black man in the country" (244). The difference between them is the extent to which they attempt to find their own sense of place in their social milieu and to achieve their independence. If they became friends, they could support each other and this bonding could lead them to finding their own identities as individual black women. This point is developed and explored more fully in Walker's later novels, such as *The Color Purple*, in which different female friendships help Celie to assert her own voice in society. However, in this novel, the bonding between Ruth and Rossel is only briefly explored. A lack of female bonding in this novel is significant, partly because Walker wants to show how black women are marginalised in society, through black men, whose decisions determine how black women live. Further, her idea of 'womanism' and female bonding are not fully developed at this stage.

The only time Ruth talks with Rossel is at a graduation ceremony, after which Ruth meets her and "impulsively" calls Rossel by name (244). The reason she does this is because it is the first time in her life that she is trying to make friends with someone; neither her mother, nor her father, had any friends, and as a consequence she has no knowledge of how to befriend anyone herself. However, the way that she approaches her is odd; although they are the same age, Ruth starts the conversation in a very formal, rather than friendly, manner. Her embarrassment in making a friend for the first time is quite clear in that she asks for permission to talk to her; it seems that Ruth is about to conduct a business conversation, not to chat with someone she likes. Part of her embarrassment can be linked to the fact that Rossel is about to marry Walt Terrel, which makes Rossel different from the other girls. It is the potential friendship that matters to Ruth. It is important to talk to her now because she sees Rossel's

marriage as an obstacle to this friendship, and although she has never talked to her before, she is happy that she has a friend in mind. She wants to talk to Rossel just to change her mind about marrying Walt Terrel. "'Why you going to marry *him*?' she managed to blurt out finally" (246). Both girls ask about each other's partners, which implies their disinterest in each other as individuals. Rossel calls her "Mrs. Grange" (245), although she knows that her name is Ruth. Both girls thus reveal the degree to which they are entrenched in society's assumed patriarchal rules, ignoring a woman's individuality, presuming that they are, and will be, devoted to a man and defined by their relation to him. On the one hand, Ruth is dependent upon Grange's love and support, but she wants to find her identity and her own way of life – as previously discussed. On the other hand, Rossel is going to be a devoted wife, completely dependent on her rich husband, so that she can rid herself of any "stinking jobs". Neither Ruth nor Rossel continue their friendship after this conversation. This is how the only potential site of female bonding of the novel plays out, because of male dominancy and female dependency. Ruth, finally, is the only female in the novel who seeks independence and self-fulfilment.

As the most significant girl of the third generation, Ruth has many outstanding characteristics. One is her possession of a power to stand against oppression and violence. She reveals this on several occasions throughout the novel – as the youngest child of the family, when her father beats Mem, she stands up to him, telling him in her baby-like language: "you nothing but a sonnabit" (143). As fathers can be intimidating figures in a girl's life, through standing up to Brownfield, Ruth shows her intolerance towards violence and oppression. Through this one act, she learns in the early stages of her life that she can stand up to anyone and although she will receive some "hard blows", as she received from her father, she does not creep through a world of silence as the older generation does. Ruth retains this attitude as she grows up, for example standing up to Mrs. Grayson, who downgrades black people in her teaching of history. Ruth insults her: "You goddam mean evil *stupid* motherfucker" (240). This

time her outburst is longer than when she was just a child standing against her father; she is out in the real world and at a school where the dominant social ideology, and a dominant version of history, is taught and practised. Standing up to her teacher, who preaches this ideology, means standing up to the ideology itself, and the way it is managed and perpetuated. She also wants to understand these issues before making any judgments; when Grange asks her to accept that the white men in their neighbourhood are after Grange's farm, Ruth does not believe him straight away (226). As a young black girl, Ruth is so fearless and brave that she disagrees with, and stands up to, anyone she feels is morally in the wrong. Another outstanding point about this character is that, throughout the novel, she demands that others call her by her name, not by her nickname or anything else that she deems unacceptable. For instance, on one occasion she wants Grange to call her by her name and not as "my granddaughter" (180), and, on another occasion, she reminds Rossel of her first name (245). This demonstrates the extent to which Ruth is concerned with her desire not to replicate the social deficiencies of the past: she has such strong sense of identity that she does not even let her grandfather, who is certainly the kindest person in her life, call her by anything other than her first name. This brave female figure represents the third generation of the Copeland family. She wants to travel and improve her knowledge of the world before making any judgement or influencing any other people. In the final sections of the novel Ruth becomes aware of the Civil Rights Movement (240), which conforms with her own determination to stand up to violence and to seek a greater understanding of these life altering issues. The story of Meridian could be seen as the continuation of Ruth's journey in search of herself.

Conclusion

To conclude, this novel accentuates the significance of the legacies of slavery on African-American families. Being emasculated by white society, African-American men want to regain their sense of masculine control in the most immediate ways possible, in this case within their families. And so they impress a code of silence on their family members, effectively treating

their wives as absolute slaves; before they abandon them, as Grange did, or kill them, like Brownfield. This can be the result of an internalised oppression that the society imposed upon black men. Since these men find it impossible to change this way of life, they tend to escape from reality into a dream world, on in which they can achieve their ambitions. Their tendency to be 'invisible' in society is an even bigger danger, not only for themselves but also for their families. Rejecting reality makes them unable to accept their situation, so inevitably they make decisions that lead them into a downward spiral. The devastating effect of their escape from this situation leads the family to even greater problems, as the dejected women need to maintain their basic needs in a society where black women are suffering from the double effects of racism and sexism.

Consequently all of the women in this novel try their hardest to gain a man's company. They wholeheartedly embrace the role of mammy figures, as Margaret does. Moreover, as they consider themselves worthless; women are not willing or able to enter into female bonds that might make them mutually stronger. Women like Josie waste their lives searching for a man's love; they even reject female companionship in pursuit of this. The more Josie begs for love, the more she loses her dignity. Therefore women in the novel try to achieve their sense of worth and position in the world through a female-male relationship, or their lives cease to hold any meaning, as with Margaret after Grange's departure.

All the above is true for the women of *The Third Life,* with the exception of Ruth. She is the only black female in the novel who experiences a different way of life. She has her grandfather's financial and emotional support which enables her to feel more secure than any other black woman in the novel. Grange even assures her that his land and money will all be hers in the future, enabling Ruth to initiate a different way of life that none of the black women in the novel have experienced, similar to what Virginia Woolf called gaining "A Room of

One's Own".[22] The financial facility that Grange provides Ruth enables her to defy social norms and beliefs. Equally important, Ruth herself also has some unique characteristics that make her different from the other black men and women of the novel: for example, as described earlier, her continued stance against oppression and violence. The youngest member of the Copeland family is in many respects experiencing a different life and she is determined to be recognised as an individual black woman with distinctive beliefs and desires. The last part of Grange's life, which is devoted to serving Ruth, gives hope that there might be an end to the cycle of the suffering of black families. This all depends on Ruth keeping her combative ideology and her sense of individuality alive, the story of which is told in Walker's second novel, *Meridian*, in which the heroine, as a young black woman and an activist, is seeking to achieve her individuality via her distinctive relationship to the politics of both black and white societies. As part of this journey, Meridian develops various helpful female-male and female-female relationships, as discussed in the next chapter.

[22] See Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, especially pp. 45-47 regarding the need for women's financial independence

Chapter Two

Meridian: Walker's First Female Protagonist and the Question of Female Agency

Chapter Abstract

Meridian (1976) deals with the eponymous character's quest for self-realisation. Having endured a dysfunctional relationship with her mother, Meridian finds that the Civil Rights movement fills this maternal gap in her life. The Civil Rights movement gives her an outlet through which she can shout her sorrow. Fighting for the rights of black people gives her a sense of satisfaction, which temporarily heals the wounds created by the relationship with her mother. Also, for the first time in Walker's novels, *Meridian* explores interracial female bonding. This occurs between Meridian and Lynne, a white woman, who are linked by way of Truman, their lover. These two women manage to overcome the conflict between them, wrought by their affection towards Truman, and shift their attention to caring about themselves and their own bond. Although this female friendship is not developed in much detail, its brevity does not overshadow the significance of this bond. Walker's second novel also puts forward the message that a womanist should privilege her self and her desires over the responsibilities that society burdens them with as a mother or wife.

The Dysfunctional Mother-Daughter Relationship

In this novel, Walker in a sense "feminises" history, or presents a feminist history, through showing Meridian's activities within the Civil Rights movement; a political movement commonly considered to be male-dominated, even though there were certainly prominent

female figures such as Rosa Parks and Coretta Scott King.[23] Peter B. Levy has identified the substance of Walker's equation of Civil Rights and feminism. "Black and white female Civil Rights activists," Levy writes, "played a key role in fomenting the rebirth of feminism" (116). The female activists in the movement helped and supported each other. This can be viewed as the ways in which female bonding operated within the movement. However, throughout the novel, there is no firm sisterhood between Meridian and any of her female friends; despite the novel focusing on the role of women and their significance in the movement. Most critics believe that *Meridian* is a novel about the Civil Rights Movement alone.[24] Yet, as Maria Lauret writes, "*Meridian* is perhaps less a novel *about* the Civil Rights era than *of* it" (70). Lauret may well be right since the novel does not explore detailed events of the movement. Instead, it focuses on the influence of the movement on Meridian's life and other characters, such as Truman, who are not active within the movement but are affected indirectly. In this section I would like to focus more on the issue of gender than the movement per se: how does Walker emphasise the importance of women in the movement? And does Meridian help the movement, or is it the movement which helps her to regain her voice and individuality in society?

One of the threads that link the social and personal aspects of Meridian's life is her desire for love, as her family, and particularly her mother, do not give her enough love or attention. Lack of maternal love casts an enormous shadow over her life and it becomes one of the most significant influences on her actions. This maternal affection has been denied to her because she refuses to accept her mother's suggestion that she should believe in a Christian God (17). There is a constant conflict between Meridian and her mother throughout the novel, a conflict which makes their relationship darker and more distressing for them. Adrienne Rich

[23] For further readings please refer to *Civil Rights Movement* by Peter B. Levy, pp.103-120.
[24] See: "Remembering the Dream: Alice Walker's *Meridian* and the Civil Rights Movement" by Roberta M. Henrickson (111-128); "Self in Bloom: Walker's *Meridian*" by Deborah E. McDowell (168-178); ""A Broken and Bloddy Hoop": The Intertextuality of Black Elk Speaks and Alice Walker's *Meridian*" by Anne M. Downey (37-45).

is perhaps a characteristic contemporary voice describing this scenario, articulating her experience of the mother-daughter relationship in this way:

> I entered this as a woman who, born between her mother's legs, has time after time and in different ways tried to return to her mother, to repossess her and be repossessed by her, to find the mutual confirmation from and with another woman that daughters and mothers alike hunger for, pull away from, make possible or impossible for each other. (*Of Woman Born* 218)

The main reason for the conflict between Meridian and her mother is, as Rich describes, Meridian's attempt to rekindle her mother's love and attention. Her mother withdraws her love, in response to her daughter's lack of obedience. Her mother cannot abide her own daughter, who was once a part of herself, disobeying her. Yet on the other hand, Meridian yearns for her mother's love and wants to as Rich suggests above "repossess" her, while wanting her own independence. She wants both to be like, and different from, her mother. "I too shall marry" Rich writes, "have children - but not *like her*. I shall find a way of doing it all differently" (219).

There are also moments in the novel indicating that Meridian is doing exactly what her mother did, but in a *different* way. One such example shows that Meridian is, like her mother, trying to lead people to a better life; her mother was a teacher while Meridian is a worker in the movement. Although the two situations are totally different, they are aiming towards a common goal. A further illustration is that, like her mother, Meridian wants to be faithful in her relationships. Her mother never betrays her husband, although the feelings between them are weak. This is also true in Meridian's case since, although she has several sexual relationships before her life with Eddie, Meridian remains loyal to him as long as they live together. She wants to be like her mother in order to regain her attention and possibly her love.

However, the tension this causes manifests itself as a physical disease, which remain unknown to the readers but plagues Meridian throughout the novel. Meridian admits: "Of course I'm sick. Why else would I spend all this time trying to get well?" (11). This sickness is in at least one respect symbolic, as Meridian wants her mother's love but at the same time she is intimidated by her. In one way, she does whatever she thinks would make her mother happy but in another way she actually thinks differently to her mother. This internal conflict makes Meridian feel sick and she can never rid herself of this feeling. When Truman asks "Do you have a doctor?" (13), Meridian says "I don't need one. I am getting much better *myself* [emphasis added]…" (13). Her internal conflict is manifested physically -she strives to win her mother's love and struggles to get rid of feelings of hatred towards her.

Given the potentially symbolic dimension of Meridian's illness, we can see in *Meridian* the development of a politics grounded in the experiences of the body, in particular the black female body.[25] In *The Color Purple*, it can be observed that masturbation can be a helpful way for Celie, the heroine, to discover more about her own body. As discussed in detail later, it is through knowledge of her own body and the achieving of sexual pleasure that Celie considers herself as a human being who deserves to have the same rights as others. Consequently, exploration of her own body is shown as a means of self-fulfilment. But Meridian never explores her body herself. Neither does she have a female friendship in the manner of Shug and Celie in *The Color Purple*, which is seen to limit her ability to discuss her own body and her sexuality. Deprived of such privileges, she follows the pattern of what others in the novel do. She accepts the standard behaviour of her society and commences a heterosexual relationship without having any clear sense of her own body and her own sexual pleasure. In most of Walker's works, there is often a trajectory towards, or experimentation with,

[25] For an explanation of contemporary feminist "body politics" in Walker's work, see for example Elliot Butler-Evans, *Race, Gender, and Desire*: *Narrative strategies in the fiction of Toni Cade Bambara, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker*; pp. 123-150.

homosexuality in some form, but in *Meridian* this point is not considered. Further, process of presenting the importance of African-American women working and relating together can be observed as her works develop, since in her first work women are marginalised until the very last chapters, and in *Meridian*, we see the process of female self-actualisation magnified, which continues in her later novels as well. The lack of homosexuality in this novel could be seen as a surprise, then, given that Walker introduces Meridian as a revolutionary figure who stands against social norms. She could have been Walker's first character to challenge the socially accepted marginalisation of same-sex relationships.[26]

Wanting to know more about the opposite sex as she has no idea about sexuality and sexual pleasure, Meridian experiences her first sexual relationship with Daxter when she is not even 17, as a first step into adulthood. She does not enter into this new phase of her life as a person looking for sexual satisfaction; instead she copies what other people in the society do, since heterosexuality is recognised as the norm. As her mother is religious, Meridian never talks to her about her sexuality, and, lacking female friends, she is unable to find any other way of being a woman other than by giving up her body to a man. It is worth mentioning that, although this is her first step into adulthood, it does not help her to achieve her sense of individuality. She is not in control of her body, but instead allows it to become an object for male pleasure. Until Meridian finds out about her own body, she cannot be sure whether she actually does prefer a heterosexual relationship. This is connected to the dysfunctional mother-daughter relationship that leads Meridian into a kind of emotional abyss. She does not feel happy in any of her heterosexual relationships, because she is unable to understand what she wants out of sex. She is not seeking pleasure in sex, but "sanctuary", wanting to be secure and protected from the excesses of her mother's wrath (55). As the novel states: "It seemed doubly

[26] Perhaps Walker's own journey of sexual experimentation and liberation is played out in her novels. See "The Evolution of Alice Walker" by Cynthia Cole Robinson.

unfair that after all her sexual "experience" and after one baby and one abortion she had not once been completely fulfilled by sex" (112). She is giving her body and her soul to male partners, seeking a substitute for motherly love and attention in return. This represents a void in her life that she is unable to fill throughout the novel.

This lack of maternal love in her life pushes her to find love, within her circle of friends, at work or elsewhere. Her relationships with other people like Anne-Marion, Truman or Eddie, are to gain love and to fill the gap created by the lack of maternal love. Her other problem is that she does not know how to love, because firstly, she has not been taught, and secondly, she has never received love, so she is unable to form intimate relationships with her friends. "Hungry for their Mother's attention and approval", bell hooks writes in a similar vein, "the daughters were often emotionally fragile that they were incapable of making life-affirming decisions for themselves in either work or relationships" (*Communion* 127). This is another side-effect of Meridian's dysfunctional mother-daughter relationship. This point is demonstrated when she talks about sex with Eddie, her former husband. Sex, considered by some to be the symbol of love and unity between couples, means something completely different in her life with Eddie. To Meridian sex is "warmth, the lying together, the peace" (58) which she has never received from her mother. That making love with Eddie is really the production of a substituted maternal love is seen in how "she endured sex because it gave her these" (58). She used to "lock her legs" (58) while having intercourse, which suggests the lack of safety and security in her life. So again there is no trace of love in her newly formed family. This point also emphasises her inability to offer love and form a relationship.

As a teenage girl, with no clear boundaries in her mind, Meridian tries different experiences in an attempt to uncover how to enjoy a fulfilling and successful relationship. She has to experience different situations in order to find out the boundaries she can live by, so this adds to the reasons for their being no trace of love in her newly formed family. This point also

emphasises her inability to offer love and form a relationship. The only two positive attributes that Eddie possesses, compared to the other men she has been with, are that he does not "beat" and he does not "cheat", as the narrator explains (58). This makes him a "good" man in the eyes of her mother and other women in the neighbourhood. But that does not satisfy Meridian, as she herself is confused and bewildered. Lack of maternal love in her life has made her so vulnerable that she accepts any kind of attention from anyone. Her life with Eddie is one of the examples of this weakness. The only thing that Eddie wants from Meridian is "interest" (61), which she is unable to show. As far as Meridian is concerned, in order to maintain a heterosexual relationship, she only has to offer her body to her partner. She is actually subjecting herself to a male gaze and seeing herself as an object in those terms –a form of internalising oppression.[27]

There is a paradox between what Eddie wants and what Meridian thinks he wants. She wants to achieve maternal love, but seeks it in a heterosexual relationship. Moreover, given that she does not have a clear understanding of the opposite sex, she confuses her partner's expectations in terms of being a wife. Consequently, they are both involved in a relationship from which they cannot get what they want. I would argue that Eddie's ostensible aim is the satisfaction of his sexual needs, and to fill that need he requires her "interest" (61) in him. Eddie wants her to show interest, happiness and satisfaction in his company. It seems that Eddie, like Meridian, also lacks clear understanding of himself and his desires. His views towards his sexual demands are immature. As a married man he is not even partially aware of his own body's needs. When he realises that Meridian is pregnant, he expresses regret and assumes that his voracious sexual needs are the main cause for her pregnancy. He believes that

[27] In "Black Image in Protective Custody", Ed Guerrero writes: "it has been argued, extending the ideas of Laura Mulvey's work exploring the cinematic objectification of the female body, that, in the broadcast sense, all of these narrative strategies and modes of Black representation and subordination construct the Black body as the object of "the look" for the pleasure of the dominant spectator" (238). Partaking in a similar ideology, Meridian also wants to expose herself to Eddie so that she can benefit from his support and protection.

"[he has] always required a lot" (56). This suggests that, in his opinion, if he could have curtailed his needs, he would have been able to prevent Meridian's pregnancy.

To Meridian, her mother represents a gag on her ability to express herself; each encounter with her renders her speechless. For example, it took her "a long time to tell her mother she *was* in the Movement, and by the time she did, her mother already knew" (81). Or even when her mother asks Meridian "have you stolen anything," "a stillness fell over Meridian and for seconds she could not move" (41). Throughout the novel she is silenced by her mother, and every query is emotionally charged for Meridian. Her mother even gives her a sense of guilt by ignoring her and by depriving her of love. Rebecca Walker, Alice's daughter writes: writer: "A good mother is attentive, sets boundaries and makes the world safe for her child" (R. Walker). Meridian assumes that it is her own fault that her mother does not like her: "It was for stealing her mother's serenity, for shattering her mother's emerging self, that Meridian felt guilty from the very first, though she was unable to understand how this could possibly be her fault" (41). This sense of guilt stays with her throughout her life and makes her feel dissatisfied with herself as a woman. "For [...] Meridian", John Callahan writes, "silence and solitude become an essential prologue to speech and social action" (153). At this stage, still forced into a repressed state by her mother, Meridian is unable to express herself openly and falls into the realm of solitude.[28]

Though Meridian having tubal ligation could be seen as a strategy for removing a part of womanhood, the novel suggests the contrary. "The subsequent decision to have her tubes tied", Susan Willis writes however, "represents another step in the direction toward a new form of womanhood where heterosexuality will not be the means towards oppression but a mode within which sexual partners will one day set each other free" (92). Meridian also sees

[28] Silence caused by dysfunctional mother-daughter relationships is often explored by Walker in her novels; for example Celie and her mother in *The Color Purple*.

motherhood as an obstacle to women pursuing their goals and ambitions. The novel suggests that women sometimes need to reject even their biological demands, their potential motherhood, and their heterosexual obligations in order to regain their own individuality and consequently forge their identities.

While not precisely a body/mind divide, the implication follows that biology can place a burden on personal and social advancement. This idea is demonstrated in Walker's novel as, to join the movement, Meridian leaves her son with her mother in order to pursue her own goals and ambitions. She wants to get rid of anything that thwarts her ambitions, and, by doing so, repeats the same behaviour with her own child as her mother did with her. "In giving her child away," Willis writes, "Meridian makes it clear that mothering as it has been defined by heterosexual relationships in racist society is the single most insurmountable obstacle to a black woman's self-affirmation" (91). Yet, the mother-daughter relationship still plays a strong role in this sense, as Andrea O'Reilly writes: "Being motherless, whether by death of, or separation from, the mother, means that the daughter is far more vulnerable to the hurt of a racist and sexist culture because she has not received the cultural bearing that would give her a strong and proud selfhood" (*Toni Morrison and Motherhood* 78). Meridian is suffering from the spiritual gap between herself and her mother, which prevents her from finding self-empowerment and individuality. Therefore, she undergoes many difficulties such as abandoning her son, sterilisation, and all the crises in her heterosexual relationships, in order to realise her own self and womanhood. Seven years later in 1983, in her book *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens,* Walker writes that womanism is both "for male and female" (xi). Womanism is defined as "a woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men sexually or nonsexually" (*In Search* xi). Although womanism values heterosexual

relationships, it gives the priority to women's self-empowered and self-actualised identity. So if even motherhood seems to be an obstacle to a woman's understanding of self, a womanist will not sacrifice her individuality for it.

In most of Walker's novels, motherhood is seen as significant, as the majority of the female characters yearn for their mother's affirmation and admiration. Further evidence of this contradiction can be seen in the title of the book she wrote about her own ideology - *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*. Moreover, in the same book she describes her own attempts to find her literary mother, Zora Neale Hurston. She forms a kind of mother-daughter surrogate relationship with Hurston. Similarly, in Walker's *Meridian*, motherhood is double-sided like a coin; in one way, the lack of maternal love suggests it would be beneficial for the characters, especially female characters such as Meridian, to have a constructive mother-daughter relationship. Yet the other side of the coin shows a mother such as Meridian, who fails to have a successful mother-child relationship while trying to elevate her self-interests and her desires. Thus, motherhood is depicted in a very contradictory way which is supported at some stages of the novel but then is denied at others. In *Of Woman Born*, Adrienne Rich says of this tension that it is: "the fear of not one's mother or of motherhood but of becoming one's mother" (237). Although neither Meridian, nor her mother, advise their children to subsequently neglect their children, they actually follow this trend in action. This can be seen in the treatment of Meridian as a child, of her own son, and of Wile Chile. Meridian's abortion also emphasises this point that children are obstacles to female individuality if they arrive when the women have not yet recognised their basic rights and desires as individuals. Further, there are no functional mother-daughter relationships in Walker's novels. This point again highlights Walker's ambivalent viewpoint on motherhood. From a different perspective, tubal ligation and showing less interest in heterosexual relationships can be perceived as Walker indirectly suggesting an inclination towards homosocial desire in *Meridian*, an inclination that becomes explicit in her third novel

The Color Purple, as stated earlier. Meridian however does not have a very strong female bond with any of the characters in the novel, she also does not have any truly intimate heterosexual relationships. Considering that this novel is Walker's second and that she is still at the beginning of her writing career, and also seeing Meridian's activism is a continuation of Ruth's interest in the Civil Rights Movement, Meridian's rebellion against the mainstream ideology defining womanhood can be taken as Walker's rejection of imposed social norms seeing women as heterosexual, mothers and wives. In *The Self in Bloom,* Deborah E. McDowell also accentuates how Meridian is swimming against the stream of society: "She lives in a society that domesticates conformity, which censures individual expression, especially for women; but she flourishes notwithstanding and evolves into a prototype for psychic wholeness and individual autonomy" (168). What Meridian begins is continued by Celie in *The Color Purple,* as the latter clearly rejects the socially accepted concept of heterosexuality (see Chapter Three).

Beyond Meridian and her own son, we see how the theme of children being taken for granted, and parents, especially mothers, not showing enough care and love to their offspring, is present elsewhere in the novel. In the part entitled 'The Wild Child', the miserable life of three children is described: Wile Chile, the baby in her womb while she was pregnant, and another 'smaller boy'. This part commences with a very telling and blunt sentence about Wile Chile's conditions: "The Wild Child was a young girl who had managed to live without parents, relatives or friends for all her thirteen years" (23). Describing Wile Chile's misery in this way suggests the importance of motherhood in a child's life. Walker even steps forward and points to the same or even worse life situations of other children by describing a 'smaller boy' and the baby in Wile Chile's stomach. Both of them die – actually they are killed – in the same section of the novel and they are not remembered or even talked about elsewhere. Moreover, their short lives are presented in only two and a half pages; which is one of the novel's shortest sections. This significant point of how children are marginalised and discounted has rarely been

considered by critics. In the majority of Walker's novels, the female characters are in search of their own identity and power, and, in order to make this discovery, they need to sacrifice their children and their love and affection for them. In *Black Feminist Criticism,* Barbara Christian writes: "[Meridian] engages in a quest that will take her beyond the society's narrow meaning of the word mother as a physical state and expand its meaning to those who create, nurture, and save life in social and psychological as well as physical terms" (242). Wile Chile's story is extremely symbolic as she is a very young, pregnant girl who is killed immediately after being described. The only one who cares about her is Meridian. "The house mother attempted to persuade Meridian that The Wild Child was not her responsibility. […] she must not stay here. Think of the influence. This is a school for young ladies" (25). It is as if Wile Chile has come from another planet and has no hope of being reabsorbed into society as a young lady. The house mother, although a female herself, is an agent of patriarchy as she does not show any sympathy towards Wile Child –treating the child as if she is at fault and responsible for her own miseries. However, what happens to her is the outcome of a society dominated by dysfunctionality. She is deprived of anyone's attention which makes her life even worse. She is very reluctant to engage in any social interaction as "with bits of cake and colored beads and unblemished cigarettes, [Meridian] tempted Wile Chile and finally captured her" (24). Although it is never revealed why she is running away, it is clear that she does not feel safe in the society in which she lives. People such as the house mother are very quick to call her the "Wild Child" (25) and they consider her to be an outsider. Meridian, who is herself an activist, goes against the stream and welcomes her. However, when Wile Chile recognises that no school is willing to shelter her, she runs away, "her stomach the largest part of her" (25) and is killed by a "speeder" (25). This is Wile Chile's story and even Meridian, who was the only one to care about her, does not talk or think about her throughout the rest of the novel. Otherwise, from a purely narrative perspective, there would be no point in Walker including the story of

While Child within the novel. However, the effect surely remains with her and this may be one of the reasons that motivates her to stand against the dominant perception of womanhood, and why she decides to "tie her tubes" (112). She does this to ensure that she will not give birth to a baby until she is spiritually reborn as a strong, individual and empowered woman. Yet here, perhaps we see in this prefiguration of elements of womanism, that self-individuation is hindered -since these children who are deprived of motherly love, like Wile Chile and Meridian's son, may strive to assert their voices and realise their identities in their future lives.

When Meridian leaves her son with her mother-in-law, she puts her son's future and his potential success at risk since he might not receive the motherly love and affection that he should. Meridian's actions towards her son can be seen as even more destructive than her mother's behaviour toward her, which was partly motivated by Meridian's refusal to accept and believe in God and Jesus (17); however, Meridian's son was not old enough to wrong his mother in any way, which makes Meridian's actions far more serious. However, it should be emphasised that Meridian is so indifferent because of her own mother-daughter relationship and the sense of guilt that her mother has instilled in her. Interestingly though, the more she opposes these roles in theory, the more her own life moves toward accepting other forms of the maternal role as supporter and protector. She still supports the Civil Rights movement as a worker; she can never be a mother herself, but gives shelter to Wild Chile; she supports Lynne, Truman's wife, and even helps her former lover, Truman, to actualise a sense of validity and self-worth.

She is very hard on herself, however she attempts to fill the gap between her personal life and her social life. Although she suffers from an unexplained physical illness throughout the novel, Meridian's main problem is arguably not physical, but mental, an absence that echoes the lack of a mother-daughter relationship. Although *Meridian* seems to be a novel about the Civil Rights movement, it is arguably more prominently about the significance of a

mother-daughter relationship in a girl's life –and this relationship on the level of the personal is as constitutive as the novel's broader political framework.

The Role of Female Friendship

My focus has been on Meridian's main problem: the dysfunctional mother-daughter relationship that results in her lifelong insecurity. She wants to find a way to express her weaknesses, and her frustrations with how unfair she perceives her life to be, so she joins the Civil Rights movement. Although she does not join the movement specifically to resolve her personal problems, they are definitely contributory motivations, given the movement's mission to fight for justice and equality. Meridian sees the movement as a way of fighting for two different things: firstly, to give vent to her personal dissatisfactions, and secondly, to achieve personal satisfaction in helping thousands of people to improve their lives. Therefore, at this point, the personal becomes the political and political becomes personal: they are intertwined. *Meridian* is one of Walker's novels where this point emerges strongly, in contrast to many of her other works. Meridian's personal and political ambitions are completely interconnected. On the one hand, in this movement she can shout about her inner anger and sorrow concerning inequality. In addition, the movement allows her to give an outlet to her personal dissatisfactions, for example the wrath from her mother. She can also have the voice of which she has been always been deprived, because of her mother's authority. On the other hand, this political activity becomes part of her personal life as she commences a close relationship with Truman. Although she has had other relationships, this one is clearly the most carefully considered and important in the novel, given that almost half of the novel is concerned with this bond.

Dysfunctional mother-daughter relationships can also be traced in Walker's other novels, making it a common theme in her works. In most of her works, like *The Color Purple*, when Celie does not have a functional mother-daughter relationship, Walker brings Shug and the other females into her life to act as a surrogate mother. Unlike *The Color Purple*, there is

no individual surrogate mother figure for Meridian, but as suggested earlier, there are certain surrogate forms of motherhood. Meridian, however, is unable to find a single person that can fill the yawning gap in her life. After considering all of the mothers in her heritage -her mother, her grandmother and great-grandmother (121-4), Meridian looks for a surrogate mother in a totally different form. She wants to know and learn about her maternal ancestors in order to follow them or even to better find her own way. She wants to realise the other mother-daughter relationships to define her expectations and needs. After reviewing this in her mind, she says: "I never stole, I was always clean, I never did wrong by anyone, I was never *bad*" (123), which illustrates her dissatisfaction with how she has been seen in her mother's eyes, and she pleads: "Mama, I *love* you. Let me go" (123). She is actually tired of this internal battle to win her mother's love and she indirectly asks her mother to put an end to her spiritual suffering. Even the story of her mother and grandmothers does not soothe her pain and agony. Her brief statements beginning with 'I' make her sound like a child rather than an activist. In addition, her reflection does not help her to find a maternal role model within the history of her ancestors. The narrator interrupts and comments: "It never occurred to her that her mother's and her grandmother's extreme purity of life was compelled by necessity. They had not lived in an age of choice" (123). At this point, the novel suggests a solution for Meridian and other black women who share the same issues; they should make their own paths rather than copying what they find when they look back through history. However, the history of motherhood can be helpful, if it helps one to find the correct way, without needing to follow exactly the same footpath.

Her inability to love and to form permanent relationships is also another side effect of her dysfunctional mother-daughter relationship, preventing Meridian from attaining any positive female bonding which could fill the gaps in her life. For example, her friend Ann-Marion could be her surrogate mother, like Shug to Celie in *The Color Purple*. Although

Meridian and Anne-Marion spend a lot of time together, their relationship is not profound enough to help Meridian with her personal life. This is not because the relationship is not helpful, but because Meridian does not know how to love and make friends. Meridian looks cold and indifferent and is described by the narrator as a "thin" girl who "contain[s] the essence of silence" (27). But her friend Anne-Marion is a "rounded and lush" girl who is "eager to argue over the smallest issues" (27). In making such a friend, Meridian shows that she is not happy with what she is and wants to be like Anne-Marion, who is able to overcome the silence that Meridian is struggling with. Although the friendship is not very close, it helps Meridian to become stronger in personality and to assert her voice. Throughout the novel Anne-Marion is never the cause of Meridian's sadness, but always tries to make her laugh and, by the time Meridian needs help, she is the first one to rush to help her whenever she is in trouble. Whenever she faints or her obscure illness becomes difficult, Anne-Marion helps her and stays with her until she feels better. This female bonding is very significant in the novel, as this is Meridian's only friendship which endures and remains consistent throughout the novel. Although this friendship is significant in Meridian's life, it is not strong enough to resolve Meridian's deeper problems. Anne-Marion does her best to be her carer and friend but she never attempts to talk to her about her personal issues. This is a key difference between Ann-Marion and Shug, who demonstrates powerful leadership skills. In *Meridian*, the only character who wants to lead people is Meridian herself, and most of her friends are satisfied with her attention and help, like Truman and Lynne.

Her other female friendship is with Lynne. Although it does not offer a great deal of help to Meridian, it has some notable characteristics that make it quite different from Meridian's friendship with Anne-Marion. It is the first time in Walker's novels that there is a bond between a white and a black female. This female bonding suggests a need not just for ethnic solidarity but for gender solidarity. Here Walker advances a broadened example of her

definition of womanism, although it is not developed. She talks about this new kind of female bonding only for a few sections in the second chapter of her novel. Their unexpected meeting in Meridian's house initiates a female bond that Meridian takes the first step towards, as she lets Lynne into her house and decides to help her. Lynne, so frustrated and furious, apparently then complains to Meridian about her interferences in her personal life since she thinks Meridian has invited Truman to her house. Knowing Lynn is vying for Truman, Meridian attempts to change Lynne's mind by saying that: "There's not the slightest thing between us [Meridian and Truman]. We're as innocent as brothers and sisters" (145). Although their discussion commences by talking about Truman and the significance of his presence or absence in their lives, it ends with feminine talk about their weight and their appearance (146), issues that have nothing to do with Truman. As they talk more, they feel closer to each other. This female bonding suggests the importance of talking for women, and also the invaluable effect it has on them. Dianne F. Saddoff believes that Lynne is Meridian's rival, as she writes "Lynne, Meridian's white friend and rival for Truman Held" (124). This may well hold true, but when Lynne comes to Meridian's home, Meridian does not see her as her rival since Meridian is no longer in love with Truman. Meridian demonstrates herself to be a sponsor and supporter of people in need by sheltering Lynne. When the conversation between the two women gives Lynne a sense of safety and security, she recounts her life story to Meridian, and tells her that "I don't even have a home" (178). While Saddoff believes that there is a rivalry between these two women, critics like Callahan note the intimacy between them: "For this exchange", Callahan writes, "with its ironic-intimate tones of call-and-response settles past accounts and enables Lynne and Meridian to confront together" (173). However, while Callahan notices the intimacy between them, he does not consider the significance of this female bonding in the novel. Their friendship takes up little space, but is nevertheless enduring. The climax of their friendship is when these two women of different

colour hug each other (179): the only time in the novel when a white and a black woman touch each other. In Walker's first novel, *The Third Life*, there is also one touch between Grange, as a black man, and a white woman, which of course does not last more than a few seconds because the white woman rejects him. In this novel, the black-white confrontation is more thoroughly developed and detailed than in her first novel. Later, in *In Search*, Walker notes that womanism is for the "survival and wholeness of entire people" (xi), regardless of their colour and sex, as in this encounter in *Meridian*. When these two women from different races "hug each other" (179), Walker's forthcoming formulation of womanism might begin to be envisioned.

Black Men as Dependants

Black men in the novels of African-American novelists are often found to be struggling with slavery or the legacy of slavery. As discussed in the previous section, in Walker's first novel men are still aspiring to regain their independence and individuality. Although slavery has ended in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, these men do not feel actual freedom. They are mentally imprisoned and enslaved; however, they still aspire to male authority, like their white male counterparts. Here, in *Meridian*, although there is a similar presentation of black males, it is not quite the same as that of novels such as *Invisible Man*. Almost all of the male characters in the novel constantly change their minds and thoughts. They hardly can manage their own desires and lives. The most outstanding example of this kind of a male character in *Meridian* is Truman, who though an activist is confused as to his purpose and goals in life. He is totally bewildered as throughout the novel he faces many changes, and with every single change, he shows huge variance in his opinions. Truman falls in love with two women; firstly a black woman, Meridian, and then a white woman, Lynne. After his marriage to Lynne and having a daughter, he again turns to Meridian, but this time he pretends that he just wants to be her friend and that he is not looking for a relationship. Although this is what he says, it would not be surprising if he changed his mind again and asked Meridian to be his partner (138). Susan

Willis argues that Truman is a chauvinist, and that Meridian's decision to be sterilised, Willis writes, is also a dramatic refutation of Truman's overtly male chauvinist invitation to "have his beautiful black babies" (92). The phrase from the novel might have patriarchal overtones but Truman is more helpless than a powerful patriarch. "In the iconography of black male sexuality", bell hooks writes, "compulsive-obsessive fucking is represented as a form of power when in actuality it is an indication of extreme powerlessness" (*We Real Cool,* 73). Throughout the novel, Truman hardly makes a clear, strong statement which can show his individuality, liberty and power. A chauvinist would at least have a particular viewpoint, whereas Truman actually has none. However, it is true that Truman wants to feel power.

This power, however, tends to be interpreted as sexual power. In the novel all of the men appear to be defined by their sexual desire. Daxter and The Assistant are two characters who are briefly described as just sexual partners of Meridian's (59-61) and they are never mentioned again. Eddie, who is Meridian's first husband, is a man whose sexual desires are emphasised over everything else. In part seven of the novel, *'English Walnuts'*, Meridian's different sexual relationships are described. In this section, Eddie's sexual desire is given much consideration. His sexual appetite has two effects on Meridian's life. Firstly, "it save[s] her from the strain of responding to other boys or even noting the whole category of men" (54). "Meridian, like many of Walker's female protagonists", Ruth D. Weston writes, "becomes afraid of males as soon as she is seen as fair game by boys at school" (155). As Weston makes clear, all of the boys in this novel have the potential to commit adultery. This also emphasises that men in this novel are like savage creatures, seemingly hungry for sex. And secondly, Eddie's sexual demands result in Meridian's pregnancy. As stated earlier, her pregnancy makes Eddie feel apologetic as he assumes that it is his fault, that she is pregnant so he asks Meridian to forgive him (55). Even Mr. Raymonds, an illustrious man, is not excluded from this roll call of male characters defined their sexuality. Regardless of his important position in Saxon

College, he is as mean as the other men and asks Meridian "to sit on his lap" (109) in return for some food. What he does, of course, is more vehement than the other uneducated men. *Meridian* suggests that even educated men are not able to control their basic sexual needs and are looking for an opportunity for any kind of satisfaction. Another example is Tommy Odds, who rapes Lynne, a white woman. Raping his friend's wife shows the wildness and violence of a man who does whatever he can for the sake of his sexual demands. "The anger of Tommy Odds", Pia Theilmann writes, "against European Americans and his lack of knowledge about them as human beings lead to the vicious circle of self-fulfilling prophesy that turns him into the rapist of a European American woman and allows him to justify his actions" (73). Essentially, he degrades the black community rather than helping it, and at the same time undermines black masculinity through enacting misogynistic violence. bell hooks believes that this rape is Tommy Odds' reaction to what white society has done throughout history:

> Much of the subculture of blackness in the early years of the twentieth century was created in reaction and resistance to the culture whites sought to impose on black folks. Since whiteness had repressed black sexuality, in the subculture space of blackness, sexual desire was expressed with degrees of abandon unheard of in white society (*We Real Cool* 70).

While hooks's analysis sees elements of black sexuality as reactive to white oppression, these actions, and the associated social dynamics, are not always self-evident. Franz Fanon offers a similarly embedded, "internalized" reading of black sexuality and white oppression.

> By loving me she proves that I am worthy of white love. I am loved like a white man. I am a white man. I marry the culture, white beauty, white whiteness. When my restless hands caress those white breasts, they grasp white civilization and dignity and make them mine (63).

Here Fanon suggests, in elliptical fashion, that embedded ideologies of white superiority drive 'black' desire underground, re-constructing whiteness as the ideal object of sexual attainment (and social power). This is exactly how some black male characters in Walker's novels behave, such as Tommy Odds in *Meridian* and Petros in *By the Light of My Father's Smile*.[29] However, the raping of white women by black men clearly cannot be anything other than a destructive way to reform the situation, a sign of dissolution rather than a resolution. In Walker's first two novels, the majority of Walker's male characters' sexual needs are magnified in a negative sense. Perhaps Walker, near the beginning of her career as a novelist, lacked subtlety in many of these cases, because in her later novels her viewpoint towards men appears to become more moderate and complex. Still, Walker often leaves a ray of hope for the readers at the end of her novels, and she does the same in *Meridian*. The final chapter, when Truman wakes up with a new epiphany that he should undertake the same experience as Meridian (228), suggests a better future for black men, so readers might have a more optimistic outlook.

In spite of this epiphany, it remains that in *Meridian*, there are no examples of masculine contributions to successful families. Apart from Meridian's parents, who cannot be considered to be a successful couple due to their lack of love for each other, all of the other couples are either separated or left alone. There are several examples of both groups. Meridian and Truman's relationship suggest a good example of the former type and Meridian and Eddie are an example of the latter. In Walker's first novel, men are mostly irresponsible and do not care about their families, as Grange and Brownfield ignore their families and pursue their own wishes and desires. However, in *Meridian*, it is the wife who disregards her family and leaves everything behind in order to follow her own dreams. As such, though Meridian's behaviour can be seen as an effort toward female individuality and liberty, there can also be a different

[29] Interracial heterosexuality has also been portrayed in Walker's short stories as well, such as "Coming Apart by Way of Introduction to Lorde, Teish and Gardner" and "Advancing Luna and Ida B. Wells" which are in her collection of short stories called *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down*.

reading. In many cases what she does is more akin to the conventional image of black male absence in the family, as presented in Walker's first novel. Both the male and female characters in these two novels have set their families aside in order to fulfil their own needs. Yet it is worth making clear that there is some ambivalence in this novel. Social change and redressing historical oppression seems to require sacrifice, it requires difficult, even seemingly selfish, choices in order to form a revolutionary movement that might break the cycles of repressed desires and slavery's legacies of submission and defeat. Yet *Meridian* also shows its female protagonist forging a new, if not always satisfactory, relation to motherhood and the family. Perhaps in emphasising Meridian's unusual and hard choice to leave her family, Walker underscores the elisions and desperate lack of resources at the heart of African-American family life -problems that can only be addressed through radical change and new ways of thinking. Meridian never quite achieves this full actualisation, but is shown as part of a broader process, a sort of allegory of becoming.

Conclusion

Although Meridian does her utmost to win back her mother's love, she never succeeds, bringing upon herself a sense of guilt that both weakens and strengthens her in different ways. It weakens her because she is filled with anger and depression, hating her womanhood and motherhood which she demonstrates by rendering herself infertile and abandoning her son. On the other hand, this sense of guilt strengthens her as she never gives up trying to win her mother's love. Although she is physically sick, she says "I am strong" (19). She joins the movement to express her anger and sorrow and in this she is successful. She meets lots of people, allowing her a chance to be kind to them, and, in return, to ask for their love and attention to fill the void in her life. However, because she does not know how to express love to and be loved in return, she cannot achieve her goal. She is confused about what she wants, giving up on her chance of becoming a mother, yet attempting to stand in as a surrogate mother to Wile Chile. She sees her son as an obstacle, although it is likely that by helping him and

showing him kindness he would appreciate her in return, thus satisfying her desire to be loved. Through her many mistakes she is left alone, yet is nevertheless experienced in life, by the end of the novel. The novel also ends with a ray of hope for the future of the male characters. Although they are often confused and bewildered, the end of the novel shows that Truman is at the beginning of the path of self-knowledge that Meridian had previously experienced. Thus, it can be assumed that the black men in the novel will also change their attitudes in due course. The novel shows how both male and female characters, such as Meridian and Truman, need to attain their own sense of identity and individuality in order to then move to another stage of their lives, which could involve having heterosexual or homosexual relationships and, in the end, a unified family. Meridian needs to find her "self" before playing the role of mother or wife. As highlighted by the novel, she rejects motherhood as well as her role as a wife or partner because she has not yet forged her individuality which is the first step on this path. Again, as depicted by the novel, the role of motherhood is crucial, as Meridian could not have a functional mother-daughter relationship with her mother throughout the novel, she searches in vain for a surrogate mother. This particular point has a huge influence on her own life as she rejects her son and her partners due to his problem that lies in her past, and needs to be resolved. A similar problem is portrayed in Celie's life in *The Color Purple* where three other women (Shug, Nettie and Sofia) help her to forge her identity.

Chapter Three

The Color Purple: A Womanist Novel

Chapter Summary

The Color Purple (1982) is Walker's most well-known novel, and was the winner of that year's Pulitzer Prize. The novel explores Celie's path to self-realisation and self-actualisation. Walker's third novel is infused with African-American history and culture, with great emphasis on women's liberation and individuality within that context. This novel was published one year before Walker officially introduced the concept of womanism in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*; however, it is her most womanist novel in term of human connection.[30] The novel includes various types of female bonding such as mother-daughter relationships, sisterhood, and homosexual relationships; each of which is given representations in their functional and dysfunctional forms. This chapter discusses these points and also briefly explores how Walker looks at male bonding in this novel, given that *The Color Purple* depicts three generations of males. *The Color Purple* is also particularly important to Walker's canon of fictional works since the characters of this novel will be employed in two of her later novels, *The Temple of My Familiar* and *Possessing the Secret of Joy*.

[30] As discussed in the Introduction, womanism focuses on three points: human relationships; humans and Nature; and humans and Spirit.

Womanism and Its Complexities in *The Color Purple*

Female friendship is given more attention in this novel than in any of Walker's other novels. Most critics, such as Brienne Menut, believe that "*The Color Purple* is an example of Walker's womanist text" (1). There are certainly different kinds of female bonding portrayed in this novel, and they are mostly significant in helping female characters to achieve self-empowerment. Walker's book, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, gives us her definition of womanism as "committed to survival and wholeness of whole entire people, male and female" (*In Search* ix). Walker writes, "a woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually" (*In Search* xi) is regarded as womanist. Womanism also embraces heterosexuality since a woman can "love individual men sexually and/or nonsexually" (*In Search* xi). In other words, this new term coined by Walker is all-inclusive, as it includes all possible relationships that a woman can experience with other adults. However womanism's main focus is on women and their autonomy, while men are regarded as a means through which women can achieve self-sufficiency. According to this definition of womanism, a woman does not necessarily have to be interested in men[31]. In *The Color Purple,* Celie tries homosexuality not because it is her only possible choice; her acceptance of a same-sex relationship is largely the result of her fear of men, not necessarily because of her interest in women. Although she learns a lot from her homosexual experiences, nevertheless it is not sufficient for her. Her fear of men remains with her throughout the novel, and never changes.[32]

Some crucial points must be made when defining Walker's notion of womanism. In some ways, it is actually self-contradictory as on the one hand, it is for the "wholeness of entire people" while on the other hand, the male's contribution is very marginal as womanism only focuses on "women's strength" (xi).[33] Some critics, such as Banks-Wallace and Brenda Verner,

[31] Please refer to "The Evolution of Alice Walker" by Cynthia Cole Robinson, pp 298-306.
[32] Celie's fear of men will be discussed later in this section; also Celie in *The Temple of My Familiar* does not have any male partner and apparently Shug is not her partner but her close friend.
[33] The differences between womanism, feminism and other related terms are discussed in the introduction.

believe that womanism also includes men. "Walker's definition," writes Wallace, "provides a space to … address explicitly the important bond between African-American women and men" (316).[34] However, the question still remains of how men can benefit from this concept equally, as women do. Yet even in *The Color Purple*, very well known as a womanist novel, male characters such as Mister, Harpo and even Shug's male partners remain marginal. The novel's main focus is on women, and hence a particular, specific notion or version of 'womanism'. This term has thus developed into a voice of "women of color" (xi), as Walker describes it in *In Search.*

There are many different forms of female connections in Walker's three interlinked novels: *The Color Purple* and the two that followed. Female bonding in womanism should lead women to self-empowerment and self-actualisation. In *The Color Purple*, the bond among Celie and her female friends helps her to have a better understanding of her own identity. While female friendship in *The Color Purple* is a very considerable theme, in *The Temple* it is not as extensive. In *The Temple* women demand one single need which is sexual freedom. The female bonding in *The Temple* is not as comprehensive as it is in *The Color Purple*. Shug and Celie stay with each other for most of the novel, however in *The Temple*, female friendships are short and brief. They are at the service of the theme of the novel, in *The Temple*, which revolves around female sexual freedom. In *Possessing*, however, female bonding is mostly dysfunctional. Walker in *Possessing* shows how the concept of place can prevent women from 'wholeness'. The jealousy between the female characters also underlines the idea of dysfunctionality of female friendships in *Possessing.*

The position of the men in this fiction is complicated, as any benefit they receive from womanism is blurred and minute. When Celie, the heroine, and Shug, her sexual partner and

[34] Very few critics have approached womanism from this perspective. But those who have have tried to attribute *The Color Purple* to womanism, such as Linda Abbandonato in "Rewriting the Heroine's Story in *The Color Purple*" (297-299), which likens it to feminism or other feminist terms.

lover, sleep together, Mister, Celie's husband, is completely marginalised.[35] At one point in the novel, Mister tries to marginalise Celie, so she suffers and becomes very lonely. After some time, when Celie's and Shug's bond becomes stronger, Mister is marginalised in turn. His character totally changes: he no longer acts as a strong and oppressive black man. "He [doesn't] let nobody in" (203) his house and feels "too weak to fight back". It is true that he is being paid back (in terms of poetic justice) for all that he has done to Celie, but it cannot be denied that he is completely helpless, just as Celie was when married to Mister. Although their roles are reversed, their problems are never quite resolved. The common trait that they share is that they remain helpless in turn, first Celie and then Mister. As an oppressive black man, Mister wants to be superior to others in order to be at the centre of power in his home. In order to be the centre of attention, he needs to be in contact with households so he can impose his superiority upon them. But once Celie leaves him (180), he actually loses his power and becomes isolated. Therefore, Celie is the one person over whom Mister can be authoritative, otherwise he is just a weak, trapped man. At the end of the novel, Mister still craves contact with others and he wants to have people around him; yet, he is tired of letting "anybody in" (203). His suffering is caused by being alone and feeling abandoned and emasculated. Mister experiences masculinity as oppressive and imposing, as he tells his son, Harpo: "[I beat Celie] Cause she my wife" (23). He has no other reason to beat Celie besides reassuring himself of his power and manhood. In other words, his masculinity is tied to Celie –even to abusing her- and when Celie leaves him, he loses his power. It becomes clear that he does not own his masculinity, but depends on his environment. Thus, at the end of the novel, he wants to be rid of the feeling of emasculation. In this way, it can be seen that throughout the novel he never alters his desire to be the centre of attention.

[35] This happens after Celie is oppressed, physically and mentally, by Mister. Suffering from an illness, Mister brings Shug home and wants Celie look after her.

On the other hand, Celie's attitude to men remains the same throughout the novel: she is always afraid of them. That is why she makes herself believe she is 'wood'. "I say to myself, Celie, you a tree. That's how come I know trees fear men" (23). Even when Shug, near the end of the novel, talks enthusiastically about her recent partner Germaine, Celie says, "he's a man" (66) which suggests that she feels there is no difference between men. Celie again reveals her fear of men. Although Celie's different versions of female bonding –which will be discussed in this section- helps her in having a better understanding of her identity, she still suffers from the destructive effect of patriarchy which she was struggling with at the early stages of her life. So womanism, to a great extent, helps Celie but it does not set her free from all of her problematic issues. However when it comes to men, womanist ideology in *The Color Purple* does not help characters like Mister to find their own individuality and liberty. Not only does Mister not find his individuality, but also he loses his autonomy. At the beginning of the novel, although in a negative and destructive sense toward women, Mister was very authoritative; later on in the novel, he becomes a naïve character. If womanism stands for "men *and* women" (ix), here in this novel, it does not seem very helpful for Mister –this point will also be discussed shortly.

In the definition of womanism, sexuality is given central consideration as a woman can have a sexual relationship with both women and men. Shug can be seen as a true example of this as she has numerous sexual relationships with different people. "Shug is depicted," bell hooks writes, "as an ageing female seducer who fears the loss of her ability to use sex as a means to attract and control men, as a way to power" ("Writing the Subject" 56). In addition, after her relationship with Grady, Shug also starts a new relationship with Germaine, who is a nineteen-year-old man. This reinforces the idea that Shug still has the power to control men through her sexuality. Thus, in this novel, sexuality can be seen as a way to impose female power upon men. Hence, after Celie starts her sexual relationship with Shug, she develops

herself as a powerful character while Mister loses his authority. In addition, at the beginning of the novel, sexuality is used to emphasise Celie's weakness since she is forced to obey Pa's and Mister's sexual desires. She was raped by Pa and she had no power to resist. She was even unable to tell anyone of her ordeal, except God. The sexual relationship between Celie and Shug also implies power issues. Shug helps Celie to awaken her sexual desires and this enables Celie to feel a sense of belonging to her own body for the first time in her life. As it was through Shug that Celie experienced this unique feeling, Celie considers Shug to be part of it. Therefore, in some ways, Celie wants to possess Shug so she can become sexually satisfied. However, when she realises that Shug is bisexual – a practise easily assimilated to womanism – she feels sad and powerless. The clearly positive aspect of Celie's homosexual relationship is that it helps her to have a better understanding of her body, which actually engages in direct relationship with her identity. Nevertheless, she also realises that she is the only one who can deal with her own sexuality, and this is exactly what womanism suggests, as it accentuates the freedom of female sexuality. The more Celie understands her own body, the more she knows her self and her individuality. Ultimately, however, she also realises that Shug cannot be her sexual partner, even while Shug might be seen as a privileged example of a womanist character.

Celie's Female Connections: Achieving a Sense of Belonging

There are many female bonds in Celie's life, some of which hamper her and others which push her to regain her individuality. The main point in these connections is how the sense of belonging to her body and to other women as her friends, sisters and surrogate mothers, are withheld from, or bestowed upon, Celie. The novel accentuates this sense as the most significant point in Celie's quest for self-empowerment. In "Who Touches This Touches a Woman", Ruth D. Weston states: "Through her relationships with other women in the novel, she gets in touch with her moral and physical self" (155). However, not all of Celie's female connections are helpful, although there are some beneficial ones which hugely alter her life path. The female connections in *The Color Purple* lie between Celie and the following

characters: Celie's mother, Kate, Shug, Nettie and Sofia. Some of them pave the way for Celie's development, while others actually block her path to self-actualisation.

Dysfunctional Mother-Daughter Relationship

Celie's primary female connection is with her mother, arguably a central element of the novel which has been overlooked by some critics. Carolyn Williams believe that Celie's first female bonding role is with her sister Nettie, as she says in "Trying to Do Without God": "with her mother gone, Celie herself is left in the position of surrogate mother to her sister, Nettie, who becomes her primary female relation" (79). Although the mother-daughter relationship is brief and dysfunctional, it has an impact on Celie as her first and most important female relationship. As she describes it: "My mama fuss at me an look at me" (1). This demonstrates that her mother pays some attention to her but also insults her: even when she is dying, her mother is "screaming" and "cussing" at Celie (2). Celie mentions her mother's name only once in the novel, when she addresses her as "little Lucious" (1) in the second paragraph of her first letter to God, in which she describes Pa's attempts to have sex with her mother: "Last spring after little Lucious come I heard them fussing. He was pulling on her arm. She say it too soon, Fonso. I ain't well" (1). Her mother's name also seems more like a nickname than a name; ironically, Lucious suggests the adjective 'luscious', which can mean "having sexual appeal", or a rich, deep flavour. Celie describes her mother as, "too sick to last long" (1), so her appeal, sexual or otherwise, is not bound to last. Celie thus is left to stand in as an alternative to her mother to meet Pa's expectations.

Talking about her mother early on in the novel shows the significance of this connection for Celie. Celie only once mentions that her mother is happy: "She happy, cause he [Pa] got her now"(1). The reason for her happiness is because she is taken by a man, and she hints to Celie that being owned by a man brings a woman happiness, rather than helping Celie seeking the sense of possession within her self not in others. Katherine Payant in *Becoming and Bonding* argues that, with respect to Walker's cast of characters: "Women […] lack self-esteem

and continually try to find it through romantic love with men" (19). As a figure who seems to learn such self-defeating practices from her mother, Celie remains completely submissive to Pa and Mister, and she does not even look elsewhere for romance. Payant suggests that this is because she has never seen or been taught about romantic relationships. Celie is used as a substitute by her mother to meet what she believes are her responsibilities of having sexual relations with Pa. Celie, then, is repeatedly raped by him because, as he tells Celie: "You gonna do what your mammy wouldn't"(1). Fourteen-year-old Celie's mind and body are raped by Pa, the patriarch, and her mother's refusal, or inability, to protect her contributes to these acts. The biological mother is inadequate in terms of care and guidance; the surrogate mother comes to replace her in *The Color Purple* through other female characters such as Kate, Shug, Sofia and Nettie.

The rape makes Celie fall into silence, as Pa threatens her: "you'd better not never tell nobody but God. It's kill your mammy" (3). Still, she finds an alternative to escape her verbal silence. The novel starts with Celie's letters to God, which is how Celie can find an outlet from her life's problems and pressures. The way Celie chooses to express her feelings and emotions is also significant since it implies a cleverness in conveying her own voice in the form of letter writing. It is worth stressing here that letter writing was a popular narrative device in 19th century English literature. Indeed, Alice Walker was very much influenced by the authors of the 19th century, such as Jane Austen (Alice Walker interview). For example, there are thirteen letters featured in *Pride and Prejudice* and six in *Sense and Sensibility*. "An epistolary novel," Joe Bray writes, "is often thought to present a relatively unsophisticated and transparent version of subjectivity, as its letter-writers apparently jot down whatever is passing through their heads at the moment of writing" (1). However, this is the best and most transparent way for Celie to express her emotions, as she is forbidden to talk with anyone. As cited above, it is worth stressing that Pa threatens her: "You better not tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy" (3).

Walker thus uses the epistolary form and applies it to an African-American literary history marked by silence:[36] as a means of allowing her characters to think out loud even if they cannot speak out loud. It is through writing that Celie can initially express and begin to distance herself from her miseries. This brings her moments of privacy, when she considers herself to be the only one who can act without interruption as she had always been ordered about and ruled by either her mother, Pa or Mister. Writing helps Celie to express her emotions and it even enables her to revise and rethink her ideas about God, family and her self, as will be discussed later in this section.

Kate: The First Woman Rejecting Patriarchy

Kate, Mister's sister, has received scant critical attention in relation to Celie's quest for identity. Though her presence in the novel is brief, her influence is in fact considerable; Kate is the first female in Celie's life, following her marriage, who attempts to form a female connection with her. Some critics, such as Katherine Payant in *Becoming and Bonding*, regard Celie's first female bond as being with Sofia and not with Kate: "Celie finds her way out of this brutal existence through female bonds, first with Sofia, a feisty girl" (80).[37] The second time that Kate comes to visit Celie, she asks Mister to "buy Celie some clothes"(20) and then goes shopping with Celie, telling her: "you deserve more than this"(20). Celie is delighted, as it is the first time in her life that she wears a new dress, rather than a second-hand one: "I can't remember being the first one in my own dress" (20). The symbol of clothes and dressing is significant for Celie because she does not feel good about herself when she wears clothes she dislikes: "I hate the way I look, I hate the way I'm dress. Nothing but churchgoing clothes in my chifferobe"

[36] Alice Walker also found writing when she was in solitude and seclusion, after she had been shot in the eye by her brother at the age of eight, while playing together. She says: "I retreated into solitude and read stories and began to write poems" (*Everyday Use* 56).

[37] Mel Watkins also in his review on *The Color Purple* does not consider Kate as one of primary Celie's female connections: "Bolstered by her contacts with other women and by her affection for her younger sister, Netti [sic]- who with Celie's help has fled to Africa with a missionary group- Celie eventually leaves Albert …" (16). Lauren Berlant in "Race, Gender and Nation in *The Color Purple*" writes: "Sofia is the first woman Celie knows who refuses to accede to both the patriarchal and the racist demand that the black woman demonstrate her abjection to her oppressors" (219).

(64). Celie wants to dress up so that she can be pleased with her 'self'—her figure as seen by others. Celie knows that if she dresses nicely she will attract Mister's attention, since she says: "Mr._____ looking at Shug's bright black skin in her tight red dress, her feet in little sassy red shoes. Her hair shining in waves" (64). In her opinion, if she dresses well she will be valued; but it is only when she takes complete control her clothes and outward appearance that she achieves her self-esteem. At the end of the novel, Celie's pants-making job is significant, because she sees making clothes and intervening in the social codes of dress as a means of advancing a self-identity; and through selling pants to others, she can pass on a sense of self-esteem. The joy Kate brings to Celie's life is significant here, since she helps Celie begin to recognise her identity in wearing what she wants. Kate paves the way for Celie to enjoy her appearance so it can give her more self-confidence. This is actually the first time that Celie tries to understand that she deserves to have something which belongs to her alone, which has not been used by others, socially regulated by others. She is wearing a new dress which provides her with a new look. This is the first step in her progression towards self-awareness and correcting the perception of own womanhood that her mother had conveyed to her. This is a trend that begins with Kate and firmly continues with Shug, Sofia and Nettie.

Kate's help is not restricted to this gesture, as she reminds Celie that all of the household chores are in fact not on her shoulders. She asks Harpo to help Celie, but he refuses by pointing out patriarchal norms: "Women work, I'm a man" (20). After being berated by Mister, Kate was "shaking" and "so mad tears be flying every which way while she pack" (22), and she leaves Celie. Although she leaves, she passes her last words to Celie: "You got to fight them, Celie. [...] I can't do it for you. You got to fight them for yourself" (21). This is sound advice for Celie, as the only role she plays out is one of subordination. Kate wants Celie to fight for her own rights, because no one else can help her. This is the first female friendship in Celie's life after marriage, and is very crucial to Celie's path as Kate brings a new dress, new thoughts

of selfhood, and she finally pushes her to fight. The other factor that causes this bond to be even more unique is that Kate is Mister's sister, and she has these liberating thoughts of womanhood instead of being a submissive woman in a patriarchal family with Mister and her father. However, because Celie has identified with her mother and her submissive ideology, she is still lost in her own world; she does not respond well to Kate's actions, yet this bond is a promising beginning for subsequent female connections and her discovery of liberty.

Shug and Celie: Womanist Relationship

The period the novel is set in is between 1900 and around 1940. In this era, African-American women, it might go without saying, were not given much social standing and respect. Douglas Hurt writes: "A woman was likely to have passes made at her and insults meted out if men's propositions were refused" (*African American Life,* 119).[38] However, *The Color Purple* tells the story of Celie in company with other women as if they were at the centre of the social system. Shug, the blues singer, for example is one of the women in this novel who represents an alternate historical sphere in African-American history; reflecting the centrality of women as producers of entertainment and performance (as in the 1920s Harlem Renaissance) and their place in African-American cultural production.

Celie's most important female bonding relationship is with Shug, Mister's mistress. Together with her relationships with other women, her sisterhood with Shug returns the lost Celie back to the real world. She supports, protects and helps Celie understand her own body and her sexual pleasure. Ruth Weston says that, "the rite of passage comes through a different sort of literal touching of the self, in Celie's sexual awakening by Shug Avery" (156). Shug believes that Celie is still a virgin; although she was raped by her stepfather and her husband, she never experiences sexual pleasure until she sleeps with Shug. Shug plays out different roles in Celie's life, as she is her lover, mother, sister and teacher. When Shug helps Celie to discover

[38] See Douglas Hurt. *African American Life in Rural South 1900-1950*; pp.115-125.

her sexuality and to have an orgasm (74), she is actually helping her to take pleasure from what she owns, not seeking pleasure in others or serving others. Shug actually helps Celie to 'possess the secret of joy'. To Celie, sex was previously like going to the "toilet" (74), so she did not care if Shug wanted to sleep with Mister or not. However, her perspective towards sex changes completely even to the extent that she cries and hides herself under a quilt (75) when she realises that Shug was sleeping with Mister. Sexual pleasure is the only feeling that gives her a sense of belonging; when she realises that she has "a button" which can give her deep pleasure, she becomes passionately excited and for the first time in the novel she says: "It mine" (75). Ellen Barker describes this emotion: "with her new found identity, Celie is able to break free from male domination and join a community of women for support, and she begins to establish an identification through a network of female relationships with Shug" (61). Following on from Kate's help, Shug opens new doors for Celie into womanhood and self-realisation.

This help is useful and empowers Celie, as it gives her an intimate perception of self. Immediately after helping Celie to appreciate her sexual organ and her sexual pleasure, however, Shug sleeps with Mister and ignores Celie. This deed causes Celie to fall into sadness and she weeps (75). This was especially the case on this night as Celie had just found a way to happiness with Shug's help; she needed more attention from Shug but was deprived of it. It is with Shug that Celie finds her most private part; Shug is part of her privacy. But to Celie, Shug leaves her and shares in this sense Celie's privacy with Mister, who is Celie's enemy. Before understanding her own sexuality, Celie did not mind if Shug slept with Mister but immediately after that, things change in her mind. Celie thinks of herself as useless/unloved when Mister and Shug sleep together and both ignore her. She says: "When I hear them together all I can do is pull the quilt over my head and finger my little button and titties and cry" (75). Her lesson in pleasure has been transformed into pain. This is the second time in the novel that Celie cries.

The first time was when Pa raped her, and "when that hurt, I [Celie] cry" (3). However, this time, she hears Shug and Mister, and so cries –in many ways an echo of this early trauma.

Sexuality is crucial here, as well as in Walker's other works, in helping a character like Celie feel either powerful or powerless. The critic Susan Willis believes that Celie is no longer a lesbian lover at the end of the novel (89). This is true, since Celie did not achieve happiness and satisfaction in any of her sexual relationships; not with men, nor with women. In this sense Celie's self-worth does not end up relying upon a lesbian identity or physical relationships with women, but must necessarily be generated through a more autonomous sense of her desires and social position. The sexual relationship with Shug helps Celie to discover her sexual self. Although she yearns for Shug's sexual companionship, Celie does not receive it. However being in women's community and engaging in sexual acts with Shug makes her a lesbian character in Walker's novels. However, Celie's sexuality arguably remains fluid and unfixed. Payant states: "Many radical lesbian feminists believe that sex with men is bound to be oppressive for women, and urge a lesbian lifestyle as an alternative to the brutalization they see in heterosexual relationships; for them, sexual relations with women are the only true form of feminism" (19). However, *The Color Purple* demonstrates that even homosexuality as an alternative to "brutalisation" cannot guarantee Celie's freedom from oppression, nor lead to her sexual liberty. The movement towards womanism suggested here rarely seems resolved through ascribing to one identity, once practice or another. This constant sense of ongoing evolution, of identity as something unfinished and malleable, perhaps begins to suggest Walker's ongoing use of characters established here, such as Celie, in changing and transmuted forms in further novels.

Throughout this novel Shug dismisses Celie several times. The first time is when Celie wants to help a sick Shug take a bath. Instead of appreciating her kindness, she says "What you staring at? She ast. Hateful. She weak as a kitten. But her mouth pack with claws" (47). Shug

treats Celie as if she is her servant and it is her responsibility to serve her (47). However, at that moment Shug is totally helpless and in need of serious help since she is "sick and nobody in this town want to take [her] in" (42). Although Shug is very harsh with Celie, it has an indirect positive effect on Celie, since for the first time she sees a woman as an authoritative figure, although she is physically weak.

The relationship between Celie and Shug becomes stronger and deeper. "Shug's and Celie's bond," Ellen Barker writes, "becomes stronger and their love and respect as friends begins to deepen, gradually transforming Celie's 'oppression into self-authorization.' Validating Shug's 'unconditional' approval of Celie as friend and confidant, Shug dedicates a song to her" (58). Indeed, after recovering, Shug tries to appreciate Celie by dedicating a song to her. Shug, as a blues singer, thanks Celie for taking care of her, in "Miss Celie's Song". Blues powerfully expresses the hardship and oppression experienced by African-Americans. Ralph Ellison in "Richard Wright's Blues" defines blues as:

> ...an impulse to keep the painful detail and episodes of a brutal existence alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jazzed grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it in a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism. As a form blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically (68).

Accordingly, the blues is a way for African Americans to express the miseries of their difficult lives in a lyrical and musical form, cathartically sharing through them their pains and sufferings, so that they become aware of each other's hardships. If, for example, many people suffer a similar situation, through the blues they can understand that they are not alone in their pain, and can push away imposed silences. Through this genre, many African Americans are able to join together and experience a sense of unity which they have hitherto been denied.

Consequently, the blues is a way of self-expression.[39] It is the first time that Celie feels that she is important to anyone, saying: "First time somebody made something and name it after me" (74). It is the first time that Celie's name is announced in public in terms of appreciation, and she becomes the centre of attention for just a few minutes in her life, recognising herself as an individual among all the men and women present at the event.

As the blues are a genre dealing with personal pains, Shug also sings about Celie's personal, aching life. Celie says: "It [the song] all about some no count man doing her wrong, again. But I don't listen to that part" (65). The song is about Celie's problem with Mister, and although Shug suggests that Celie should not pay any attention to them, Celie does not want to "listen to that part". According to Courtney George in "My Man treats me like a slave": "Shug's song acts as a catalyst for Celie's change, but Celie herself - as a female audience member - shrugs off the patriarchal values and understands the song's hidden meaning as a tribute to her individual personhood and womanhood" (139). Celie and the pain she experiences in her heterosexual relationship is publically revealed by Shug, who speaks it out loud, although Celie herself remains silent, expressing herself in writing.

Although the bond between Shug and Celie becomes stronger after Shug's illness, it is never an 'unconditional' union since Shug never completely commits to her sexual partner, Celie. Throughout the novel, Shug leaves Celie and then returns to her, carrying on bisexual affairs. Each time she arrives, Shug portrays an attitude which emphasises that their love and bond is not unconditional. For example, Shug ignores Celie when she comes back with her newly married husband Grady (100). On this day, Shug hugs everybody else first and Celie is the last person she greets. This actually causes great distress to Celie as she says, "finally Shug really seem to notice me. She come over and hug me a long time" (100). After hugging her,

[39] See Naghana Tamu Lewis; "In a Different Chord: Interpreting the Relations among Black Female Sexuality, Agency, and the Blues". *African American Review*. Vol. 37, No. 4 (Winter 2003): 599-601. James B. Stewart; "Message in the Music: Political Commentary in Black Popular Music from Rhythm and Blues to Early Hip Hop". *The Journal of African American History*. Vol. 90. No. 3 (Summer 2005): 197-199.

the first thing she says to Celie is that "Us two married ladies now" (100), but the question is whether Shug really does see Celie as a married woman, despite all her knowledge about Celie's miseries and difficult life. Barker writes that, "When Shug returns to Mr._____'s house with her new husband Grady, Shug and Celie develop a more stabilizing, intimate bond" (61). It can also be true to say that the way Shug behaves never gives confidence to Celie that she can rely on their partnership, or even their friendship, as Shug is not as consistent as Celie and their female bond seems less central to her.

Shug, of course, has her own weaknesses and failures. Although for Celie, Shug is a teacher and a person on whom she can depend and trust, Shug never affirms this way of thinking and wants her own individuality and independence. Shug, as a bisexual woman, sleeps with Celie and then with her other male partners and never feels regret –even if it hurts Celie's feelings- because she is doing what she wants. However, there is also a significant lesson for Celie not to depend on anyone except her self. Therefore, even on this occasion, Shug's presence in Celie's life is extremely helpful and this relationship pushes her forward to realise her own individuality and independence which is a positive effect of womanism. As a womanist, Shug is pursuing her own quest and at the same time being an individual and liberated woman. This attitude perhaps paradoxically helps Celie to stand on her own two feet.

However, Celie helps Shug regardless of all of these negative ideas about her. This shows how strong and decisive she is in her ways and attitudes. Celie, who at first appears weak and oppressed, and who has been abused throughout her life, warmly welcomes her husband's mistress and does whatever she can to help her. But, in her first visit to Celie, helpless Shug tells Celie "You sure *is* ugly" (44). Celie, however, kind and patient, ignores her impoliteness and opens her arms to Shug. Celie "work on her like she a doll or like she Olivia [Celie's daughter] –or like she mama" (51). Celie's love for Shug is unconditional, "like she mama", but Shug's love for her is never the same. Indeed, Celie is such a responsible mother

that she never stops thinking about her own children, even though she has been told that they are dead (5). Her strong maternal sense enables her to recognise her daughter in a busy store (15).[40] She gains this strength throughout the novel, changing the course of her life even though she suffers many difficulties. It should be mentioned that the fact that Celie unconditionally loves her children, and is very committed and responsible, cannot wholly be seen as a positive attribute as, in this case, she persistently sacrifices her self and her individuality for the sake of others, finding happiness only if she serves others. This is a very crucial problem for Celie because since childhood she was been taught by her own mother to serve others. However, she needs to find happiness in a different way, where (unlike her mother) her individuality is not sacrificed.

Sofia and the Power of Resistance

Apart from Celie's relationship with Shug, there are other female friendships which help Celie to realise her individuality and independence. Celie's relationships with her sister, Nettie, and her friend, Sofia, are also significant. However, they are not as important as her relationship with Shug, as Shug is the only female friend who is habitually by her side while Nettie and Sofia are away. Moreover, Shug's influence on Celie is more considerable when compared to Sofia or Nettie. Sofia helps Celie to fight and stand against any oppression. Lauren Berlant writes, "Sofia is the first woman Celie knows who refuses to accede to both the patriarchal and the racist demand that the black woman demonstrate her abjection to her oppressors" (12). However, it was Kate who pushed Celie to fight. Sofia suffers for many years because of her beliefs and ideas since she does not want to be treated as a slave by anyone, especially by whites. She also stands against male power, as when Harpo "punch her in stomach, she come up with both hands lock right under his privates" (37). In a similar way to Shug, Sofia also shows another form of feminine power. As discussed previously, Shug imposes her power upon

[40] Celie's ability to recognise her own child after a few years, and very randomly in the market, suggests Walker's interest in spirituality and supernatural power which she develops in her later work. See Chapter Six.

males by seducing them, and her sexual attraction is a means of making men follow her. Sofia shows the physical power of women and proves that men cannot always have physical privileges over women. Shug's courage and Sofia's recklessness make Celie stand against Mister as she shouts at him in front of others and cuts down his power. "You lowdown dog is what's wrong. It's time to leave you and enter into the Creation. And your dead body just the welcome mat I need" (180). Although Sofia is physically weak and fallible at the end of the novel, she is still so dear to Celie that she gives her a job and lets Sofia work as her assistant in her tailoring business. Despite Sofia's weakness, she has done what she wanted and has not allowed anyone to break her rules and beliefs. She has fought as hard as she could and has never given up. Even though Sofia worked in Eleanor's –Mayor's- house for years and Miss Eleanor Jane had a good relationship with Sofia, she never showed any tendency to reduce her rage and anger against them and never forgot the boundaries between them. Sofia is the person in Celie's life who teaches her not to step back from her rights and beliefs.

At the beginning of the novel, Celie is effectively a version of a mammy figure[41]--though not directly serving a white household, a kind of servile presence in both Pa's and Mister's houses. But through observing Sofia and her attitude in rejecting the mammy role, she succeeds in starting to respect a different kind of womanhood. At the end of the novel it is Celie who asks Sofia to start working in her store, which shows that not only does she reject the mammy or servant figure herself, she refuses to be regarded as a mammy figure in white society. When the Mayor's wife notices how clean Sofia's children are, she asks Sofia to work in their house, and she promptly replies: "Hell, no" (76). Collins, in *Black Feminist Thought*, writes: "By loving, nurturing, and caring for her White children and "family" better than her own, the mammy symbolizes the dominant group's perceptions of the ideal Black female relationship to elite White male power" (72). As a black woman Sophia does not want to be a

[41] As Patricia Hill Collins defines this as "the faithful, obedient, domestic servant" (*Black Feminist Thought*, 72).

mammy figure, even though her boldness results in her imprisonment. After suffering a short period in jail, she is sentenced to work in the Mayor's house, during which time only Eleanor Jane, the Mayor's daughter, shows her any kindness. According to Linda Selzer in "Race and Domesticity in *The Color Purple*", "Sophia [sic] is entirely unsuited for the role of mammy, but whites — including and perhaps especially Miss Eleanor Jane — continually expect her to behave according to their cultural representations of the black mother"(148). Sofia even refuses to show any feeling towards Eleanor's son, as she cannot forgive the cruelty of whites against her. Sofia believes that white society will teach the son how to look down at black people (225).

Although Sofia definitely has some positive features, she also has some negative impact. One of her biases, is that she believes all whites are total oppressors and there is no difference between any of them, from a child to an adult. When Miss Eleanor Jane asks her whether she loves her child, she says, "I don't love him....I love children, say Sofia. But all the colored women that say they love yours is lying....Some colored people so scared of white folks they claim to love the cotton gin" (240). It is quite acceptable if Sofia does not like these white children, but she should not be speaking for the other 'colored' women since she is actually over-generalising due to her anger against whites.[42] The other message that Sofia conveys to Miss Eleanor Jane is that Sofia threatens her in her love for her son: "You can love him just as much as you want to. But be ready to suffer the consequences. That's how the colored lived" (241). Now Sofia steps forward as her anger is aimed at all white males as well. Her anger is understandable, as she was tortured thoroughly in prison and she does not have good memories of white men. However, she also seems to exaggerate some behaviours of white people. At times, Sofia's reductive views of difference seem to extend at large to an idea that all white people are, as an undifferentiated group, mindless oppressors. For example, when the Mayor's

[42] This is what Grange does in the third part of his life. He is filled with hatred and this acrimony towards white people, which causes him to feel secluded. However, Sofia's hatred does not lead her to failure as she benefits from the company of Celie and Shug, whereas Grange does not have any bonding and this drags him into absolute solitude.

wife decides to take Sofia back home for a short while, it is shown that the white woman is so helpless she cannot even drive a car, and if black people were not around she would not even be able to drive back home. However, her decision to take Sofia home perhaps suggests elements of a good nature: it is a reward for Sofia's work in their house. Perhaps, Sofia expects too much from white people: her experience has led to a manichean world view which only understands extremes of good and bad, right and wrong –perhaps a mirror image of the oppressors themselves.

Brought up in male-dominated family, Sofia suffered a lot during her childhood so she assumes that all males are the same and they should be disregarded. This point has made her very tough, as she was always fighting with her brothers throughout her childhood. All of these clashes make Sofia liable to harshness and aggressiveness. Therefore, she is tough, like the men in her family, but she criticises them for the same reason. She even admits that, "All my life I had to fight. I had to fight my daddy. I had to fight my brothers. I had to fight my cousins and my uncles. A girl child ain't safe in a family of men" (39). This embattled world view is one that informs Celie, but that over time Celie also finds a need to step back from, or transcend in seeking new forms of enlightened self-awareness.

Throughout the novel, Sofia never has a close relationship. Her relationships are all influenced by her past and problems in her early life. Sofia's relationship with Harpo is also affected by her tough background. Although Harpo wants to be like her father, to be oppressive to his wife (35), he is never like his father inside. The reason that Sofia wants to fight with him is not just because Harpo is a patriarch like his father, but also because she wants to unload her anger towards men on Harpo. Because she is unable to have a close relationship with anyone, she is usually segregated and alone. Sofia is like an invisible woman who is always moving from place to place, restless. She seems solipsistic, alone. In this loneliness, she wants to judge others and cannot bear any resistance to her beliefs. Because she is filled with rage, she cannot

accept any love or affection from others. She wants to fight and make others fight regardless of the consequences. She is more aggressive even than some men in the novel, such as Harpo and Shug's male partners.

Sofia is essentially an aggressive character who can never find peace. Although the novel generally depicts her as being physically powerful, she is totally helpless in managing her life and her personal issues. Sofia is chiefly a disruptive troublemaker rather than an empowered black woman. The difference between her power and Shug's power is that Shug never uses her power to put herself in trouble, and she mostly seeks happiness and desires pleasure. However, Sofia is more confused than Shug and she cannot understand what she really wants. She is unable to have powerful reasoning, as her decisions are principally made as a result of her emotions. One of the occasions when her anger is understandable is when she goes to Celie to find out why she told Harpo to beat her (35). But, in her meeting with Celie, nothing untoward happens since at that moment Celie herself is very weak. She immediately recognises Sofia's power by saying, ""I say it cause I'm a fool, I say. I say it cause I'm jealous of you. I say it cause you do what I can't". "What that?" She say. "Fight". I say" (39). This is why Sofia does not instigate a clash with Celie, while we also see Celie gradually discovering her own limitations, opening the door on to her potential.

As Sofia was usually considered as a weak person in her childhood, when Celie recognises her power and confesses her own weakness and jealousy, Sofia actually regains her self-confidence and tries initiate a good relationship with her. Celie shows her ability to begin a relationship with another woman, after Shug, and Sofia becomes one of her first new friends in the novel. As with the beginning of her relationship with Shug, in her relationship with Sofia, Celie takes the first steps, and behaves so humbly that it helps to calm an angry Sofia. Although Sofia has some weak points, she can help Celie considerably. "Celie and Sofia," Judy Elsly writes, "move through confrontation to reconciliation with each other. Their joint quiltmaking

marks the beginning of Celie's journey to selfhood" (165). What Celie learns from Sofia is that she can stand on her own two feet and assert her voice. Celie also understands that being a woman does not mean being inferior and subservient; she can be a woman *and* have her own individuality and enjoy her liberty. She also helps Celie stand against Mister's cruelty by saying: "You ought to bash Mr. _____ head open" (47). Celie is inspired to fight for her life when Kate tells her to fight, and by observing Sofia fighting. Although Sofia is a very aggressive woman, Celie is not like her. Celie learns to comprehend her own strengths, and never tries to be aggressive in the same way as Sofia. Throughout the novel, Sofia just resists and she is unable to manage after this resistance. However, Celie understands the value and problems with this form of resistance through her bonding with other females, which provides perspective on to different versions of black womens' resistance, and a recognition of different strategies for developing resilience and self-actualization.

Nettie and African Heritage

According to bell hooks in *Belonging*, "choosing a place to die is as vital as choosing where and how to live" (6). In African-American history, numerous women migrated from the South to the North (they are labelled 'New Negro Women')[43] as part of the First, and Second Great Migration (1910–1970). There are two examples of migration in this novel. The first one is Nettie's migration from the South to Africa, and the second one involves Celie's journey from Georgia to Mississippi. The similarity between these migrations is that they both remain attached to their roots. Meanwhile, many 'New Negro Women' in the North were suffering as part of the diaspora; many came back to the South after a period of time. With regard to the black women in the North, Paula Giddings writes, "for the first time, significant numbers of black women were earning decent wages in the mainstream of the American labor force" (143). However, at the same time, they were discriminated against by whites and they had to endure

[43] See Paula Giddings. *When And Where I Entre*; pp. 135-152

racism.[44] Verifying scenarios outlined in novels such as Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, Giddings indicates that, "In a time of intense union activity among white men and women, black women encountered the same kind of racial discrimination levelled at black men" (Giddings, 144). The significant point in Celie's migration is that when she moves to Mississippi, she begins a successful new career as a tailor, making pants. It is interesting to note, then, that black women who migrated to the North "were also largely excluded from the garment industry, despite their long tradition in dressmaking" (Giddings, 146). The novel tackles the significance of remaining in the South, and establishing the union among black people, instead of portraying the women as leaving home and facing the issues that the 'New Negro Woman' had to suffer. The novel was written approximately a decade after the Great Migration was unofficially finished, so Celie's and Nettie's migration back to their roots and their clinging to the place they belong to, contrasts with the lack of ability to achieve of many black people who were part of the Great Migration. In *Belonging*, hooks emphasises the importance of home and identity: "living away from my native place I become more consciously Kentuckian than I was when I lived at home. This is what the experience of exile can do, change your mind, utterly transform one's perception of the world of home" (13). The two migrations in the novel seem to tally with hooks' concept of migration. Celie moves, while nonetheless remaining in the South, and Nettie leaves her native home, searching for roots in Africa. In many ways both develop a better perception of home, and new surroundings ultimately enable both Nettie and Celie to have a sense of belonging to the place they live.

At the beginning of the novel, Nettie is supposed to become a teacher in accordance with the wishes of her stepfather and Celie. However, she becomes a missionary and starts to travel, through which she explores many places, so she gains new knowledge. Her travel to

[44] "Because in many instances white women refused to work side by side with Black women, the latter usually had to perform the worse jobs, under segregated and dirty conditions" (Giddings 144).

Africa as a missionary is significant as she goes there to convey her religious message, however she is more influenced and amused by African culture and life than she influences others by her sermons. “Sometimes I feel our position is like that of flies on an elephant's hide," (213) she confides to Celie, "they never even listen to how we've suffered. And if they listen they say stupid things” (214). Nettie and her other friends are unable to carry out their duty as missionaries and instead realise their own uselessness, and later are themselves are influenced by the ‘native’ black people. The “Black president himself refers to his people as “natives,” as Nettie remarks, “it was the first time I'd heard a black man use that word” (127). Nettie’s trip to Africa makes her aware of her origins. The fact that blacks can have a sense of belonging to a region, and this sense of belonging to a place, is conveyed to Celie as well. Talking about Africa, and specifically Olinka, where she is sent to preach Christianity, Nettie describes that the people of Olinka refuse to accept a white God. Tamar Katz, in “Show me how to do like you” says:

> Ultimately, the education the missionaries offer—an education in the name of a white, male God whose existence the novel itself finally denies—is powerless to help the Olinka (68).

Nettie also describes how Olinkans see white people’s inability even to survive in the African weather. “In a rainy season some of you will probably die. You people do not last long in our climate” (137). Olinkans reject British colonialism; they refuse to be changed and want colonists to go back to their own countries: “We have seen it all before. You Christians come here, try hard to change us, get sick and go back to England, or wherever you come from” (137). Olinkans seem irrepressible. This helps both Nettie and Celie have a renewed strength of feeling about their blackness.[45]

[45] Both Walker and Zora Neale Hurston depict heritage and culture as essential elements. Nettie’s description of Olinkans and their rituals enables Celie to become familiar with her roots and history. Hurston also does the same, but in a slightly different way. It may be Hurston’s influence on Walker that brings her to depict the significance

The other significance of Celie's bond with her sister is that they shape *The Color Purple* as an epistolary novel. Celie and Nettie meet each other at the end of the novel, though throughout the novel Nettie is mostly away from her; however they are always present in each others' minds even while being absent physically. [46] "Both women," Yvonne Johnson writes, "are writing their letters to potentially unresponsive addressees, but neither of their (written) voices can be silenced by patriarchy" (227). Both women do not speak about their own experiences but they can at least express themselves and their emotions through writing. This is very significant as they can realise their own voices in this way and can better understand themselves and their feelings. This novel also conveys the message that through letter writing women can meet their own desire to speak and, in addition, verbal expression is a way of realising one's identity. Letter writing for Nettie and Celie has the same function; they are both alone and they need someone to talk to. They both write letters but they do not receive any replies. Thus, writing letters fulfils a need to realise their own identity, more or less in isolation rather than in collaboration or interaction with another, and assert their own voices. Both Celie and Nettie are answering their own desires to express themselves and they select exactly the same manner of achieving this goal. It is the only sister-sister relationship in the novel. As discussed earlier, Celie is always concerned about Nettie and her future. Even in her relationship with Shug, the peak of their relationship, after helping Celie finding out about her own body, is when Shug helps Celie to find Nettie's letters. This is when Celie feels more content and more powerful. When she realises that her sister is still alive and loves her (113), Celie's sense of belonging grows stronger in the sense that she has a sister whom she loves. A

of the black heritage in her novel. But it is obvious that in her dialogue with Hurston, she supports her idea and develops it.

[46] The effect of absence is also a common theme in Walker's and Morrison's works. For example, in Morrison's most celebrated novel, *Beloved*, the murdered baby, Beloved, is always present and the whole story revolves around her presence even though she is dead. Celie and Nettie's relationship is similar to that of Beloved and her mother because both of them cannot give in and throughout the novel they are always hopeful of having their 'Beloved' back. Walker and Morrison write novels where men are usually absent while their presence is tangible; in this case this theme is related to women.

sister that shares all her childhood memories with her. A sister who belongs to Celie's family. This helps her to be more confident than before. Celie writes to God, "Now I know Nettie alive I begin to strut a little bit. Think, when she come home us leave here (133). This feeling helps her change her attitude towards Mister, Pa and even God. Reading Nettie's letters, Celie realises that "My daddy lynch. My mama crazy. All my little half-brothers and sisters no kin to me. My children not my brother and sister. Pa not Pa. You [God] *must be sleep* [emphasis added] (160). From this point on, having learnt the way to fight from Sofia, and having the sense of belonging, Celie attempts to reject any hurdles in her life and tries to pave her own path towards individuality.

Another of Nettie's great influences on Celie, which has not been considered by other critics, is that through Nettie, Celie can understand that it is possible to have a happy heterosexual life. Neither Sofia nor Shug can bring this realisation to Celie, since they were never able to have a successful life with their husbands over a long period of time. Sofia and Harpo were in love at the beginning of their relationship, but things changed later in their life and hatred replaced love. Shug wants to use her sexual power to convince herself of her beauty, and that she is still able to attract attention.[47] However, Nettie and Samuel's relationship, unlike Shug's or Sofia's, is more stable and to some extent effective. It at least gives an example to Celie that it is possible to have a peaceful heterosexual relationship. Nettie and Samuel's relationship is, however, exaggerated in that there is no trace of any problems in their lives. It is as if they are a perfect couple and they never argue. The only problem in their life is Samuel's wife; when she learns of the affair between her husband and Nettie, she becomes anxious to

[47] The other reason for this is that Shug yearns for fatherly love. The novel very subtly hints at the fact that Shug wanted to have an intimate relationship with her father but she found her mother to be an obstacle: "My daddy love me to kiss and hug him, but she [Shug's mother] did not like the looks of that" (110). This deferred desire appears in her relationships with other men, as Shug says: "So when I met Albert [Mister], at once I got in his arms, nothing could git me out" (110). Similarly, a lack of father-daughter relationship is what Josie also suffers from in *The Third Life*. She wants to attract men's attention so she can feel self-worth. Shug also goes from one man to another and this bewilderment never ends. These two women share common father-daughter issues and also the same attitude towards the men around them.

find out more. However, even this problem does not have any affect on their relationship as she dies after an illness. Although this fairytale-like relationship brings about a change to Celie's view of heterosexual life, it is not strong enough to make Celie re-initiate her life with Mister or any other men. Her fear of men remains with her to the end of the novel.

Male Characters and The Cycle of Patriarchal and Masculine Silence

Although *The Color Purple* includes various types of female bonding, men's homosocial and heterosexual relationships are also explored a great deal. In this novel, different male bonds are accompanied with issues of rivalry and the question of power. As in *The Third Life,* there are three generations, but in this novel the third generation is a man, Harpo. A similar issue in both novels is that patriarchy leads men into silence in the presence of the older generation. For example, Brownfield falls silent in his father's presence, and in this novel Grange does the same in Old Mister's (his father) presence, as does Harpo when he is near Mister. The other common point *The Third Life* and *The Color Purple* is that Mister becomes a very lenient and mild character who is completely different from his earlier harsh and oppressive persona, similar to Grange in the third part of his life. However, despite the First Great Migration (1910–1930) taking place during the course of the novel, Mister and the other black men in *The Color Purple* show no tendency move to the North. Mister's family is seen as one of the few families at that time to be financially independent.[48]

The father-son relationship between Mister and Harpo is a fine example how males hamper each other and prevent the bonds from being functional. Mister and Harpo think that in order to prove their power they should be physically strong and be able to oppress others. However, this does not work for any of them, and makes them weaker than before. Throughout the novel, Mister wants a supreme power which he is unable to sustain. In order to be the ruler of his house, he insists on obedience from others, including his son, Harpo. As discussed

[48] See Douglas Hurt. *African American Life in Rural South 1900-1950*; pp.115-125.

earlier, Mister degrades Harpo in front of Sofia. Brought up in this situation, Harpo becomes so weak and dependent and therefore confused, since he wants to be, like his father, oppressive and authoritative (35) to his wife. His emasculation by Mister, however, prevents him from doing this. Harpo never experiences parental love and throughout the novel he is always going around a futile circle, like the men in *The Third Life*. He is so neutral and passive that he does not make any decisions or take any actions. The first time Harpo brings Sofia home to meet his father, Mister degrades Harpo in front of Sofia, however Harpo does not do anything and just acts as an observer (31). Mister does not want his son to be happy and successful so he decides to put him down. In order to do so, he firstly degrades Sofia and then Harpo. Mister tries to downgrade others so he can feel powerful in own mind:

> "Young womens no good these days, he say. Got they legs open to every Tom, Dick and Harry. Harpo look like he never seen him before. But he don't say anything. Mr ------ say, No need to think I'm gon let my boy marry you just cause you in the family way. He young and limited. Pretty gal like you could put anything over him" (31).

By looking down on both of them, Mister wants to show himself as the supreme power in the house. Firstly, he accuses Sofia of being a loose girl and then refers to her beauty. By belittling her, he tries to take Sofia's self-esteem away and then by back-handedly praising her beauty, he wants to impose a label. He demands absolute control –even compliments reinforce his power further undermine his son and son's desires.

There is another father-son relationship in the novel where there is no trace of companionship and kindness. Mister's father appears only once for a very short time. Silence is also present in the meeting between Mister and his father as well as between Mister and Harpo. In both father-son relationships, the sons are silent and it is the father who has the voice and wants to be superior. As soon as Mister's father appears, Mister falls into silence. He does

not even tell his father to take a seat: “Mr ------ don’t say nothing....Won’t you have a seat? I [Celie] ast, pushing him up a chair. How bout a cool drinking of water?” (52). Hence, the first meeting between them is silence. In his short visit, the father just scolds Mister and reminds him that Mister and his son are living in his houses and working on his land.

Besides very short and distracted conversations between fathers and sons, this connection ends when it reaches the third generation. There is literally no connection of any kind between Mister’s father and his grandson, Harpo. This detachment makes them lonely and weak. Unlike the few very functional female bonds in the novel which lead to female power and individuality, men escape from each other. As they have no connections with any other men, they feel lonely and weak and in order to prove their power to themselves, they consciously or unconsciously impose their masculine power on women. However, they cannot maintain their dominance for a long time. Because they are empty inside, they are confused and bewildered like Harpo, so they will do anything in order to prove themselves. Harpo is so helpless that he even asks Celie for assistance. Celie appears the most naive character in the novel at that point. Yet Harpo is actually a lot more helpless than Celie. The father figures are similar to each other in the novel and want to look down on their sons and make them feel useless. They also praise some good points in their daughter-in-laws’ features to attract their attention and further detach themselves from their sons. Generally, the men want to emasculate their sons and show off their masculine power by insulting other men and taking their wives away emotionally. Therefore men symbolically castrate each other and lose their power, both in their own eyes and in the eyes of the women. They are jealous of each other, in a sense inverting cliches of gender expectation. In *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, the third generation ends up with a female progeny, and the novel ends by suggesting she can be stronger than her father or grandfather, as she is a kind of genius, brave and far more independent than the men. However, in *The Color Purple* the third generation of the family does not have any

hope to carry on; the male progeny, Harpo, is even more confused than Mister or his grandfather.

It is worth pausing to compare this with Toni Morrison's novel *Sula*, as there are also three generations of women consisting of Sula, her mother and her grandmother. Like the men in *The Color Purple* and *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, they do not have a very good relationship with each other. The difference is that Sula has some other female relationships which can fill the gap in her life, while in Walker's first and second novel, men do not have any other male relationships to replace their unsuccessful blood relationships. Sisterhood and surrogate motherhood are two significant phenomena which help female characters in the novels of Morrison and Walker, and it seems that men in these novels are also in need of brotherhood and surrogate fathers. Harpo does not have any friends at all, male or female. This makes him the weakest and most vulnerable character in the novel. His plea for help from Celie is a significant sign that he needs friendship to express himself. Although he has a father or had a mother, he is literally abandoned and neglected and no one shares their time with him except for Sofia and, for a short while, Squeak, his female partner after Sofia. The reason he likes Sofia is because of her physical power which he yearns to have. He thinks that being with her can bring him power and strength but as he was brought up in a patriarchal family, he could not tolerate being under the thumb of a woman since he believes that he should have "the upper hand" (35). This internal contradiction creates immense trouble in his relationship with Sofia. Then, in his second heterosexual relationship, he lives with Squeak who is totally unlike Sofia, being weak both emotionally and physically. Still, Mister downgrades Harpo in Squeak's presence: "Shut up Harpo. Us trying to think" (85). Again, in this relationship he cannot feel happy because he does not feel powerful inside. Thus, once more he turns to Sofia, but this time he is even more confused than before. In short, as the third generation of the family Harpo is detached, distracted and passive, and he remains the character in the novel who is in need of

help and companionship more than any other. This suggests Walker's reading of black masculinity is that of cyclically stunted growth: the ongoing imposition of historical and social restrictions already seen in the figure of Grange. A future depends on feminine self-empowerment—rather than masculine or patriarchal leadership. Womanist work might empower both sexes.

As mentioned previously, masculinity is a significant issue in this novel, although Walker does not offer fully developed male characters. This point can also be a sign that masculinity is absent in the male characters and, in other words, men are symbolically castrated and largely passive. Mister says, "to tell the truth, Shug act more manly than most men. I mean she upright, honest.…You know Shug will fight, he say. Just like Sofia. She bound to live her life and be herself no matter what" (244). At this stage of his life, Mister had changed, just like Grange had in the third part of his life. It is clear that Mister's interest in Shug is an attempt to regain his autonomy. In his relationship with Celie, Mister imposes his physical power so he can convince himself that he is powerful even though he knows he is weak. Therefore, he turns to Shug because she is powerful and autonomous and he wants to attach himself to her in order to obtain what he lacks. "Masculinity," Catherine Colton argues, "is not absent from Walker's utopia, it is just not present exclusively in male characters" (43). What Colton argues is plausible, as men are not as masculine as Colton expects and women, like Shug and Sofia, are more direct and extroverted. However, autonomy is the main issue for both the male and female characters in this novel. Patriarchy has the paradoxical ability to emasculate men in other men's company; as we see, Mister is submissive to his father as well as to Harpo. Men discover their masculinity through being autonomous; yet in Walker's world and in the womanist archetype, it is women who, while constrained in ways even more severely than men, seem better capable of developing strategies for attaining forms of individual and social autonomy. So Harpo, who

was brought up in a patriarchal environment, becomes attached to Sofia, who is herself an autonomous figure. Mister is interested in Shug for the very same reason.

Conclusion

The Color Purple is a novel about the suffering of women, with only scant mention of male issues and how patriarchy can initially destroy men, as well as women. The novel suggests that women can overcome patriarchy, and even dysfunctional mother-daughter relationships, through modes of female bonding. Through Shug, Celie learns how to overcome the lack of a mother-daughter relationship in her life and also becomes capable of removing the shadow of Mister's dominance. She nurtures Shug and is nurtured by her; the mutual bond between them makes them feel self-empowered. However, this bond also includes some negative components, as discussed earlier, although it is still beneficial for Celie in terms of her achieving individuality and liberty.

The novel encompasses a variety of female connections, most of which revolve around Celie. This helps her as she takes steps towards self-actualisation. For example, her bond with Kate is very brief but extremely significant throughout the rest of the novel, as Kate helps Celie with the essence of her other female bonding relationships with Sofia and Nettie. Through Sofia, Celie learns that she can stand up for herself, and through Nettie she learns that she has a home.

The male characters in the novel deal with almost all the same issues as they do in *The Third Life*. They are the first to distance themselves from the influence of patriarchy because it paradoxically silences them and makes them feel emasculated. Mister and Harpo are both denounced by their fathers and they both seek autonomy by seeking comfort and power in women. At the same time, they also want to impose their own power upon women: patriarchy is double edged. The male characters can be seen as confused by the concept of patriarchal power: they both lack and yearn for power at the same time. This trend in men, as Walker's

first and third novels show, leads to seclusion and solitude. In this sense, womanism stands in as an alternative ideology and practice, to both subvert and transcend the limits of patriarchy.

Although the novel begins with Celie's miseries, it concludes with her happiness and empowerment. This is a dramatic change which illustrates Walker's belief in transcendence and womanist potential. Celie was a shattered character at the beginning of the novel, but surprisingly she becomes the centre of power by the end. Her beliefs have changed, her wounds have recovered and her soul has been elevated. She has her own house and family and she clearly feels connected to the whole of nature, as her final letter is addressed to "all". This sense of connectedness and spirituality can be observed towards the end of this novel, but continues to develop in new directions in Walker's other novels, especially in *The Temple of My Familiar*.[49]

[49] This begins a trend in Walker's writing towards becoming more didactic and oriented around religious and spiritual issues. Dinitia Smith in her review on *The Color Purple* writes, "Walker's didacticism is especially more evident in Nettie's letters…" (20).Walker's other later novels further enhance this didactic trend.

Chapter Four

The Temple of My Familiar: Deconstructing the Concept of Marriage

"I believe in change: change personal, and change in society"
Alice Walker (*In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, 252)

Chapter Abstract

The Temple of My Familiar (1989) explores how women can gain their sexual freedom within a patriarchal society that expects women to marry, and to stay with their husbands for the rest of their lives. The novel reconfigures the traditional concept of marriage, which constrains women by requiring that they stay with their partner, regardless of how bad their relationship may be. The novel argues that love and individuality should be equally prioritized for women, and that, in order to attain these two things, women may need to sacrifice some other part of their womanhood, such as motherhood. For, according to the novel, a woman cannot be a helpful mother to her child unless she achieves love and liberation in her own interpersonal relationships; yet in order to achieve the latter, being a mother in the first place is invariably neglected. The novel is about seeking peace for women and is against any kind of war or conflict. The novel aims at unification of body and soul. It also explores how womanism examines women and men's sexual freedom and how they can love each other but not restrain each other.

Introduction

The Temple of My Familiar is Walker's most poorly reviewed.[50] Perhaps this is because it is Walker's most voluminous novel, embracing different and apparently inchoate ideas, as Joyce

[50] See: James Wolcott, "Party of Animals", review of *The Temple of My Familiar*, in *New Republic*, 29 May 1989, 29-30; J.M. Coetzee, "The Beginnings of (Wo)man in Africa", review of *The Temple of My Familiar*, in *New York Times Book Review*, 30 April 1989, 7; Doris Davenport, "Afracentric Visions", review of *The Temple of My Familiar*, in *Women's Review of Books*, September 1989, 13-14; Madelyn Jablon, "Re-memory, Dream History,

Maynard points out, describing it as: "a radical feminist Harlequin romance written under the influence of hallucinogenic mushrooms ... There's a little black history here, a little crystal healing there, with a hot tub and some acupressure thrown in for good measure" (72). Perhaps more kindly, given her direct address to Walker, Ursula K. Le Guin nevertheless criticises the novel on a similar basis: "Dear Genius, please – you don't have to get it *all* into one book!" (23). In spite of the expansive range of themes of *The Temple,* I would suggest that it is the concept of womanism that underpins them all. *The Temple* followed Walker's most outstanding novel, *The Color Purple*, which is primarily concerned with female bonding and women's relationships, while *The Temple* employs varying themes as well as an excess of characters, including some from that preceding work. *The Temple* explores and expands dimensions of womanism which are related to women's sexual freedom and also to the connection between human and spiritual themes.

Walker's notion of womanism focuses on wholeness and the aims of the "entire people" (*In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, xi). In this novel this concept is expressed in the broadest context, extending it to cosmology, universal unity, and oneness. In "Toward a Monistic Idealism", Ikenna Deike writes that, in *The Temple*, Walker "creates a salutary vision, which points toward a monistic idealism in which humans, animals, and the whole ecological order coexist in a unique dynamic of pancosmic symbiosis" (507). The point that Deike is making is valid as it can be seen that Walker is continuing the theme that she had introduced at the end of her third novel; in *The Color Purple*, Celie's final letter is addressed to everyone and all creatures. In the Acknowledgments for *The Temple*, Walker states: "I thank the Universe for my participation in Existence. It is a pleasure to have always been present" (405). Walker here

and Re-vision in Toni Morrison's Beloved and Alice Walker's *The Temple of My Familiar*", in *CLA Journal* 37 (1993), 136-44; Felipe Smith, "Alice Walker's Redemptive Art", in *African American Review* 26 (1992), 437-51; Ikenna Dieke, "Toward a Monastic Idealism: The Thematics of Alice Walker's *The Temple of My Familiar*", in *African American Review* 26 (1992), 507-14; and Maureen T. Reddy, "Maternal Reading: Lazarre and Walker", in *Narrating Mothers: Theorizing Maternal Subjectivities,* ed. Brenda O. Daly and Maureen T. Reddy. (Knoxville: Univ. of Tennessee Press, 1991), 222-38.

considers herself to be quietly attached to the universe, and she tries to convey this concept of wholeness through her characters. For example, Lissie is a character that Walker uses to define the title of her novel, *The Temple of My Familiar*.

> Last night I dreamed I was showing you my temple, Miss Lissie said. […] Anyway, my familiar – what you might these days, unfortunately, call a pet – was a small, incredibly beautiful creature that was part bird, for it was feathered, part fish, for it could swim, and had a somewhat fish/bird shape, and part reptile, for it scooted about like geckoes do, and it was all over the place while I talked to you. […] It was alive (115).

This is a very symbolic description of the term "familiar"; the pet is simultaneously familiar yet also strange, as it has all of the attributed features. The characterisation of this familiar, then, is another way in which Walker is emphasising a totality. The novel takes place over six chapters and Ikenna Deike believes that each chapter demonstrates such "values of oneness, wholeness and unity" ("Toward a Monistic", 508). Thus, the entire novel revolves around these notions, and it should be further noted that the text finds Walker exploring Buddhist beliefs with respect to them.[51]

The word 'temple' in this novel has two meanings: firstly, it can refer to the sexual in terms of behaviour and body. When Lissie, as a prominent character of the novel, says that she is talking about "my temple in particular", it means that she is talking about her experience of sexual freedom as exercised through the body (116). And secondly, Walker's term can be regarded as an actual temple, referring, specifically, to the character Fanny and her massage centre.

[51] Familiar is also related to 'folk magic' and also Freud's 'Uncanny'. Walker's interest in Freudian and Jungian studies become clear in this novel and continues in her later works as well. Walker writes: "I thank Carl Jung for becoming so real in my own self-therapy" (*Possessing the Secret of Joy,* 269).

Both of these concepts, that of the temple and the familiar, will be discussed in this section, for the description of these terms relate to Walker's previously mentioned reference to the universe and her presence in the Acknowledgements. The questions that will be addressed here are: How does this wholeness relate to the definition of womanism? And, is Walker becoming more interested in spirituality and piety than in womanism and female bonding? Walker may even want to portray the unity of both sexes to show how womanism is for the "entire people" (*In Search*, xi). She is certainly attempting to bring all of these points into the novel and this may be one of the reasons for it being the longest work in her canon.[52]

The most prominent theme that Walker tackles in this novel, and which is also related to womanism, is that of the socially enforced concept of marriage. There are numerous heterosexual relationships in the novel but none of them are stable as long as they are sheltered under the notion of marriage. For example, Lissie has many different short term relationships. Her heterosexual relationships are with a young boy, then Mr. Hal, Rafe, and finally with Jack, who turns up in the novel for a short while and then disappears. Besides her male partners, she has some female partners as well. There is only one example of lengthy married relationship between Olivia and her husband, Lance, which the novel does not reveal too much about them and, as such, we do not know whether there is any love between them. *The Temple* explores how womanism focuses on the sexual freedom of women: "A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or non-sexually. Sometimes love individual men, sexually and/or non-sexually" (*In Search*, xi). A womanist is someone who enjoys her sexual freedom, and does not have to stay with one partner, which contradicts the traditional notion of marriage, which enforces an

[52] One of the themes that Walker also introduces is Jungian psychology. In her book, *Alice Walker*, Maria Lauret writes that "we can hear the voice of Miss Lissie here harmonising with Jung's" (126). As stated, Walker's interest in Jung becomes clear in *The Temple*, and she develops her treatment of this subject in her subsequent novel, *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. However, the point here is that Walker is trying to engage such themes in an attempt to further her interest in female bonding, which is made dynamic through its expression in different fields, such as psychoanalysis. Walker's most recent novel, *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart* (2004), is another eclectic novel which concerns spirituality, female relationships, and Jungian symbolism. Although she knits various themes into her novels, they work to develop the quilt of womanism and female bonding.

unconditional sexual commitment to the one partner they have bound themselves to. "Marriage," hooks writes, "as sanctioned by the state, was an unnecessary institution; commitment and constancy would emerge as dictates of the heart and not by court orders and demands" (*Communion,* 39). This is exactly the same view that Shug advances in her Gospel in this novel: "Helped are those born from love: conceived in their father's tenderness and their mother's orgasm" (281). The womanist freedom of sexuality, as depicted in *The Temple,* generally leads women to liberty and self-empowerment, although damage and failures are inevitable. In her discussion of sexual freedom, hooks writes, "our goal in everything was personal growth. To be fully self-actualized, we needed to sprout wings and fly all over the place" (*Communion,* 38). It seems to me that, despite the multitude of themes present in what is her longest novel, Walker is exploring and expanding upon one key concept, womanism.

Shug and Lissie: The Pillars of the Temple

Shug and Lissie are two female characters that Walker uses to outline a diagram of womanism. In *The Color Purple,* Shug had helped Celie to reconstruct her idea of God and in *The Temple* Shug appears as a woman who has her own church. Shug preaches and establishes the rules of her church, which are close to womanist ideology, while Lissie is an example of a womanist who practises these ideas. Although in this novel they never meet each other, they are both pillars of the temple that Walker builds. Lissie's ideal of womanism and Shug's church both welcome men and women. According to Walker's definition of womanism, it involves the "survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female" (*In Search,* xi). Shug allows those men and women who are in love into the temple, and those who reveal qualities and actions often suppressed by gender norms: for example, those who show tenderness as fathers and enjoy orgasms as mothers (281). As mentioned in my discussion of *The Color Purple*, Shug can be regarded as a womanist when it comes to her sexual freedom. She follows the main focus of womanism concerning sexual freedom and she does not show any interest in being tied to the identity of the "mother", even though she has children. Lissie also shares the same

features. Like Shug, she is sexually free and is also a mother, here with five children. However, she does not show any sign of interest in motherhood, which will be discussed in detail later in this section.

I have already discussed Shug's relationship with her male partners, in *The Color Purple*, so I will here explore Lissie's heterosexual relationships. However, before that, it is worth analysing how Walker presents Lissie as the most significant character in *The Temple*.

Lissie and the Concept of Wholeness and Marriage

In her book, *Living by the Word*, Walker talks about a woman she dreamt of: "The universe sends me fabulous dreams! Early this morning I dreamed of a two-headed woman. Literally. A wise woman. Who was giving advice to people. Her knowledge was for everyone" (1). The description of the woman is similar to that of the pet dreamt by Lissie and referred to as her 'familiar'; both are uncanny. They are strange and at the same time familiar. Yet Walker's dreamt woman in fact shares many characteristics with Lissie.

For it is through Lissie, her wise woman, that Walker communicates the idea of wholeness and unity with the universe, as well as the concept of sexual freedom and marriage. Walker begins the novel with a quote from Lissie – "if they have lied about Me, they have lied about everything" – which can be found even before the main narrative begins. This means Lissie's thoughts are given the status of an epigram, which is usually reserved for thinkers that the author of the text admires and respects. Lissie's name, as stated in the novel, means "the one who remembers everything" (51). She is the one who experiences many lives and has many lifetime experiences. Lissie says: "If I've ever in *all my lifetimes* experienced peace, I am nearly perplexed. Could it be possible that after *hundreds of lifetimes* I have not known peace?" (81, emphasis added). Deike writes: "Lissie, in *The Temple of My Familiar*, is probably the most memorable character possessing this unique power to incarnate successively, lifetime after lifetime" (*Critical Essays* 4). There are two points to be made about this excerpt. Firstly, she revives after death so she is always present. Secondly, as the most significant character in the

novel, and probably Walker's strongest womanist, she cannot find peace. These themes are the extra motifs that Walker injects into this novel and expands upon in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, *By The Light of My Father's Smile* and *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart*. In this novel, Lissie actually establishes the basis for Walker's ideology of incarnation – which will be traced in her later works – and sexual freedom – which is developed in *The Temple*.

Lissie initiates her sexual relationships as she reaches "an age to mate" (84)[53] and from that point on she becomes involved in numerous other relationships. Although she never marries, she picks a life partner, Mr Hal. They are so attached to each other that, according to Mr Hal, people know them as "Hal 'n' Lissie, Lissie 'n' Hal" (41). While she is with Mr Hal, Lissie also has her own sexual life outside of this partnership. She even sleeps with Rafe, who is Mr Hal's best friend. Mr Hal tells Suwelo, who is Rafe's nephew, that "Lissie was our wife" (39). Mr Hal is always by her side and he looks after the babies that he delivers for Lissie, even though they are not his (107). This is an example of a womanist relationship, as Lissie has her sexual freedom while Mr Hal is simply happy to be with her. Lissie and Hal both enjoy each other's company. Mr Hal tells Suwelo: "We developed what you would call an understanding. But before we reached it, we had, both of us, shed rivers of pain" (107). Not only does Mr Hal not have any sexual jealousy, but he also "love[s] delivering her babies" (107). Through the portrayal of Mr Hal, *The Temple* makes it clear that he believes that "marriage was not the answer for us" (96). He continues: "Here was a woman I loved, who loved me" (96). Mr Hal is not possessive and he does not treat Lissie's body as his own territory. He is even not an obstacle to Lissie's various sexual relationships. As such, Mr Hal aides in Lissie's own

[53] In the novel, the exact age at which Lissie has her first sexual relationship has not been mentioned, as such, the notion of her "age to mate" can be interpreted in two different ways. Firstly, it could be interpreted in cultural terms to mean the age at which she is expected to marry. Secondly, her 'age to mate' could refer to a biological aspect, i.e. that she is literally old enough to have or desire sex in terms of the female body. Either way, Lissie is depicted as a free woman when it comes to her sexuality, and so she could be seen as rebelling against cultural norms explicitly in the first interpretation (rejecting marriage), and implicitly engaging with her sexuality even if this were at an age before she is expected to marry, i.e. as soon as puberty strikes.

womanism, his relationship with her is such that Lissie is able to develop as a liberal, individual, and autonomous, woman. Her freedom finds Lissie fully pursuing her desires; she is in love with Mr Hal, sexually and/or non-sexually, but she is also in love with women – Lulu and Fadpa – sexually and/or non-sexually, which is in accordance with the definition of womanism.

Another of Lissie's womanist features is her figure as a mother. Mr Hal makes the following comment about Lissie's mothering skills: "Lissie was a good mother, but aloof" (111). A womanist mother is a mother who is not a mammy figure. Further in the African American community, it has been traditionally considered that mothers should sacrifice themselves for their children (Collins 174). However, in *The Temple*, Walker characterises Lissie in the womanist model of the mother – not only does she not sacrifice herself, but she also pays more attention to herself than to her responsibilities of motherhood. As the novel is mostly focused on women's sexual freedom, mothers, like Lissie, also practice this notion accordingly. Mr Hal, who almost always agrees with Lissie's decisions, approves of her as a mother but still makes a note that she is 'aloof'. This shows that even Mr Hal thinks that Lissie as a mother should be a little more responsible toward her children. The novel explores that mothers should not sacrifice their own selves for the sake of their children, however she exaggerates this point in the case of Lissie in order to emphasise the notion of a mother's liberation. Arguably, the reason that Lissie is carefree about her children is chiefly to oppose the dominant image of motherhood as subservience, and its embodied ties to myths about the African American community.

Fanny: The Third Pillar of the Temple

Fanny is Celie's daughter-in-law and she is close to both her and to Shug. She is a literature graduate and married to Suwelo. Fanny and Suwelo used to teach at the same universities; Suwelo taught American History and Fanny English Literature. Through the portrayal of this couple, *The Temple* directly challenges the social convention of marriage. In this novel, Walker

seems to have changed her attitude towards marriage as she does not portray any examples of successful marriage as she previously had in *The Color Purple*.

Fanny is the one who is unhappy with being married to Suwelo, whilst wishing to remain coupled with him. Fanny tells Suwelo: "I don't want to be married. Not to you, not to anybody. But I don't want to lose you either". Suwelo replies: "You can't have your cake and eat it too" (135). This is exactly what Fanny wants. She wants Suwelo to act as she wishes. This is identical to how Lissie actually does treat Mr Hal. However, the difference here is that Suwelo does not want to be as submissive as Mr Hal. Therefore, Suwelo is a figure in this novel that challenges this womanist ideology. Fanny rejects marriage to "feel free" and Suwelo challenges her by asking: "When have you ever felt free?" (135). This suggests that Fanny does not want to be a sexual object in a man's hand. Although she wants to be free, she does not know how to achieve this. This is similar to what Audre Lorde in *Sister Outsider* says: "For Black women as well as Black men, it is axiomatic that if we do not define ourselves for ourselves, we will be defined by others" (*Compendium*, 99). According to Walker and Lorde, both black women and black men should help each other to strengthen their identities. Although challenging Fanny, Suwelo is indirectly helping her to clarify her idea of freedom, he is helping to strengthen her identity. On the other hand, left to their own devices, without regard to such close interpersonal relationships, Lissie and Shug attempt to find freedom by sleeping with numerous men or women – yet they cannot be free until they understand exactly what they want from their sexual freedom.

Because Fanny is Celie's descendant, and also influenced by Shug, Fanny has no clear idea of marriage. As Celie is scared of men, she can never be a good example for Fanny from which to judge (heterosexual) marital life, and neither can Shug, who wanders between her lovers, including Celie. Fanny's only example of a successful marriage is that of her parents, Olivia and Lancy. However, the novel does not go into much detail about them as its focus is

on attempting to relate Fanny to Shug and Celie. This is because Walker wants to redefine marriage and imply that the socially accepted concept of marriage is actually not socially and personally beneficial.

Walker's definition of marriage tallies with the union of human beings with the universe, as depicted in *The Color Purple* through Celie's reconciliation with the whole of creation, as discussed earlier. Walker does not want the socially accepted concept of marriage to bind women and make them devoted to a single man, in disregard of the rest, the whole, of nature. She wants women to set themselves free from all constraints so they can reconstruct the concept of marriage. In her poem *Beyond*, Walker defines marriage as something which might happen:

In a lifetime or in a flash
But also
Something
Beyond it.
To grow toward,
To come
To understand
And know.
Not only about my beloved(s)
Who oftentimes distracted me
Sweetly, kindly, intelligently,
But about the cosmos
The stars
Tree roots

Tiny sea shells

The roiling waves

And the open door.

As also depicted in the novel, marriage *should* elevate one's self spiritually – but this can only happen if women reconstruct the received concept of marriage. This clarifies her claim that womanism is for an "entire people". She does not see sexuality as mere physical contact, but as the outcome and expression of love. Sexuality should not be at the service of procreation but at the service of love. Moreover, love cannot happen until women set themselves free from the limitations that societies put in their paths. After a series of brief, imagistic statements which imply interior contemplation, the final line of the poem says that marriage should find an "open door". Fanny similarly defines her love for people, when Suwelo asks why she loves in such a way: "They open doors inside me. It is as if they're keys. To rooms inside myself" (182). This is the temple that Walker builds in the novel. She wants women to become close to the universe and mingle with it so they can feel connected to the power of nature, and to others. And to do that, women should break through the social constraints upon their bodies, so they can exult in their physical and sexual freedom. Having achieved this, Walker suggests that women can aim for wholeness with the universe – which further relates to precepts of Buddhism, a practice and theme that marks Walker's later work.

While Lissie changes partners in her search for peace without success, Fanny pursues her womanism in a different way. She becomes a masseuse in order to acknowledge people's "bodily reality and also their pain" (287). Therefore, she is searching for the key through an understanding of people's bodies and through them, their souls. The message that Fanny here gives as a literature graduate, is significant. But she adds to this a focus on the body itself. The female body has always been the centre of attention for Walker, as she hopes that women can

forge their mind-body self-actualisation. In *The Color Purple*, it was Celie's interest in her body and sexuality that helped her to have a better sense of her own identity. In this novel, Walker uses Fanny as a masseuse to add another dimension to her works as she wants to make links between human physical reconciliation and the universe; prefiguring her interest in Buddhism and meditation which Walker will explore in her final novel, *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart*.

Carlotta and Her Healing Ceremony

After finding her temple –which is the mixture of body and spirituality– through Shug and Lissie, Fanny is used by Walker to bring the other characters of the novel into the temple. After deciding to alter her relationship with Suwelo from being a married couple to simply being friends, they no longer live together in the same flat. This is when Suwelo meets Carlotta and sleeps with her. Carlotta herself is married to Arveyda, with whom she has children. Her liaison with Suwelo occurs after Arveyda sleeps with Zede, Carlotta's mother. When Carlotta realises that they have had an affair, she falls into despair: "Carlotta's heart was breaking. She felt it swell tears and then crack. Once again, as when she was a small child, she felt she knew nothing" (27). Walker begins the novel by describing Carlotta's story and she shows how marriage can be fragile and damaging. Arveyda, Zede, and Carlotta are all ashamed and sorry for what has happened. As the novel continues, Walker uses Shug and Lissie to construct the concept of marriage. Then, through Fanny, she manages to show the healing of Carlotta's pain. However, the question is: are Carlotta's wounds really healed? The mother-daughter relationship has always been crucial in Walker's novels and there are relevant questions to be asked. Does Carlotta manage to reconcile with her mother? Does sexual freedom help her to re-instate her control over her life?

Once Carlotta finds out about the affair between Arveyda and Zede, she unsuccessfully attempts to break her marriage bonds, and she then tries to take revenge on Arveyda and Zede by sleeping with Suwelo, whom she knows from college. When she is in bed lying "naked after

sex" (242) with Suwelo, she does not reveal anything about herself when he asks her of her family: "I have no people" (242). Suwelo persists with his questions but he cannot penetrate the shield that Carlotta has built around herself. Suwelo says: "She was just a body" (242) and he believes that "only if I married Carlotta would she tell me who she was" (243). This suggests that Carlotta is still loyal to the structure she believes in, since she reveals her body to Suwelo, but not her mind. She was actually not even a "body", as that, too, had been taken by her mother and Arveyda. She comes from Zede's womb and, as a daughter, she identifies herself with her mother, both physically and mentally. When Carlotta sees that Zede is taking her physical partner away, she feels resentful of her own body, as if Zede is more sexually attractive than her. Therefore, Carlotta decides to prove to herself that she is still physically attractive and able to have a man in her bed, so she decides to have sex with Suwelo. Her body was with Suwelo to reassure her of her sexuality, but her soul was with Arveyda and Zede. She was so badly, mentally, damaged that she wanted to rebel against the oppression of Arveyda and Zede. However, sleeping with Suwelo does not set Carlotta free from the pain they caused.

Some time later, Carlotta goes to Fanny's parlour for a massage. In this way, Walker is showing that, all of the sudden, Carlotta's healing process has begun through the massage. She says: "Fanny would massage you, and soon your body would feel yours again. And *she* would look satisfied, as if she'd achieved a sweet, if temporary, victory, and you'd wonder if you'd really heard this mild woman say anything about murdering anybody" (288). Therefore, Carlotta regains the body that had been taken away by Zede and Arveyda. Although the sex with Suwelo was no help, the massage allows her to take control of her body once more. As the novel highlights, Carlotta's wounds are healing through Fanny and the ideology of Walker's temple. The ideology that Walker injects into this novel – and her later novels – is more concerned with issues of Buddhism and meditation. Indeed after the massage from Fanny, Carlotta is regarded as "a fat little Buddha of a girl" (201).

Walker's healing remedy changes in *The Temple.* In her previous novel, *The Color Purple*, Celie's healing process, similar to Carlotta's, began with physicality and bodily acknowledgment. However, the process for Celie encompasses other issues such as the various experiences of female bonding and a sense of belonging, as discussed earlier in previous chapter. In *The Temple*, Walker depicts the massage and physical touch of Fanny as a miraculous healing power. The feminine connection between Fanny and Carlotta is significant here. As in *The Color Purple*, where Shug helps Celie to reconcile with her body and spirit, in *The Temple* Fanny provides the same favour for Carlotta. In *The Color Purple*, there is a triangular relationship between Shug, Mister, and Celie, but in *The Temple*, the relationships between Carlotta, Arveyda, Suwelo, Fanny, and Zede are more complicated. These characters have sexual relationships one way or another – as I explored earlier – which cause some serious damage to their characters, especially to Carlotta. Sexuality and the body are paid a great deal of attention in Walker's works but in this novel the theme is infused with Walker's idea of the temple.

Walker builds her temple upon three pillars: Shug, Lissie, and Fanny. The goal of this temple is to bring sexual freedom to women so they can reunite with the universe. Walker uses numerous examples of Lissie's various relationships to convey a message that women should have sexual freedom and enjoy their sexuality in order to find love. In this novel, marriage does not mean that a woman should be bound to a man, and vice-versa. In addition, Walker endeavours to show how characters such as Carlotta, who are very much attached to the socially enforced concept of marriage, can change their minds and acknowledge the idea of the temple. Walker's work indirectly critiques here the dominant social institution of marriage, and its constraining of sexuality, and attempts to replace it with another ideological construct – the temple. In fact, in order to free women from being considered as sexual objects, Walker is making the point that her imagined institution might be more valid and longer-lasting than the

previous one. To prove that her ideology is efficient, she uses the character of Carlotta, and has her convert into the religion of Walker's temple: that of womanism. Because of Fanny, Carlotta later reconciles with Arveyda and her mother. However, like Lissie, she pays little attention to her children. Thus, perhaps disturbingly, readers never find out what happens to Carlotta's children. In this novel, Walker suggests that the solution to the problems in the mundane world should be sought in another world, the spiritual world. This reasoning gathers pace in *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart*, her most recent novel, in which the characters are healed in groups after having related their stories and prayed for each other. Moreover, in *The Temple*, Walker suggests that regardless of the extent of the damage that people suffer in life, they can still be healed if they follow spiritual practices. In her early novels, such as *The Third Life* and *Meridian*, Walker's characters would suffer because of their previous deeds and, in order to overcome their wounds, she suggested that they should firstly face up to reality and then move towards correcting their mistakes in order to build a better future. Walker's later novels show her characters attempting to find healing through spiritual practices, so they can continue with their lives after being restored, as if they had never been wounded.

In *The Color Purple*, Shug helps Celie to confront the bitter reality of her life and enables her to overcome the harm she has suffered at the hands of Mister and Pa. Shug takes Celie's hand and helps her to walk. She also helps Celie to cope with reality, even though it is very difficult. By struggling and fighting for her rights as an individual, and as a self-empowered woman, Celie can look forward to a better future. Similarly, in *The Temple*, Shug reaches out to other persons by way of the Gospel she preaches. Walker introduces her as a peer that the other characters can follow in order to find love and sexual liberty. According to Shug's Gospel, "Helped are those who are born from love: conceived in the father's tenderness and their mother's orgasm" (281). Walker now wants her characters to find love and to enjoy the sexual freedom. She wants the families in the novel to love each other as well as their

children. Previously, and even in this novel, children have not been the main focus of Walker's narrative; however, from this point on, she wants the children to be saturated with love so that they can find self-dignity and self-esteem in the early stages of their lives. Walker's perspective is very positive towards the future and the focus of her novels is essentially about love. In her most recent novel, *Now Is the Time*, she writes about how the characters can love the universe and unite with Mother Earth so that they can overcome past hardships.

Male Characters and Sexual Avarice

There are many male characters in the novel but the most significant ones are Suwelo, Arveyda, and Mr Hal. Suwelo and Arveyda are typical of Walker's male characters. They crave for sex and nothing will stop them in this pursuit. Arveyda is a name that might be derived from Ayurveda, or 'life knowledge' in Hindu ancient medical traditions based on physical and spiritual balance. But while such balance is at once promised in marriage with Carlotta's, his relationship with Zede confirms a potentially baser nature. And when Fanny leaves Suwelo, his first concern is sex: "Does this mean we won't ever sleep together"? (236). Then, when Suwelo lives alone, he gets "into pornography" (238). This shows that Suwelo considers Fanny to be a sexual object that he can use to satisfy his sexual desires. As such, this also justifies Fanny's quest for sexual freedom. In *Communion*, hooks suggests something similar: "Our most intense power struggles took place in the bedroom. I wanted him to understand that I was not responsible for his sexual desires. And if his dick was hard and he needed to put it someplace to seek satisfaction, then he had to find the place. He could not assume that my body was territory he could occupy at will" (40). Along similar lines, it might be said that Fanny is right to leave Suwelo without feeling any responsibility for the pleasing of his own sexual desires.

In this novel, Walker wants her characters, especially the female characters, to achieve sexual freedom and to find a loving partner. Moreover, their relationships should not involve any sexual restrictions. Fanny loves Suwelo and does not want to upset him, but at the same

time she does not want to sacrifice her self and her desires in order to keep him by her side. Fanny wants to be free and she wants her partner to be free and independent. The image that Walker is trying to portray to her readers is similar to what Shug conveys in her Gospel; partners should not interfere with each other's individuality and they should love each other as they are. The image that Walker is depicting is idealistic, however, as even this novel fails to provide any examples of such couples.

Conclusion

As mentioned at the beginning of my discussion of *The Temple*, this voluminous novel was deemed by critics to present an author struggling to present all her various themes and motifs in a coherent work. However, by identifying the underlying ideology of womanism, that underpins this myriad of ideas, I have demonstrated that, to some extent, Walker's novel does succeed. The central message in this novel is about women's sexual freedom, and in order to deliver the idea, Walker challenges the traditional and received concept of marriage, characterising it as a socially enforced ideology grounded in patriarchal norms.

The Temple of My Familiar rejects the constraints that society puts on women, and it is through the novel that Walker attempts to build her own temple in opposition to this. She introduces examples such as Fanny, who wants to love her husband but who also wants to change their relationship as she does not want to be bound. And, as discussed, this sexual freedom empowers women and allows them to be autonomous. This point is clear in the novel. However, in another example, Carlotta achieves her sexual freedom while at the same time being objectified by both Arveyda and Suwelo. Shug has her own church and, in her Gospel, she defines men and women and how they should love each other in relationships. To make this church resemble a temple, Walker adds two themes to the novel: meditation and life after death. These two themes also become the main themes in her subsequent novels. Lissie embodies almost all of the themes of the novel except one; she is sexually free, she believes in

life after death, and she believes in incarnation. The only aspect she cannot find is peace. This is what Fanny brings to characters such as Carlotta through her massages.

Walker's temple is for both men and women, although men are depicted in a very inchoate way. Mr Hal, however, is characterised in a manner completely opposite to the majority of Walker's male characters. He is very flexible to Lissie's demands; Lissie has sex with others and gets pregnant, yet Mr Hal delivers the babies and looks after her. He never disagrees with her or stands against her sexual life, which most of Walker's other male characters would do. As discussed here, Mr Hal is Walker's example of a "womanist man".

The Temple is a continuation of *The Color Purple* and, in this sense, it focuses on female empowerment. In *The Color Purple*, Celie discovers her body and her sexuality, and in this novel women further claim their sexual freedom. This point continues in Walker's sixth novel, *Possessing The Secret of Joy*, though here Walker addresses the politics of the female body even more directly, by standing against another social convention, circumcision.

Chapter Five

Possessing the Secret of Joy: Dysfunctional Female Bonding

> Everything and
> Everyone
> To the girl child
> Of Africa
> Appears to be
> Against her.
> This was the message of
> The dream
> I had last night
>
> Alice Walker (*Warrior Marks* 55)

Chapter Summary

Walker's fifth novel, *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992), has the most dysfunctional female bond to be featured in her works. The novel tackles the cultural beliefs of black people within both Africa and America, and argues that certain conventions hamper women from having functional female connections. According to the novel, female circumcision is a traditional practice of Olinka, Alice Walker's imaginary place situated in Africa. Women who refuse to be circumcised are regarded as "others", to the extent that the society rejects them. Tashi gets circumcised, yet, as a result of the physical and mental damage she incurs from the procedure, she finds that she cannot fit within the community she lives in, anyway. Her mother assisted the circumciser, M'lissa, during the procedure, which is a normal occurrence in Olinka, where women help each other to have their genitalia maimed. Later on, Tashi moves to America where women do not get circumcised; as such, she still finds herself unable to fit within the society she inhabits, this time due to her being *different*. This difference also prevents her from

having an intimate bond with Olivia, her childhood friend, since, she is born in America and has adopted American culture. To Tashi, Olivia is more of an American than an African. The place, and the culture of place, is the main factor in this novel that stops its female characters from attaining functional female bonds.

Introduction

Possessing is primarily about a social problem concerning a particular issue, female circumcision. However, it tackles some other important points which revolve around this subject, such as female friendship, cultural differences, and their links to concepts of place. In this section, these points will be discussed. Some critics have pondered over the issue of female circumcision raised in this novel.[54] The novel deals with both the social and emotional consequences of experiencing of female genital mutilation, as well as the female circumciser's relationship to the act. "*Possessing the Secret of Joy*," Angeletta Gourdine writes, "is the story of two kinds of women: those who are forbidden this possession, the right to own their bodies in natural totality, and those who forbid others this right" (237).[55]

Circumcision is the most significant factor in this novel; however, the effects of circumcision and how it changes the lives and attitudes of the characters is arguably just as, if not more, important than the act of circumcision itself. The influence that circumcision has on family life and human relationships is very prominent. As Walker, writes in *Warrior Marks*, her non-fiction account of female genital mutilation:

[54] Juliet Rogers writes in her text *Law's Cut on the Body of Human Rights: Female Circumcision, Torture and Sacred Flesh* (2013): "In *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, Alice Walker portrays an account of a woman's experience of mutilation, as testimony on the fantasy of non-cultural status of the mutilated woman's flesh" (54). See Nelisiwe Zondi's review of the novel, and Tina Mcelroy Ansa's review of *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, also.

[55] Also, Jago Morrison writes: "In *Possessing the Secret of Joy* it is interesting that Walker has the Harvard educated Frenchman, Pierre, articulate the most developed analysis of circumcision. For him circumcision of both sexes can be seen as a violent bodily intervention designed to reinforce the social division of gender. In the novel as a whole, we see graphically how excision and infibulations ensure a position of struggling victimhood for women in relation to intercourse, at the same time as rendering non-penetrative sexual practices such as cunnilingus virtually redundant in relation to sexual pleasure" (224).

> No one would think it normal to deliberately destroy the pupil of the eye. Without its pupil, the eye can never see itself, or the person possessing it, reflected in the eye of another. It is the same with the vulva. 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". And even then never completely (19).

Walker lost sight in one of her eyes when she was eight years old and she believes that this injury is what gave her access to understanding the impact a girl's circumcision can have on her life: "It was my visual mutilation that helped me 'see' the subject of genital mutilation" (18). She also notes:

> I was eight when I was injured. This is the age at which many "circumcisions" are done. When I see how the little girls- how small they are!- drag their feet after being wounded, I am reminded of myself. How had I learned to walk again without constantly walking into something? To see aging using half my vision? Instead of being helped to make this transition, I was banished, set aside from the family, as is true of genitally mutilated little girls. For they must sit for a period alone, their legs bound, as their wound heals. It is taboo to speak of what has been done to them (18-19).

In this excerpt, Walker is clearly tackling two points; firstly, the harshness of the mutilation, and secondly, how the maimed children are isolated and left to feel dejected after the act. The latter element will be explored in this section in terms of how –and if– Tashi can recover after her mutilation and reclaim her physical and mental health.

The concept of female bonding is also significant in this novel, since the circumciser, M'Lissa, is herself a female, allowing us to see how females can damage each other's bodies and emotions, albeit through an extreme example. Moreover, this act of mutilation establishes

a huge chasm between uncircumcised and circumcised women, to the extent that Tashi and Olivia who have been friends since childhood can no longer be as intimate as they were before the point at which Tashi is circumcised. Tashi, previously, has been a lively girl who enjoyed her life and her sexuality; making love in the fields in defiance of social rules, for instance (26). However, after circumcision, she not only suffers from psychological problems but even loses Adam, her lover, since she no longer enjoys sex. Despite loving Tashi, Adam becomes frustrated, and an emotional distance develops between the couple as he begins a relationship with Lisette. Although Tashi and Adam began their relationship with mutual love and affection, their connection fades as a result of the circumcision. So the cultural and social division caused by circumcision is as significant as the damage it causes on the female bodies.

Tashi, following her circumcision, says: "I DID NOT realize for a long time that I was dead" (3). She no longer feels any joy or pleasure in her life and she feels so distracted that she cannot control her feelings. The damage appears to be as much mental as physical. "This traumatic event," Geneva Cobb Moore writes, "alerts Tashi to the limitations of the ego-centered consciousness, which is incapable of resolving emotional conflicts on its own, and to the profound but unconscious supra-personal forces interfering in a creative and positive way with the ego" (111). Moore believes that *Possessing* is a Jungian novel, and tries to understand Tashi's mental problem as a result of the genital cutting. However Christine Hejinian in her review of the novel writes: "Freud's theory of castration anxiety has always been somewhat of an intellectual exercise for me. Jung doesn't develop this theme in the way Freud does, who gives it a central role in the drive to resolve the Oedipus complex and from a superego, in both sexes" (62). Notably, the common feature of these two conflicting psychoanalytic readings of the novel is that genital mutilation damages both physical and mental health. And the result of the psychological disturbance caused by Tashi's circumcision is that she questions her own identity as she does not see herself as being physically complete. The sense of wholeness, or

its lack, also conflicts with her sense of belonging to Olinka, where she is from. "The Operation she's had done to herself joined her, she felt, to these women whom she envisioned as strong, invincible. Completely woman. Completely African. Completely Olinka" (61). On the one hand, she undergoes the procedure as she wants to be recognised as an Olinkan, but on the other, after going through the pain of circumcision, she does not view herself as a complete woman. This notion of identity as interwoven with place and physicality structures the whole novel. Having this contradictory sense of place, Tashi finds herself feeling severely lonely; although there are many people around her, and she has ostensibly "joined" the community though the act of circumcision, she is unable to build an intimate relationship with any of them. For example, Tashi and Olivia were close friends before the event, but since the circumcision, although Olivia is still beside her, Tashi is unable to engage with her at the same level of intimacy as before. The female bonding is sacrificed between them, and although they could have been good friends, the places they come from make them different people, giving them different identities and personalities. Olivia, having been raised in the US, follows the cultural example of American women and considers circumcision to be taboo. Meanwhile, due to her origins in Olinka, Tashi praises circumcision and hence insists upon going through the operation.[56]

In a related issue, the novel also highlights the influence of circumcision on children's lives and the changes it causes. Benny is deprived of a good, healthy, and helpful mother as Tashi is entangled with her own issues and is unable to spend any time with him or anyone else. He also has only a part-time father since Adam has two preoccupying issues – dealing with Tashi and Benny, and looking after Lisette and Pierre – which take up most of his time

[56] In her book, *Belonging: A Culture of Place* (2009), bell hooks writes about her childhood neighbourhood in Kentucky, which was surrounded by hills. "Houses in the hollows close to ours were inhabited by poor white folk, who we were taught were rabid racists. They were not our friends. Even if they were by chance neighborly, we were taught to mistrust their kindness". (6) This mistrust can be observed in Tashi's relationship with Olivia, who is kept at a distance due to her being American, regardless of her African background.

and energy. In this regard, both Benny and Pierre have the same problem, as they both have part-time fathers, both of which are Adam.

The situation is no better when it comes to male relationships. Circumcision is conducted with the purpose of ensuring family unity and giving men more sexual pleasure. Therefore, such mutilation is in fact the result of patriarchy – whilst also being a process that is practised by women on women. It is a means by which men can possess the bodies of women and treat them as their own territory. Walker makes the following point in *Warrior Marks*:

> I was not surprised to learn, while doing research for my book *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, that women are blamed for their own sexual mutilation. Their genitalia are unclean, it is said. Monstrous. The activity of unmutilated female vulva frightens men and destroys crops. When erect, the clitoris challenges male authority. It must be destroyed (18).

This point is also expressed in the novel through Walker's depiction of Tashi:

> Yes. My own body was a Mystery to me, as was the female body, beyond the function of breasts, to almost everyone I knew. … Everyone knew that if a woman was not circumcised her unclean parts would grow so long they'd soon touch her thighs; she'd become masculine and arouse herself. No man could enter her because her own erection would be in his way (112–113).

This comment by Tashi tallies with Walker's idea of patriarchy, which wants to control the female body. The erection of the clitoris challenges the male erection and belittles male authority. A further distressing aspect is that the circumciser can be a woman herself, making the female an instrument of patriarchy and of violence against her own sex.[57] "The women after giving birth, they come back to the *tsunga* [circumciser] to be resewn, tighter than before.

[57] For further reading please refer to *Warrior Marks* by Alice Walker; pp. 178-179.

Because if it is loose he [the husband] won't receive enough pleasure" (207).[58] Moreover, uncircumcised women are regarded by Olinkans as "demons" so everyone avoids them, both men and women (113). Accordingly, women have to go through this painful process in order to be accepted in society and have their husbands beside them. However, the novel suggests this patriarchal act does not guarantee that men will stay with their wives and remain loyal to them. In fact, it suggests that the act can even work against retaining the affection of males, since they are still chasing after other women in this novel. One of the reasons for this can be the circumcision itself, as demonstrated by Adam, who is in love with Tashi throughout *The Color Purple* and *The Temple of My Familiar*, yet becomes frustrated after his lover's circumcision in *Possessing* and turns his attention elsewhere, initiating a new relationship with Lisette. Thus, in this novel's case, circumcision is at the root of betrayal.

The "secret of joy" referred to in the title becomes more clear as the novel progresses: it relates to the female's sense of totality, of which sexual pleasure is a vital component; thus demonstrating that this novel is a continuation of the themes of female sexual liberation in relation to wholeness found in Walker's previous novel, as discussed above. Tashi and Adam's sexual life has been affected by her circumcision since she no longer possesses the source of sexual pleasure. She used to always experience orgasm before her circumcision, now, like the other circumcised female characters of the novel, she has found herself robbed of such pleasure (113). Amy, one such character, says: "I never touched myself – in that way – again. And of course when I accidentally touched myself there I discovered there was nothing left to touch" (179). This shows that circumcised women such as Tashi cannot discover their natural totality. And given that womanism is for both women and men, it is notable that Walker extends the negative impact of female genital mutilation to the physical and mental aspects of males as

[58] For the factual basis of this point, please refer to Walker, *Warrior Marks*; p. 209.

well. As has been described, Tashi's circumcision has certainly not resulted in Adam receiving more sexual pleasure, and has, in fact, pushed them apart.

Female Bonding and Its Connection to Place

In most of Walker's novels, female friendship and female individuality are key themes. In the majority of her works, the female body, and especially the female sexual organs, are given detailed and explicit descriptions. As discussed in the section on *The Color Purple*, the female sexual organ and sexual pleasure are steps to female power and liberty; female masturbation can become a sign of self-recognition and self-awareness. Shug helps Celie to find her clitoris so that Celie is able to discover another aspect of her life – her control over her sexuality. Subsequently, Celie realises that there is something for her, something which fully belongs to her. This sense of belonging to the body and self-possession of the body helps Celie enormously as she can then see herself as an individual, as different from others. She realises that she has something of her own, as others also do, so this sense of equality enables her to regain her self-esteem. The same thought exists in *Possessing* as well, although in a different way. In *The Color Purple*, recognition of her body helps Celie to understand her identity, while in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, denial of the body results in denial of selfhood and identity. This is the reason why Tashi is just as mentally harmed as physically, and also why Adam turns to Lisette; these consequences are both the result of the notion that the denial of the body is the denial of the self. This point is repeated many times in Walker's books, both fiction and nonfiction, although the message remains largely the same. Walker's novels suggest that the female body should be honoured, like a temple,[59] as having respect for their bodies enables them to have a better understanding of their identity and leads them to self-empowerment.

According to the earlier discussion about the relationship between the female body and pleasure in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, it can be concluded that the novel's name itself

[59] As discussed in my chapter on *The Temple of My Familiar* and how it is related to the body.

accentuates Walker's point about this. In this novel, Tashi, as a representative of African women, is being deprived of her clitoris, which is a source of sexual pleasure. Celie regards her clitoris as a "button" (74) and whenever she feels sad and alone, she turns herself on by pressing the button. This button had been a secret to her until Shug uncovered it and she uses it as a shortcut to joy in times of sorrow. *Possessing* is about dispossession of the "secret button", which causes Tashi to fall into an abyss in which she faces nothing but sorrow, and which ends in death. While in *The Color Purple* Shug uses female bonding to help Celie to realise the secret of joy, in *Possessing*, it is another woman, M'Lissa, who in fact takes the 'button' away, such that the circumcised Tashi no longer possesses the secret of joy even until she dies. This dysfunctional female relationship between Tashi and M'Lissa will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

Place also plays an important role in Tashi's female bonding. Lisette strives to reconcile with Tashi, but this effort fails as Tashi cannot tolerate Lisette and Adam's relationship. However, when Tashi is sentenced to death, she writes a letter to Lisette from prison: "I am writing this letter to you a decade after your own death. It is that you are in the land of death that makes friendship with you so appealing" (258). This reconciliation is somewhat ironic as it instead works to emphasise Tashi's inability to engage with Lisette; Tashi wants to tell her story, but does not want to hear what Lisette has to say, hence writing the latter when she can no longer respond. The reason why place separates these two is that Lisette, like Olivia, is not from Africa. And the chasm between herself and Lisette is even worse in Tashi's mind since the latter is white, French, and Adam's mistress – or Tashi's "co-wife", as she phrases it herself (3). Although Lisette spent most of her childhood with her family in Algeria, this does not cause Tashi to consider Lisette to be an African.

Lisette feels a stronger affinity towards Algeria than France. When her father's duty as a missionary ends in Algeria, the family return to France. "Loving my nurse, my playmates,

and the servants, I naturally hated France. And then suddenly to have to 'return' there. I protested to my parents that France was a place I'd never been; how, therefore, could I 'return'" (121). Yet this passage also demonstrates that her sense of belonging to Algeria is one infused by colonial sentiments; she relates to the place as home, but a home as imposed upon the land by the French colonialists with their wealth affording them 'servants' and a 'nurse', an African home different to most African homes. The novel also illustrates how she is connected to Africa through her African-American partner, Adam, and her son, Pierre, who looks like an "Algerian boy" (121). Thus, Lisette's small family shows her affinity with her 'African' sense of self, however, her white skin distinguishes her from other Africans in Tashi's mind. Tashi, who is black and from Africa, does not consider either Lisette or Olivia to be African enough. Although Lisette claims to be is spiritually linked to Africa, she is white, and although Olivia is black, she is connected to America. This sense of difference, rooted in Tashi's conception of Africa as the place that defines her, leads Tashi to seclusion as she does not believe that Olivia and Lisette can think like her.

Tashi and Lisette

Having strong feelings for Africa and Africans, Lisette nevertheless acts in a very cruel way towards Tashi by initiating a relationship with Adam. She knows that Tashi is suffering from a psychological problem as a result of her circumcision and that she needs help and support rather than being 'wounded' again; yet Lisette just adds more wounds.

Tashi tells a story at the beginning of the novel about three panthers; Lara represents Tashi, Lala represents Lisette, and Baba, Adam. The story begins: "There was once a beautiful young panther who had a co-wife and a husband. Her name was Lara and she was unhappy because her husband and her co-wife were really in love" (3). Although by the time she tells the story, Tashi has already been circumcised, the fact that she is telling this story on the very first page of the novel indicates the significance of it to her. "I am *supposed* to make love to

her, Baba would say to Lala, his heartchosen mate. She is my wife as you are. I did not plan things this way. This is the arrangement that came down to me" (3). Tashi believes that Adam does not love her and he is only staying with her because he is 'supposed' to. Tashi's story reveals that although the male panther is not comfortable with the situation he is in, he does not blame himself for having two wives. The panther absolves himself of any responsibility as he believes that the situation has already been 'arranged' and he could not do anything about it.

With respect to Lisette's attitude to this situation, the novel suggests it to be something which she has inherited. Lisette says: "I had inherited the genes of my mother's mother, who had had affairs but no children with gypsies and Turks and the occasional Palestinian Jew, and, even worse, with penniless artists who could be found living in the literal garret of her tiny house ..." (94). Coming from this background, Lisette never blames herself for what she does. Like her grandmother who was interested in homeless and weak men, Lisette also picks Adam for her own desire since he is so tired and frustrated with all of the pressures in his life with Tashi.

Following her grandmother, Lisette's decision to initiate a sexual relationship sacrifices four people–Adam, Tashi, Pierre, and Benny–for her own benefit. When she sleeps with Adam, Lisette has other ideas than just being a friend to him. She wants to have a baby and satisfy her sexual desires. However, Lisette drags Adam into an abyss and leaves him there. Although she realises that Adam just needs her support and someone to talk to, she leads him into a sexual relationship, so that he will face another problem on top of the problems in his life with Tashi. Actually, Lisette does not help Adam at all; she just looks to him as a means of achieving her own goals. Throughout the novel, there are several times when Tashi displays a very strong reaction to anything related to this event. Lisette says: "When Evelyn learned of my pregnancy with little Pierre, she flew into a rage that subsided into a years-long deterioration and rancorous

depression" (119). Knowing that Lisette's ambition hurts Tashi, Lisette does not do anything effective to help. What Lisette does to Tashi is as severe as or possibly worse than what M'Lissa does to Tashi. M'Lissa was targeting Tashi's physical body, but her actions also had psychological effects. Meanwhile, Lisette was only targeting Tashi's mental and psychological past and she destroys it completely. Tashi is paralysed by M'Lissa, and dies by Lisette.

M'Lissa is an uneducated Olinkan woman who does not have any access to other ideology except Olinkan superstitions. However, Lisette is an educated woman who reads *The Second Sex* by Simon de Beauvoir to her son, and pretends to be wise and experienced. In praise of the book, she says: "Thanks to … Simon de Beauvoir whose book *The Second Sex* put the world I knew into a perspective I could more easily comprehend, if not control" (119). However, she does not understand that hurting another woman's feeling by stealing her partner is not what de Beauvoir suggests. It seems that she is still confused by the concept of feminism and sisterhood as well as her concept of place and its relation to identity.

Walker demonstrates that women are bound by the culture of where they were brought up. Lisette is a French woman but she has lived in Africa for some time, so is a blend of the two cultures. On the other hand, the novel also presents Tashi, who is an African but is being brought up with her American friend whilst in Olinka. Tashi moves to America and the contradiction between African culture and American culture prevents her from having a clear cultural identity. This also prevents her from establishing a strong female bond with Lisette and with Olivia. Walker's notion of womanism emphasises wholeness, but this does not seem to fully apply across this novel; place seems to signify forms of irreconcilable difference, as women from different backgrounds cannot unite or create the kinds of bonds which would allow Tashi to safely overcome the hurdles in her life.

The novel explores how Lisette and M'Lissa are connected to their respective backgrounds. Lisette follows her grandmother's sexually liberated attitude, and, as such, despite wanting to have a good relationship with Tashi, she instead causes severe distress by taking Adam from her. M'Lissa, too, follows her grandmother's attitude – in this case towards circumcision. M'Lissa is herself a victim of circumcision, but since she has been brought up in a community where female genital mutilation is valued by women, she also practises this ritual and becomes a symbol of the tradition. This is the Olinkan tradition which makes the women feel Olinkan. "In service to tradition, to what makes us a people. In service to the country and what makes us who we are" (210). Like M'Lissa, Lisette also follows her family and the accepted culture of the place where she lives – and M'Lissa causes Tashi severe distress by conducting this ritual of circumcision upon her body.

Thus, identity is linked to place and the culture of a place, as demonstrated in the cases of Lisette and M'lissa, yet Tashi is a character who is bewildered by two cultures, African and American, a confusion that ultimately leads to her undergoing the circumcision and to further suffer physical and mental problems. In the preface, Walker includes an excerpt from *The Color Purple*: "Tashi was happy that the initiation ceremony isn't done in Europe or America, said Olivia. That makes it [Europe and America] even more valuable to her" (v). This shows that Tashi is conflicted about the issue – she partially accepts the circumcision and partially disagrees with it at the same time. She wants to be recognised as an Olinkan, but she cannot bear not having her natural totality. Like other Olinkan women, Tashi's mother has gone through the process of mutilation and although some of them, such as Dura, Tashi's sister, have died during the operation, they have all accepted it as a phenomenon that should be carried out. Although Tashi does go through with the circumcision, having knowledge of another place in which this mutilation is not practised, and abhorred even, gives her a conflicted attitude to the

act, based upon her dual concept of place. She wants to be Olinkan, but she cannot accept circumcision. She also wants to be American, but is hindered by her inability to forget her past and her Olinkan background. Later on, after Tashi has moved to America with Adam, and she decides to return to Olinka and pay a visit to M'lissa. She stays with her for a few days. Once M'Lissa asks Tashi: "What does an American look like?" (200), Tashi says: "An American looks like a wounded person whose wound is hidden from others, and sometimes from herself. An American looks like me" (200). Therefore, it appears that Tashi believes that Americans are wounded, but she does not say whether America ever heals these wounds or makes them even worse. In her book, *Alice Walker*, Maria Lauret writes: "America, in her [Tashi's] definition, is not a place of proverbial freedom as compared to Africa, but merely a vantage form of cultural difference from which her original trauma can be examined" (171). Accordingly, America widens the gap in Tashi's mind and her concept of place becomes even more blurred; she becomes aware of her wounds as well as her pains. The more she faces reality and the more she compares Africa to America, the more confused she becomes.

After moving to America, Tashi's name changes to Evelyn. In some sections where Tashi is the narrator, she is introduced as Tashi-Evelyn, Evelyn, Evelyne Johnson, and Tashi-Evelyn-Mrs Johnson. This change of name takes place alongside the change of place, which highlights that her African identity is either mixed with an American identity, or she is something in between; not American, not African, and not even African-American, but a blend of them all. At the end of the novel, Tashi dies, and her death is symbolic. The cause of her death might be tied to her identity problem. She could not fit in, either in Africa or America. Even though she did not kill M'Lissa, she confesses to it. She actually chooses to die rather than to continue the struggle of fitting into any specific place. Lisette, who has both African and European identity, also dies during the course of the novel. Although her death is not what she wants, fighting political causes against French nuclear reactor projects, embracing life, she dies of stomach

cancer. The novel seems to be sending a message that those whose identities do not fit with the place they are in, cannot stay in this world. This is why Tashi wants to reconcile with Lisette in the land of death, so she can bond with her outside the geographical borders of Africa, Europe and America. However, as mentioned earlier, it is ironic that they still may not be able to have this friendship in the land of death; as place changes in the real world affect friendships, so the same thing may happen in the land of death: they have no idea of what is to come and whether the concept of friendship will be different from what they know in the real world. Therefore, they may not be able to build a sisterhood, even in this other, spiritual world.

Female bonding and cultural difference

The bonding between Tashi and Olivia starts in their childhood and continues until Tashi dies. Olivia is always beside Tashi and her support is unceasing. Olivia takes Tashi to Old Man (a figuration of Carl Jung himself), the psychologist (11). She never wants Tashi to become involved in the Olinkan traditions by putting scars on her face or by genital cutting. Olivia always feels herself to be close to Tashi, yet unable to help her. The reason for this is that although they have been together since the age of "six or seven" (6), they come from different lands, and this makes Tashi think that Olivia is unable to understand her concerns about the rituals of Olinka. Tashi says:

> Sometimes I think Olivia and I remember two entirely different people, and now, because Olivia and I have lived together for so many years I think my recollection of her as a child is sure to be the correct one. But what if it is not (14).

The difference between these two friends prevents them from achieving a more intimate bond. The other successful examples of female bonding in Walker's previous novels are between women of the same background. However, this is the first time in her work that two black women cannot have an effective bond because they are from different places and different cultures. In *The Color Purple*, Celie and Nettie are two women who are in different parts of

the world, but they come from the same background and get along very well, their mutually helpful relationship lasting a long time. On the other hand, Tashi and Olivia, who have been brought up together and share many childhood memories, are unable to attain as influential a relationship, one that would enable them to save each other. Here, in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, the cultural difference means that they do not feel equal, and in Tashi's mind this difference is so significant that she cannot forget their background.

In the dysfunctional relationship between Tashi and Olivia, both appear to lose out. Tashi cannot trust Olivia and in her mind they are "two entirely different people" (14). Furthermore, Olivia does not have a good female friend in Tashi. To Olivia, Tashi is the one who is in need because of Tashi's background and the Olinkan rituals. When Olivia insists that Tashi rejects the Olinkan traditions, she actually put emphasis on the same point that Tashi expresses. Since Olivia is not from Olinka and is opposed to the rituals, Tashi cannot trust her, as Tashi wants to feel Olinkan, a desire Olivia aims to deny her. There are numerous women surrounding Tashi who have gone through circumcision, and although she understands the pain and sorrow of genital cutting, such familiarity means she can trust them more easily than she can trust Olivia. How many uncircumcised women has Tashi seen in her life? There are just Olivia, Nettie, and Catherine. These three women travelled to Olinka to change Olinkans, not to initiate a close relationship with them in the form of friendship. Samuel, his wife Catherine, and Nettie are missionaries in Olinka and, as discussed in previous section on *The Color Purple*, they were completely unsuccessful in their mission. The Olinkans neither changed their behaviour nor traditions because of them. The same attitude that Tashi's people had towards the missionaries has transferred to Tashi herself. Olivia is a true friend to Tashi and wants to help her by any means possible. However, what Olivia is doing is the same as what her father did. Olivia wants to change Tashi's mind and make her accept an American style of life, but Tashi has learnt from her parents and her people not to trust these missionaries and Americans.

Accordingly, both Tashi and Olivia are under the influence of their past. Their bond is also sacrificed for the same reason.

Tashi and Olivia, who are part of the next generation, are unable to have an effective understanding of each other. Olivia is always trying to protect Tashi, but Tashi is already too involved with her Olinkan rituals and traditions even before being circumcised. "Olivia begged me not to go ... Tell me to do anything and I will do it, she said. Tell me to go anywhere and I will go, she said" (20). Tashi cannot escape from her background and she is so entangled with it that without her Olinkan identity she is lost. Tashi tells Olivia: "You want to change us, I said. So that we are like you. And who are *you* like? Do you even know? ... You are black but you are not like us. We look at you and your people with pity" (22). Tashi thus rejects a female bond for the sake of saving her local identity, as she feels lost without her background, a loss she sees in African-Americans. In Walker's second novel, although Meridian and Lynne have different coloured skin, they are able to establish a bond which allows them to talk and understand each other. However, *Possessing* suggests that even women sharing the same skin colour cannot have a functional relationship if they are from difference places. Moreover, in *Meridian*, the reason for the sisterhood between Meridian and Lynne is a common enemy, Truman. This circumstance unites them and encourages them to talk and share their worries. In addition, in *The Color Purple*, Celie and Shug rebel against Mister. It is the common wounds that bring Walker's women close to each other, rather than their race or colour. In *Possessing*, there is not a trace of feminine rivalry with regard to winning a man's love between Tashi and Olivia. However circumcision has made them different from each other so they are not able to come along with each other. Since circumcision is a cultural ritual of Olinka, in other words, it is the culture of place which prevents them having a functional bond. In *Meridian* and *The Color Purple*, women were united against a man while here Tashi and Olivia are apart because of the ambivalent concept of place. They cannot unite with each other since their identity is

interwoven with the culture of place. Tashi is an Olinkan while Olivia is an African-American. The novel explores that one's background plays such an important role that it cannot be defeated easily.

Further, as discussed earlier, the female body has a direct relationship with a woman's identity. In *The Color Purple*, Celie is able to realise her sexual freedom, which leads her to self-empowerment, while in *Possessing*, Tashi's clitoris has been removed and it cannot be replaced by anything, not even by any type of female friendship or sisterhood. This, then, further damages an attempt at bonding between Olivia and Tashi. Moreover, it is worth mentioning that, in order to realise their identity, black people need "to think of themselves as 'family' rather than a community with an oppressed status" (Chersie A. Harris and Nikki Khanna, 642). However, Tashi, who feels she is betrayed by Olinkans, cannot consider herself as a part of the society, nor is she able to consider herself as an American, since she sees herself as being different from Americans as she has been circumcised and they have not.

M'Lissa: agent and victim of patriarchy

Possessing is a specific example in Walker's work of the potential dysfunctionality of female friendship. M'Lissa is portrayed as the cruellest female character in Walker's books, and she can be regarded as an enemy of women. She is actually very lonely and does not have a single close friend. There is only the servant living with her with whom she has regular contact. Although M'Lissa is doing what society asks of her, this same society does not want to get close to her. In a society such as Olinka, where uncircumcised women are assumed to be "demons", the circumciser herself is assumed to be share in this evil, as apparently no one wants to be with her (113). M'Lissa's servant, M'bati, is the only person to stay beside her, but this is just to serve her, not to be her friend. Interestingly, although M'Lissa has no friends, she becomes the centre of attention for the press, including *Newsweek* (142). Ultimately celebrated by her government for supporting "wars of liberation", she is described experiencing renewed energy and physical revitalization. As Tashi-Evelyn sees her in *Newsweek*: "In the photograph

[in the magazine] M'Lissa smiled broadly, new teeth glistening; even her hair had grown back and was a white halo around her deep brown head" (142). It is as if the press in America wanted to present her as someone having supernatural features, an African hero who is effectively immortal, since she is regarded as "youthen" (142) in the article. In addition, Tashi, after going back to Africa to visit M'Lissa, describes her as follows: "M'Lissa had stopped showing any signs of death, stopped aging, and begun to actually blossom" (142). However, in spite of this new respect and physical appearance she is neither supernatural nor happy; she remains just a lonely woman imprisoned by her superstitions. Through M'Lissa and circumcision, Olinkans can partly feel they are Olinkan, and so it is society which makes M'Lissa into a symbol of Olinkan identity. It is for this reason that Olinkans consider M'Lissa as "The monument, the grandmother of the race" (153). M'lissa has not been born as a circumciser but she has become one due to social pressure. She is following the rituals just like the other Olinkans; if people refused support this custom then M'lissa would have led a different life. It might be considered, then, that it is the society itself, including Olinkan women, that are cruel, not just M'Lissa. In the circumcision ceremony, there are usually many women helping the circumciser to do her job. M'Lissa cannot do it alone. Other people are required to restrain the victim so tightly that she cannot move, then, it is M'Lissa's turn to do her job. For example Dura, Tashi's sister was held by Nafa, her mother, during the circumcision.[60] Thus the procedure is dependent on many practitioners – family members of the victims are directly implicated in the act of mutilation.

M'Lissa is a circumciser who has been circumcised, and she also has "the mark, on my body, of my own mother's disobedience" (203). This took the form of a further brutalisation to her body during the circumcision procedure, such that she can no longer walk properly.

[60] For further reading please refer to Walker. *Warrior Marks,* 301-309. Featured here is Walker's interview with a circumciser whose views are very similar to those of M'Lissa in the novel.

> Not only had her clitoris, outer and inner labia, and every other scrap of flesh been removed, but a deep gash travelled right through the tendon of her inner thigh. That's why when walking, she had to drag her left leg. It was supported by the back tendon and the buttock muscles alone. Indeed, the left buttock was far more developed than the right, and even though she hadn't really walked with vigor in many years, there was a firm resilience in her flesh on that side.

M'Lissa makes Tashi touch the mark showing the 'disobedience' of her mother, "she felt my finger exploring the keliodal tissue of the old wound, as hard as a leather shoe sole" (203).[61] M'Lissa's physical marks are much more severe than Tashi's. However, as she lives in Olinka and has never stepped outside, she can identify herself with the culture and become a symbol of Olinkan culture. She has no idea about America and American people. Her limited world provides her with a more solid and unified concept of place, whereas for Tashi the ambivalent concept of place draws her into utter bewilderment. Although M'Lissa has been physically tortured, she is still able to survive. However, Tashi cannot tolerate life any longer and welcomes death instead. M'Lissa's mental totality, protected by a highly limited sense of place, in contrast to Tashi's fragmented self, is arguably what helps her to survive. *Possessing* is a novel which demonstrates that mental and cultural restrictedness, or even ignorance, might permit survival, even if this is a sort of death in life—while Tashi's attempts to cross such boundaries of mind and culture lead to total obliteration.

Dysfunctional Mother-Daughter Relationship

Another issue haunting Tashi's background is her relationship with her mother, Nafa, which is extremely dysfunctional. The mother-daughter theme here, so endemic to Walker's fiction, both maps onto and advances the depictions of mothers and daughters presented in the earlier

[61] The nature of this 'disobedience' has not been revealed in the novel.

novels. Here, Tashi does not have a sensible nor caring mother. Nafa is someone who does not have any feelings and is completely absorbed by the destructive anti-woman culture of the society. "My mother never wept" (16), said Tashi about Nafa.[62] Nafa, who is supposed to be a role model to Tashi, is a wrecked woman who is tormented by pain and misery, and does not know any efficient way of finding an outlet for herself other than working. "Tashi, she [Nafa] would say, it is only hard work that fills the emptiness" (16). So Tashi, according to her mother's ideology, should be like an object, taking orders and working hard however unable to show feelings (364). In her essay entitled "One Child of One's Own", published in *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, Walker regards this kind of feminine advice as "[w]omen's folly", instead of "women's wisdom." The other destructive effect of Nafa's advice is that they should be detached from others since they should "fill the emptiness" through hard work, as an outlet for all human feelings, rather than through the development of interpersonal relationships. Nafa believes that people, and society in general, are damaging and no one is trustworthy, and we have seen how this attitude has transferred to Tashi, in the latter's relationship with Olivia. This stance causes them to become alone and secluded.

This dysfunctional and damaging mother-daughter relationship continues until Nafa lets Tashi undergo the painful process of circumcision. Since Nafa herself is unable to stand up to any oppression, she pushes Tashi towards this abyss. Following the circumcision, and its impact upon her marriage, Tashi, who never could see the good in others thanks to her mother, then finds herself completely alone, abandoned, and vulnerable. The dysfunctional mother-daughter relationship is so damaging that Tashi is suppressed by the very figure that should nurture her.

[62] See also *Warrior Marks*, Walker; pp.255-262. This suggests the roles of mother in societies in which female genital mutilation is practiced.

Yet Tashi, unlike Nafa, is not a wholly obedient girl. Tashi is the Olinkan girl who makes love to Adam in a field, despite the fact that this is a taboo act in Olinkan tradition (26). She does not obey or accept the norms of society in the same way as Nafa. Instead, she wants to have her own pleasure and individuality. Having said that, she is unable to stand up to her mother's support for the ideology of circumcision. Tashi believes that her mother is her supporter and protector, so she cannot imagine that she would make her undergo this painful operation if it would affect her womanhood for the rest of her life. Meanwhile, Nafa cannot imagine a woman who has not undergone the operation, and so blindly leads her daughter through it and considers this to be a normal phenomenon. This is why Walker calls it "Women's Folly" (*In Search* 364).

The mother-daughter relationship is rarely portrayed as a functional relationship in Walker's novels. Generally, mothers do not have an effective influence on their daughters that would lead them to success. In these five novels, regardless of the mothers' occupations, class, backgrounds, and education, they are mostly unsuccessful in helping their daughters. Educated mothers such as Zede in *The Temple* and Meridian's mother in *Meridian*, do not have any significant positive influence on their daughters' lives. The only mother to show any sustained concern in these five novels is Mem in *The Third Life*; she cares about Ruth and does her best to help and support her. However, she dies after a short while and Ruth is raised without a long-lasting mother-daughter relationship. Ultimately, in Walker's depictions, under her ideology of womanism, what mothers require is to regain their womanhood and create a self-empowered identity in order to be recognised as individuals; perhaps then they can pursue their desires and duties as mothers. Without following this path, they will be ignored, like Mem or Celie's mother, and they will be destroyed by the patriarchal views passed down and sustained in African-American society.

Another significant female relationship takes place between Tashi and Raye, her psychologist. Tashi moves to America in order to obtain some psychological help. Her first psychologist is M'zee ('Old Man', 'Carl'), who is an old man and apparently Lisette's uncle. After spending a long time working with him, Tashi's psychological situation does not improve. After M'zee dies, Tashi meets Raye, another psychologist, this time an African-American. There are some significant features in her relationship with Raye. Tashi says: "I resented her. Because she was black. Because she was a woman. Because she was whole. She radiated a calm, cheerful competence that irritated me" (107). These points actually allow Tashi to engage with her new psychologist, however, since she subsequently comments: "It was to her, however, that I found myself speaking, one day" (107). It is worth mentioning that Tashi had rarely talked to M'zee. Raye is an African-American woman who has retained her natural totality, and the negative points that Tashi feels about Raye, as cited above, motivate her to talk to her.

The first topic that Tashi and Raye talk about is place: "But you have left Africa, said Raye. Yes I said. My body had left. My soul had not" (108). Raye thus tackles Tashi's main problem in her first therapy session, and she makes her talk, which helps Tashi to feel better. This is how the female bonding between them begins to build. Moreover, communication plays a key role in articulating female identity. In *The Color Purple*, Celie begins her self-revelation by writing letters and here, in *Possessing*, Tashi utilises verbal communication for a similar purpose. Both Tashi and Celie use women as their confidantes, and they both come to reject the patriarchal inheritance in any form. Celie begins writing to God, as she has been told to do so, but as soon as she finds out that Nettie is alive, she writes to her instead. Similarly, Tashi discovers that she can talk to Raye rather than the male M'zee. Female conversation in both novels is significant as it brings both Celie and Tashi out of their solitude. Tashi is surrounded by many people, but she can only talk to Raye as she does not want to impose her ideas on Tashi. Both Olivia and Nafa love Tashi, but they push their thoughts onto her. Raye is the only

woman who does not let her personal interests become an obstacle to their bond. Also strengthening the only partially-functional female bond in the novel is the fact that that both women are mutilated. Raye, of course, has not undergone the process of circumcision, but she did have an operation on her gum, which suggests a ghost of Tashi's own experience: "gum mutilation, she said . . . she'd had her gums turned down like socks around her teeth, their edges clipped and insides scraped, and then sewed up again, tight" (133). While hardly circumcision, as Raye admits, the moment relieves the tension that Tashi would have felt if she thought that she was the only one who lacked natural totality; "Raye became someone I felt I knew; someone with whom I could bond" (134). Genital mutilation is an extreme, but in this scene the meeting of women's experiences with surgical intervention works to situate such bodily violence in a different perspective.

This bond is ultimately only partially functional because Raye and Tashi are not close friends; it is a doctor-client relationship. It is true that Raye allows Tashi to talk and sometimes, if it is necessary, she adds some information about herself, but this cannot be compared to the relationship between Tashi and Olivia. Raye is a psychologist, thus making the relationship a more one-sided affair in which she is restricted from imposing her views upon Tashi; Tashi and Olivia are childhood friends whose lives are so much more intertwined.

Male Characters and Their Quests for Identity

Male characters in Walker's novels are depicted in their extremities within a polemical discourse, expressed throughout her canon of fictional works, which privileges female experiences over male experiences. Men seem to be either very cruel and ignorant or very obedient and passive. Characters such as Pa and Mister in *The Color Purple* are examples of cruel men, while Truman in *Meridian* and Mr Hal in *The Temple* are very passive and obedient. The common point among Walker's male characters is that most of them are what could be called 'hungry' for sex. In *Possessing,* Adam, who is very in love with Tashi, as demonstrated

in *The Color Purple* and *The Temple*, does not have any control over his sexual desires. Although Adam tries his best to help Tashi, his affair with Lisette inflicts the worst possible harm on Tashi's spirit and mentality. The severity of the turmoil which Adam puts Tashi through is arguably the same as the damage she suffers from circumcision. Tashi, who does not feel close to Olivia because she is from a different culture, marries Olivia's brother, Adam. "I married him because he was loyal, gentle and familiar. Because he came for me. And because I found I could not fight with the wound tradition had given me" (114). However, Adam cannot get Tashi to trust him because he has proved that he is not loyal to her. Although "he came for [Tashi]" (114), he makes love to a white, French girl, Lisette. Adam is so caring towards Tashi before their marriage and immediately after, as well. He stands against M'Lissa saying that, "I wanted to marry her. You are a foreigner, she said, dismissing me. I still want to marry her, I said, taking Tashi's hand" (61). When Adam is very protective of Tashi in front of the big "devil", M'Lissa, Tashi becomes sure that she can rely on Adam in her life and through his help and support, she can "fight with the wound tradition had given me" (114). However, Adam soon becomes tired of his sick wife and writes a letter to Lisette yearning for her wise words: "Dearest Lisette, How much I would like to see you, to hold you, to hear your wise words" (72). Tashi goes for the circumcision but her heart is warm because, she believes, her loyal love is waiting for her and he will protect her. However, this never happens.

Tashi, like Meridian, initiates a relationship in order to feel protected, supported, and sheltered from the damage she has received in her home. Eddie, Meridian's partner, leaves her, just as Adam leaves Tashi. Both Eddie and Adam are caring and considerate, but since these feelings are not mutual in their relationships, they turn away from their partners. After circumcision, Tashi becomes so weak, both mentally and physically, that she needs Adam's help more than ever, but he turns to Lisette and asks for her love. The wounded Tashi dies inside when she realises that she has been betrayed by Adam. Her love for him was the only

hope which could bring her out of her miseries but Adam betrays her so Tashi becomes both hopeless and helpless.

It is true that Adam feels under pressure and turns to Lisette, but she could have helped Adam get back to his love rather than sleeping with him and dragging him into more troubles. Although Adam sleeps with Lisette, he does not want her, nor does he want a child with her:

> I had always been careful with Lisette, more often than not, when we were making love, I did not penetrate her. Ours was a friendship of shared sadness as well as passion, but a friendship first of all, and I spent many nights in her fluffy white bed, holding her in my arms, but so distraught about my own life with Evelyn, all I could yearn for was sleep (91).

Adam wants to release his tension, which is overtaking his life with Tashi, so he turns to Lisette, and while professing friendship and support, he nonetheless goes to the extreme by having sex with her. "Although he [Adam] acknowledges," Pia Thielmann writes, "how painful this relationship is to Tashi, he does not end it. Tashi's reactions to Lisette and later, to Adam's love son, Pierre, are simply fits of jealousy to Adam. Each of Adam's visits to Paris is another turn of the knife in Tashi's wound. Yet he does not discontinue them because he needs a friend with whom he can release his pain about Tashi" (78). This is a tendency that many men show in Walker's novels. Even Adam shares some of the sexual characteristics seen in earlier male characters of novels such as *Meridian*, as in order to release his tensions, he turns to a friend but it ends up being a sexual affair. "On the other hand", he argues to himself, "there had been an occasional weak moment, which is, after all, all one needs" (97). Adam may seem less a sexual predator than male characters that populate Walker's earlier novels, but he rationalizes away his affair with Lisette, who calls Tashi his "crazy wife", allured here by Lisette's "fluffy" whiteness.

While Adam might rationalise his actions, in Walker's novels, most men share one common point: they are unusually preoccupied with sex. To create this situation for Adam, Walker restricts Adam's choices of a confidante, and introduces Lisette as a means of relieving his tension. She creates a relationship between Adam and Lisette that suggests his relationship with her is designed to make him feel better. Soon, Lisette becomes pregnant and this creates even more tension for Adam, as well as for Tashi. Walker's depictions of the irresponsibility and amorous looseness of men, however, are shown not only to harm the women of her novels, but also to be disadvantageous to the male characters themselves. Adam's problems increase when he begins his relationship with Lisette. The relationship was supposed to bring him relief, as he mentioned in his first letter to her, but, in fact, it damages his situation. By depicting men as sexually voracious beings in the majority of her work, Walker appears to emphasise that men lack a self-awareness about sexuality that the women characters are by necessity working though; moreover, the self-deluding behaviour of characters such as Adam suggests that even apparently self-reflective men might hide more primal desires behind illusions of caring, friendship, and trust.

It is worth mentioning that the notion of sexuality and identity in Walker's novels fluctuates in many aspects. As they relate to female characters, sexuality and identity are closely interwoven, and they are very helpful to women as they endeavour to find their *selves*. For example, in *The Color Purple*, Celie recognises her *self* better when she understands her sexuality. Her homosexual experience is realised in the same way, as she can acknowledge her needs and desires much better than before. Or, in *The Temple of My Familiar*, Zede uses sexuality as a means of knowing her *self* better, even though it means she betrays her own daughter. Thus, when sexuality is related to women, it can result in female power, female identity, and individuality, which is usually the opposite in Walker's fiction when it is related to men. In Walker's novels, male sexuality seems presented primarily as a way of meeting

sexual needs, without any positive outcome. Male characters such as Adam only sleep with women to please themselves, even while believing otherwise, and there is no effort to trace a connection between their sexuality and their identity. Many male characters tend to be more animalised than the female characters. This point has its strongest embodiment in *The Color Purple*, as argued earlier, when men such as Mister and Pa literally have unbridled sex with Celie and, when they have finished the act, carry on with their normal lives as if nothing has occurred. At one point in *The Color Purple*, Celie refers to the sexual act with Mister as "toilet", which is exactly what the narrative suggests. Even in *Meridian*, there is the same impression, although Truman is a highly educated activist. Consequently, male sexuality is portrayed early on as rather one-dimensional, though even with more complexly developed male characters, such as Adam, the bottom line of male sexual desire is merely disguised, not altered or transcended, by acts of contemplation and self-reflection.

Third generations

In this novel, Walker also depicts two boys, Pierre and Benny, as the third generation of Samuel's family. Unlike the third generation in *The Third Life*, which involves Ruth being brought up by a man, in *Possessing* the third generation is brought up by women and a shared father who is only semi-present. Like Samuel in this novel, who is almost absent and does not do anything for his son, Adam is also hovering between his two families and is unable to fulfil his parental responsibilities. Generally, fathers in this novel do not carry out any considerable tasks. Being brought up by their mothers, Pierre and Benny would identify themselves with their mothers.

Walker's depiction of Pierre is similarly symbolic of male dysfunction. Her male characters tend to be either too good and considerate, or extremely positive and idealistic. Pierre can be classed in the latter category. Having a part-time father and a sexually permissive mother, Pierre becomes an anthropologist with a sophisticated viewpoint about the issues around him. He wants to be reconciled with everyone, even with Tashi who welcomes him

with a load of stones in their first meeting (137). He wants to have a good relationship with his father and his step-brother, Benny. He is familiar with great authors such as Langston Hughes, James Baldwin, Richard Wright, Simone de Beauvoir, and many others. Even his skin colour shows that he belongs to neither white nor black. "In him, 'black' has disappeared; so has white" (164). In *The Third Life*, Walker portrays Brownfield as a man whose dysfunctional father-son relationship drags him into a series of problems. However, in *Possessing*, she introduces Pierre as a completely contrasting character. The earlier portrayals of male characters in Walker's novels suggested that men have less self-determination than women. Most of her female characters, such as Celie, Meridian, Mem, and Fanny, are representative of Walker's idea of strong females; however, their male counterparts, Mister, Truman, Brownfield, and Suwelo, are less willing to stand up for their liberty. They either tend to lean on a woman, as Truman and Suwelo do, or, like Mister and Brownfield, are irrational. Pierre is a unique example in Walker's novels of a male character who is educated and rational. Through Pierre, Walker perhaps wants to throw some light into the dark future of men that is portrayed in most of her novels. Although, Pierre, does not benefit from a functional father-son relationship, he manages to stand on his own feet, study in a prestigious university and be a very open-minded man. In *The Third Life*, Walker gives her readers some hope that Grange's third generation, Ruth, can be honourable and start a new beginning with a better personal and social perspective. Similar to *The Third Life,* in this novel Walker shows some ray of hope through Pierre, that the future of men can be different.

Conclusion

Possessing the Secret of Joy clearly demonstrates the destructive effect of circumcision. Tashi dies at the end of the novel because the American court considers her to be a murderer, even though she did not kill M'Lissa. The public execution of Tashi has the further effect of discouraging other Olinkan women from rebelling against the ritual of circumcision. Moreover,

it forces them into silence as they would rather bear the pain and obey the patriarchal rules than be killed like Tashi. Tashi confesses to Olivia that she did not kill M'Lissa and she reveals that she accepted the court's decision "because women are cowards, and do not need to be reminded that we are" (239). Does she reject the accusation just so she can say that women are not cowards? Does her death help women stand against circumcision? Does her death resolve or at least provide an end to her lack of control over her body? Although she believes she is making this final decision for the benefit of her damaged body, it of course destroys her completely. Moreover, her body is destroyed by another patriarchal society, not by African culture in Olinka but by America and American capital punishment laws. So, where is the true place for women to have their own power and voice? How can women be inspired to end circumcision? M'Lissa becomes a circumciser after her mother's death. Now that she has died, will there be another circumciser in Olinka? The novel arguably ends in cyclical despair.

The novel portrays the horrifying nature of circumcision and magnifies its intensity to such a degree that not only does a change of place not heal the wounds of a circumcised woman, but takes her life away and destroys her whole physical being. Leaving Olinka makes Tashi detached from her Olinkan identity, and America does not heal her wounds. The female friendship that developed between Tashi and Olivia is also affected by the two different cultures. While these cultures and places both oppose and oddly mirror each other in terms of cruel laws and customs, each place--Olinka and America-- marks and determines both Tashi and Olivia in indelible ways.

Possessing is a novel about ongoing and irredeemable sorrow and pain. Throughout the novel, the reader is seeking joy or a character that possesses the secret of joy. Although at the end of the novel it is directly revealed that "RESISTANCE IS THE SECRET OF JOY!" (264), there are no characters in the novel that actually feel or enact this. The ending of the novel is abstract; it may be difficult to grasp how resistance can bring joy. Throughout the story, Tashi,

Adam, Olivia, Lisette, and others strive for peace and happiness but it is never attained. Tashi, whom the story revolves around, is a little joyful before her circumcision but after her circumcision she falls into the depths of sorrow; the story ends with her public execution. She is unable to have a good relationship with the people around her. Her relationship with Olivia does not work because of her friend's "RESISTANCE" to Olinkan rituals, and Tashi sacrifices this female bonding for the sake of maintaining the irrational Olinkan traditions. Then, she undergoes the painful process of circumcision and realises that the point she was resisting was, for her, not helpful but self-destructive. She therefore changes her attitude and begins resisting the acceptance of circumcision or anything related to it. However, even this change, and this new form of resistance does not bring her joy; it ends up killing M'Lissa (who dies "under her own power" [250]) and Tashi, accused of murder, is in turn killed by the US government. Adam, who resists M'Lissa and all of the troubles in his path in order to marry Tashi, ends up in sorrow. He becomes a lost character who hovers between two families and finds himself alone. On the one hand, he sees Tashi, who is executed, and their son Benny. On the other, he sees Lisette, who was supposed to be his confidante but who turns out to be his second love, and their son Pierre. However, Adam himself needs some peace and he might leave them all, just like Grange, and go on a quest to find, to 'see', himself.

To summarise, in this novel, Walker illustrates the contradictions in cultures and how cultural expectations and conditions can prevent women from being unified. She portrays her belief that although the aim of womanism is unity and wholeness, this cannot be achieved where there are women from different cultures and different locations who are unable to discover and forge common ground. The diversity of culture and ideology is another of Walker's concerns in her later novels, *By the Light of My Father's Smile* and *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart*. In *By the Light*, she shows how different ideologies and social parameters are used to judge women, and how this can bind their freedom, which can lead to dysfunctional

bonds and only partial connections. In her final novel, Walker depicts the significance of religion in women's lives, and how women can unite with each other regardless of their diverse backgrounds. Therefore, although in *Possessing* Walker shows that women from different backgrounds might struggle, and even fail to create a strong bond, in her final novel she demonstrates that, through spiritual exploration and investigation, they might overcome this hurdle.

Chapter Six

Later Work and the Didactic Turn: Walker's Figuration of Gender and Religious Affiliation

Section Abstract

This chapter explores how Walker develops different aspects of womanism from the first novel to the most recent one, and also how her last two fictional works differ from her early novels by dealing largely with the role of religion and spirituality with regards to womanism, rather than female bonding. While *By the Light of My Father's Smile* (1989) largely questions the role of religion as escape or solace, *Now is the Time to Open Your Heart* (2004), her most recent novel, explores the womanist aspect of spirituality by showing how Buddhist beliefs might help its female characters to heal their wounds. In *By the Light,* religion is an obstacle to women's freedom – especially sexual freedom; however, in *Now is the Time*, religion is posited as a route by which women are able to regain their spiritual health. These two novels thus explore the two contrasting functions of religion in women's growth, and we note that Walker differentiates between religion and spirituality- religion as organised belief system and spirituality as human connection to the divine and the self.

By the Light of My Father's Smile: Religion Against The Female Body

Introduction

As has been seen in this thesis, in the novels that follow *The Color Purple,* Walker tries to broaden the scope of womanism by addressing it from new angles and, in particular, by employing questions of spirituality and of religious transcendence. This began in *The Temple,*

where Carlotta recovers her spirituality through the healing of Fanny's massage and advice. In *The Temple,* Walker also introduces some elements of Buddhism and meditation, as addressed in chapter four of this thesis. In *By the Light*, Walker explores the connections and contradictions between spirituality and female sexual identity. The dysfunctional religious aspect of the novel is developed through Robinson's dual role as a priest of a strict form of Christianity and also as a father to Susannah and Maggie. His strict religious views prevent his daughters from having the freedom to express their sexuality. Moreover, when he dies, Maggie's lover Manuelito, who represents the functional aspect of spirituality, meets him in the world of the dead and preaches to him in such a way that Robinson eventually changes his mind and comes to understand that his daughters ought to have had more sexual freedom.

Although the reviews were not all negative, Walker's sixth novel has still not been as positively recognised as her masterpiece, *The Color Purple*. Further, unlike Walker's previous novels, there are only a few critics who have analysed *By the Light,* and most comments on the novel are found in contemporaneous reviews.[63] As one scholar puts it, perhaps explaining why there is a lack of academic attention given to this novel, "[u]nlike her first five novels, particularly the Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Color Purple* (1982), *By the Light* was poorly received and quickly dismissed" (June, 600). While Walker remains a respected writer, her engagement with different aspects of womanism in her later works has been met with less critical approval and interest. For instance, as was stated earlier, Walker's attempt to relate female identity to other social and philosophical issues in *The Temple* was not very much admired by critics. "Ms. Walker," Richard Bernstein writes, "seems to have substituted the

[63] Gayle Pemberton. *"Fantasy Lives"*. *Women's Review of Books* 16.3. Wellesley: Wellesley College Center for Research on Women; pp. 20–22. Pemberton writes: "*By the Light of My Father's Smile* is neither Walker's strongest novel nor her weakest" (21). Palmer, Trudy, *"Walker's Latest Gives More Heat Than Light." Christian Science Monitor*; p. B6. Print. Palmer writes: "Cleverly narrated and sometimes engaging, the story ultimately disappoints" (B6).

heartfelt concerns that motivated 'The Color Purple' for a mediocre sort of spiritualist philosophizing that is both cloying and predictable" (E8).

Further, Walker's key ideas and themes are more openly stated in her later work, and critics have suggested that such explicit didactic prose means they cannot find much to dig into.[64] This is to say that, in *By the Light*, characters comment upon and analyse their own actions, doing the interpretive work of the scholar, and the reader in general, for them. For example, the connection between female sexuality and freedom is directly and openly described by characters such as Pauline and Susannah in their interior monologues. Moreover, the notion of female individuality and feminine liberty is also articulated and explored very explicitly by Maggie. This contrasts with Walker's earlier novels, where there is little open didacticism, and themes and abstract concepts relating to agency and identity are rarely explicitly described by characters, who instead act out or embody such things through their experiences and dramatic roles. Perhaps these factors have hindered critics in their approach to Walker's later works, though I would suggest that the author might have complex intentions that go beyond the points clearly stated by her characters.

For while the ideas and themes are given to readers didactically, as Gayle Pemberton writes, in her review of the novel, there is a vast number of them: "*By the Light of My Father's Smile* concerns itself with freedom, repression, sexual oppression, sexual fulfilment, memory, regret, loss, victory, love-thwarted, lost, found and the necessity of forgiveness" (20). Pemberton wonders how all these themes can be raised and developed in a 200-page novel. I

[64] Francine Prose. *"Sexual Healing." New York Times Book Review* 4 Oct. 1998: 18. At the end of this review, Prose writes: "What's so dismaying, finally, about 'By the Light of My Father's Smile' is Alice Walker's apparent assumption that her only job is to serve as a cheerleader for Eros, to exhort her audience to love and respect their bodies. Let someone else attend to their minds, let it be someone else's tedious duty to nurture and encourage her readers' love and respect for language". This affirms how didactic Walker's sixth novel is as she pushes her reader in towards the inferences and meanings she wants.

suggest that, while Walker's many themes seem, apparently, disorientating, they all come aligned under the concept of womanism. As argued with respect to *The Temple*, womanism provides the central underpinning of Walker's work, and so, in *By the Light*, the main concern is that of how women can enjoy their sexual freedom within same-sex relationships or otherwise.

In *The Color Purple*, Walker suggested that attaining sexual awareness was crucial for women to have a better understanding of their selves. Having made this clear, Walker displays her innovative skills as a writer as she attempts to weave themes such as spirituality and reincarnation back into this pre-existing notion of womanism. And, in order to portray her characters as pursuing these aims, Walker embarks on a different narrative style to chart this new direction. In my analysis, the point of this novel lies in how women must develop a stronger self-awareness of their identities and desires in order to fight for their goals, and such a self-awareness is expressed from the didacticism of the prose.

Indeed, the women in each of these later novels arguably achieve self-actualisation in ways that transcend those of the female characters in Walker's work preceding *The Temple*. In *By the Light*, these women openly speak about – and fight – the norms of family and society. They are not like Celie, who was baffled, lost, and alone at the beginning of *The Color Purple*. Walker thus enacts, from this character onwards, a process of developing a strong and self-aware female identity, which is fully explored in this later novel. In other words, while on a literary level such didactism may equate to weak writing – Bernstein believes that Walker puts the ideas "into the mouths of half-formed characters rather than developing ideas through the action of the story itself" (E8), on a thematic level this didactism expresses the strength of the women characters to uncover their own senses of self.

These types of self-aware characters proliferate in Walker's novels after *The Color Purple*. By engaging with these types of characters, Walker is illustrating that her characters are becoming stronger in understanding themselves as they act according to their needs and desires. It could be argued that this presence of self-aware narrators in this later work both recalls and reverses the epistolary format of earlier novels such as *The Color Purple*. In this earlier novel, the narrator speaks mostly in the first person, their letters being akin to the later novel's inner monologues, yet here in *The Color Purple*, the narration is such that s/he makes mistakes in her/is own perception. Yet while each character speaks or articulates their sense of self in a relatively solipsistic manner in *By the Light*, the fact of the aforementioned echo in the form of narration between the two novels perhaps also indicates an increasing social stability in African-American life that allows for such centredness; these inner monologues expressing the luxury of being able to move from physical, social, and economic wants and imperatives towards psychic and spiritual exploration. This stability opens a space for self-reflection and provides a narrative framework, different to what we have seen in her previous novels, from which she is able to launch the enhanced theme of spirituality in her work.

Given the above – the thematic underpinning of womanism and the importance of self-awareness with regards to the characters – this section explores how and why Walker engages with religion in this novel, and how this relates to or contradicts the central concepts and aims of womanism.

Female Friendship and Jealousy

Of the female friendships in *By the Light*, some are beneficial and supportive as we witness women striving to realise their identities. Susannah is a novelist who is married to Petros, but, in time, she turns to Pauline and initiates a deep relationship with her. Petros is Susannah's only heterosexual relationship and it is not described in much detail. Susannah would often go on trips with Petros, but their relationship ends after he leaves her for a "blonde airline hostess"

(7). There are very few mentions of Petros in the novel thereafter, and Susannah never feels regret after Petros leaves her. She does not try to win Petros back nor does she feel any jealousy. Instead, Susannah ignores Petros and his lover and continues her own life by choosing another, female, partner. And Susannah's relationship with Pauline endures until the end of the novel. While characters signifying womanist concerns and goals in Walker's previous novels often explored sexual relations with other women, they were usually coded as bisexual. In *By the Light*, Walker depicts an aspect of womanism that introduces a new concept – a womanist who is solely in love with another woman. This is the first time that Walker has portrayed a lesbian couple in her work where neither woman has ties or affiliations with men at some level.[65]

Comparing Susannah to Celie and Lynne, she behaves in a more mature manner than the other two since Celie and Lynne never succeed in winning back their man's love, rendering their attempts to gain their men's attentions futile. Susannah skips this period of pain and continues her own life, showing the kind of self-determination that was lacking in Celie and Lynne following their abandonment by their partners. The significance of this in Lynne's narrative is that the failure in her heterosexual relationship leads her to have a female bond with Meridian; this is what Susannah achieves also, but in a manner that suggests she need not endure the painful lesson of failure. Susannah totally puts Petros aside and picks a new female partner, she does not fight in a manner that duplicates a man's life and instead pursues her own wishes as an individual; it is as if Susannah benefits from Celie and Lynne's experience and uses it to move her life onward. Further, Susannah does not divorce Petros, which suggests that the central concepts relating to marriage are conceived differently by her. Susannah here is practising the concept of marriage that has been discussed previously with respect to *The*

[65] Still she avoids exploring men's sexuality and male homosexuality. The distance she keeps from male sexuality is both ambiguous and interesting at the same time.

Temple; for though remaining married to Petro, she lets him go to pursue his own sexual desires, while she moves on with her own.[66]

The first few pages of the novel provide an explicit illustration of the relations between Susannah and Pauline, as if the novel is going to solely concern a lesbian couple, which relates to the theme of human relations as one aspect of womanism. And though this focus gives way at points to Walker's engagement with the theme of Christianity, the lesbian relationship under the shelter of womanism is nevertheless central to the theme of sexual freedom that the religious elements work to accentuate in the novel. The first homosexual relationship in Walker's novels was presented in *The Color Purple*, where Celie's relationship with Shug is utilised to forge her identity, and which results in her self-empowerment. Her attaining of an orgasm, with Shug's help, is actually the first time that Celie realises that something is just for herself; previously her body and her mind belonged to the sexual desires of Pa and Mister. Sexual pleasures are a means by which the female characters in Walker's novels set themselves free from patriarchy and male oppression, thus intimately relating the female body to identity. This point is further developed in *By the Light*. Pauline says: "I learned about orgasms. And once I learned that I could have them, and have them easily, I realized that in at least that one area I was free" (132). Therefore, this novel very openly depicts how sexual self-knowledge can lead women towards freedom and empowerment. Pauline continues: "That I, lowly me, somehow had this precious thing. I knew instantly what it meant. It meant I was not forgotten by creation; it meant that I was passionately, immeasurably loved. I started right away to plan my escape" (133). Although it appears that Pauline is fully aware of her actions and decisions, as well as her sexuality, this excerpt reveals how she is liberated in thought as well as in her physicality. She considers her clitoris to be an element which connects her to creation. The dialogue in Walker's *Possessing* illustrates that the clitoris is often socially regarded as dirty,

[66] See Carolyn Heilbrun's discussion on Marriage and Family in *Reinventing Womanhood*: pp. 171-197.

and as a threat to patriarchy. *By the Light*, like *Possessing* and *The Temple*, attacks this social norm by depicting a lesbian couple who enjoy their sexuality and regard their sex as a gift of creation. However, their sexual relationship is not revealed socially, to the other characters of the novel, it is only revealed to the readers. This conveys the message that women such as Susannah and Pauline, who have a better understanding of their selves, are free to act independently within their private, personal sphere even if society or their families –Susannah's father being a priest who is against lesbianism – attempt to undermine them from outside.[67] From *The Color Purple* onwards, then, Walker describes the steps towards sexual freedom that her female characters undertake; in this novel, we encounter a uniquely secure image of womanism as figured within a lesbian relationship.

By way of Pauline and Susannah's relationship, Walker also implicitly reveals how Pauline came to embrace lesbianism. In the section entitled "Meat", Pauline's own unsuccessful heterosexual relationship is explained. Her first experience of sexual intercourse was with Winston; whilst disliking him on the level of attraction, that Pauline lacked sexual awareness is seen in how she "didn't even know how [she] got pregnant. Nobody ever told girls anything" (104). In fact, she experiences her first sexual intercourse with a man when her parents and her brother get her drunk and leave her alone with Winston, when she is fifteen.[68] This parental betrayal changes her views towards her parents and family union in general. Although she loves her son, Richard, conceived from that encounter with Winston, she is not sure whether having a child is a positive thing. In her discussion with Susannah she says: "I want parents who'd never betray me" (108). Being brought up in a family of ten, she has merely learnt from them how to survive. In this crowded and poor family, she has only come to know

[67] *Possessing* shows how Tashi is unable to achieve her individual freedom because of the cultural oppression of Olinkans, while *By the Light* shows quite opposite point, since Susannah can sustain her individuality although both society and her family are against her ideology.

[68] Celie's fear of men has also been seen as a reason for her keeping herself away from sexual relations with men, as described in the second chapter.

how to feed herself and how to live alone. Even in her youth, she needs safety and peace and she seeks these qualities in all aspects of her life, even in her sex with Susannah. One of the points that Walker has teased out is the jealousy of Pauline towards Susannah. This jealousy is a factor in their relationship. She has regrets in her life and, through sex, Pauline yearns for what Susannah had in her life, saying that **"**when I make love to you I am trying to take your life. Yes." (108). Pauline struggles to know how to love, and to understand what love is in general. On one occasion, Susannah complains to her that "you like to fuck me, but you don't like me ... why does it feel sometimes when you make love to me that you'd like to kick my teeth in?" (108) Pauline's engagement with sex and love is still marked, Walker suggests, by her traumatic sexual past.

On the other side of this relationship is Susannah; Walker implicitly reveals why she, too, has come to choose a female partner. It appears that it is tied to her not wishing to have any children (109) due to her lack of trust in parents in general. Instead of having a chaotic family of seven siblings, as Pauline does, Susannah only has one sister; the family she has been brought up in is totally different. Further, unlike Pauline's cruel parents, Susannah's father, Robinson, favours her, assuming that "Susannah was pure and Magdalena [Maggie, her sister] a tramp" (29). Yet, like Pauline, she nevertheless believes that "every parent betrays the child. They can't help [it]" (108). One of the reasons for this belief is that Susannah cannot show her true self to her father because of his religious views. It is for this reason that her parent betrays her, even without intention. Further, Robinson believes that Susannah is 'pure', not because he knows her well but because, it would appear, she is a good liar. The mask she wears in front of her father makes Susannah feel as if she is betraying him. Although her father shows love to Susannah, she cannot accept this love as he is not loving the true Susannah but the masked Susannah. Another reason for Susannah holding the belief that parents generally betray their children is that her father's viewpoint that Susannah is pure is solely due to her mask, while he

deprives Maggie -who is not metaphorically wearing any mask and does not lie- of his fatherly love and support.

Robinson lives in a family with three women. He is a strict priest who, because of his patriarchal religious views, creates a gap between himself and his daughters, as well as his wife, Langley. The result of his beliefs is that he becomes alone; his daughter, Maggie, never loves him, while Susannah and Langley only respect him. Further, as Gorey Ozlem argues: "The father's act of punishment of the daughter for her own good, which is referred to as the 'breaking of her' in the novel, also results in the alienation of the sisters from each other and from their mother" (29). Maggie's relationship to patriarchal society is, in a way, similar to Tashi's in *Possessing*. She wants to be free to do whatever she wants but she has a father who does not want his daughter to do anything that would break the moral code of his patriarchal religion; as such, when Maggie becomes sexually involved with Manuelito, Robinson is outraged to the extent that he lashes her with a leather belt (26). Tashi is also a free girl like Maggie and she swims against the stream in Olinka, having sex with Adam outside of wedlock. However, when she grows older she has to follow Olinkan rituals such as receiving scars on her face and undergoing circumcision, which emotionally and physically paralyses her. Both Maggie and Tashi find their desires oppressed, an oppression that manifests itself in physical scarring, and they are both deprived of a free life because of an ideology. Patriarchy is observed in different ways in these novels; sometimes it shows itself in the Church and sometimes in the culture of a small tribe somewhere in Africa. Yet in both cases the female body is targeted in order to prevent women from attaining individuality and power.

When Maggie is punished by Robinson, she breaks into pieces. After this punishment, she feels so mentally weak that she puts on weight to hide her frailty: "When I am fat I feel powerful, as if I could not possibly need anything more" (124). She is actually hiding her self, which she perceives to be weak, behind a facade. Accordingly, Robinson is making his

daughters hide themselves and wear masks in one way or another; Susannah lies to hide her sexuality and Maggie eats to hide her mental weakness. Walker shows how Robinson's patriarchal religion and ideology can consume women and their bodies. This is the punishment they indirectly suffer because of their father's patriarchal viewpoints.

Maggie expresses how this punishment for her sins manifests itself by her unhealthy eating and drinking:

> As soon as she [Susannah] left I threw out the juicer she'd bought and hauled my first big marbled steak out of the freezer, mashed my first mound of buttery potatoes. Had my first alcoholic drink. It was as if my memories were lodged in my cells, and needed to be fed. If I lost weight perhaps my memories of Manuelito and my anger at my father would fade away. I felt so abandoned already, I did not want them to go (125).

This excerpt proves that Maggie's unlimited appetite for food is just a way of avoiding the bitter reality she is facing. She eats to remind herself that she is not loved but "abandoned"; the worst part is that she feels so lonely that her bad memories are the only things left for her, that if she loses weight she would feel more abandoned than ever. She is aware of her overeating and is able to analyse her actions. She even understands why she does not want to lose weight. Maggie uses her body to contain all of her emotions and anger, and this relationship between body and identity is significant: in order to retain her hatred and anger, she manipulates her body. Her father targets her body and, arguably, she does the same, her body becoming the site that signifies precisely the vicious family circle that Susannah needs to escape, to survive.

Like her father, her mother does not support her, which irritates Maggie. She once expected her mother to leave Robinson but "she never did" (27). Although Langley and Robinson "had agreed [before their marriage] to never lay a hand on [their] children" (31), he does, and this compels Langley to deprive Robinson of sex for a few nights. However, she

reneges. In a way, her mother's silence after a very short resistance becomes a green light for Robinson to inflict further damage upon Maggie. Even her mourning of the death of Jocko, Langley's favourite brother, does not obstruct her warm sexual relationship with Robinson. Despite recognising that her mother and father are in wedlock, Maggie cannot help but see the hypocrisy in her being punished violently by Robinson for the very thing that he and her mother enjoy – sex. This dysfunctional mother-daughter relationship actually paralyses Maggie, and its pain is much more intense than the lashes of the belt on her back. As suggested in previous chapters, mother-daughter relationships are generally dysfunctional in Walker's novels; there are only a few mothers who express affection towards their children to the extent of Mem in *The Third Life*. On the whole, mothers are depicted as irresponsible towards their daughters. While, on the surface, Langley's betrayal of Maggie does not appear to be as extreme as that of Zede, in *The Temple,* who betrays her daughter by sleeping with the boyfriend, Arveyda, Langley's betrayal takes the form of her sexual indulgences with Robinson, and her obstructing her daughter from having the same joy, just because of the different ideologies they have. As the novel suggests, every time her parents sleep together, it is like a lash on Maggie's back. And Langley's silence is more painful than the physical attacks Robinson makes on Maggie, for throughout the novel, Maggie has one partner, just like Langley. Yet the difference is that the mother partakes in the patriarchal rules of marriage. As June writes: "Magdalena is raised in a much different environment than was her father, and thus is a product of a different ideological system" (606). Walker illustrates this point in her other later novels, *Possessing* and *The Temple,* also. Her female characters endeavour to regain their sexual freedom and in order to do so, need to fight against the dominant ideology of their societies; Tashi fights Olinkan ideology as she pursues her natural totality, and Fanny seeks her sexual freedom in opposition to the traditional concept of marriage. The difference is that, here in *By the Light,*

Maggie fails to gather the strength to fight against the patriarchy. In fact, her lack of strength results in her alienation from her sister as well as her mother.

The way that Robinson shares and deprives his love and attention is at the root of the jealousy between Maggie and Susannah. As such, while there is the successful example of bonding between Susannah and Pauline, there is also this dysfunctional sisterhood between Susannah and Maggie. From the beginning of the novel to its end, these two women are in a struggle with one another, and their conflict even continues into the world of death. Maggie leaves a letter for her sister before she dies, which reads: "our relationship, ostensibly as sisters, was in fact a relationship of strangers. I successfully killed all sisterly feeling in myself towards you" (172). The reason for their conflict is Maggie's desire to obtain her parents' approval. This is the reason why she despises Susannah, who, in spite of her 'mask', is always at the centre of her parents' attention. Maggie's jealousy of her younger sister ensures that neither can find peace. They are both battered by Robinson; Maggie is hurt physically and Susannah mentally by having to hide her true self whenever in her father's company. Unaware of this, Maggie hates Susannah because she believes her sister is in a better situation. Recognising Susannah's situation would perhaps resolve this conflict. For, like Susannah, Maggie's idea of sexuality is also different from that held by their father. These three characters' ideological conceptions of sexuality thus form the structure of the novel, by which Walker sheds light on how the conflict of ideologies within a single household can play a significant role within female relationships.

As has been seen, patriarchal society results in sex remaining a torment to women who refuse to partake in such societal norms. The resistance to such norms is revealed in the novel by Manuelito:

> If you are in love, and going to meet your lover, to make love, you think of the moon as a father, happily looking down on you. For Mundo, fathers are happy

> that their children, the girls as well as the boys, enjoy what your culture calls sex. And this is why a young girl sings, as she goes to her lover, just as does a young boy: "by the light of my father's *smile*" (212).

This is what Manuelito preaches to Robinson in the world of death. The narrator clearly conveys the message that sex can, and ought to, be allowed in a patriarchal society; that the father's overarching position is not one which need obstruct the sexual passion of the children. That fathers should give their blessings to their sons or daughters if they are in love and want to make love.

By the Light demonstrates how patriarchal thoughts have penetrated different places and different groups and have been propagated through the establishment of social norms. However, the media is apparently, in this novel, beneficial for Irene, Susannah's Greek friend. Susannah meets her when she goes to Greece as a tourist. Irene is very isolated in her society because of the miseries that her mother and her family have gone through. Although she is very lonely and detached, apparently having the one friend in Susannah, she is able to speak many languages such as "German, Italian, Spanish and even Japanese" (54). The surprising thing is that she has learnt all these languages from "wonderful tapes" (57) and "soap operas" (57). Irene thus uses media as a means of improving herself. The patriarchy, as depicted in this novel, has penetrated every aspect of society, however Irene is able to subvert this system by empowering herself through the learning of many languages through the patriarchal media itself. And more than just the different languages of different nations, Irene actually becomes familiar with the culture of these people, and the more she knows the less her mind is limited to the people of just one specific nation. Walker, through Irene, suggests that her female characters can take advantage of the very forces that are set against them. She illustrates this point in *The Color Purple*, as well, given that Celie forms a strong bond with her husband's lover, Shug, and, with Shug's help, she frees herself from the patriarchal authority of Mister.

In *Meridian*, Walker also shows how Meridian and Lynne create a bond that is beneficial to them both, regardless of their fight to win Truman's love. These examples are significant because Irene can communicate with the world and this communication can broaden her scope on life. Her range of friends extends to Susannah, suggesting that Irene is beginning to employ the power she has gained for herself. Perhaps this brief friendship with Susannah is her first step towards broader understanding and relationships.

Religion and Questions of Growth

Two of Walker's characters, Robinson and Samuel, are priests who fail in their missionary responsibilities. Samuel, who appears in *The Color Purple* and *Possessing,* is unsuccessful in his attempt to convert the Olinkans to Christianity, while Robinson, as has been suggested above, is unable to make his family follow his religious beliefs. In both of these two novels, Walker is suggesting to us that Christianity is an obstacle to women's self-growth. Female self-growth is one of the ideals that womanism aims to achieve. Walker's definition of womanism involves "being grown up" (*In Search,* xi). In *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus* (1989), Jacquelyn Grant writes: "The doctrine of Christology, from its initial formulated inception has been problematic for women" (83). Grant suggests that "if women are indeed to be saved, they must begin to re-articulate Christology starting from the questions which arise out of their experiences" (83). Walker also portrays Christianity as anti-women, and, although Walker does not allow her female characters in *By the Light* to form a new form of Christology, she does suggest what form such a religion would take by way of the Church founded by Shug in *The Temple,* a new Church which is chiefly interwoven with womanist ethics. Accordingly, priests in Walker's novels are generally unsuccessful at their job, failing to even convince their own families to share in such beliefs. However, Walker's novels emphasise the need for spirituality in terms of her characters' growth and self-individuation. In the majority of her novels, Christianity is shown to be an obstacle to women's growth, yet Walker shows an interest in the spiritual belief system of Buddhism, as well as the relationship of human beings

with nature. *Now is The Time* is an example of Walker demonstrating that spirituality, if not organised religion, is necessary for women to achieve peace and self-actualisation.

In *By the Light*, both of Robinson's daughters reject his beliefs in two different ways; Maggie does it very directly and restlessly, while Susannah hides her true self, which is incongruent with his beliefs, from her father. She is actually doing whatever she wishes by the light of her father's smile as Robinson always supports her and believes that "Susannah was pure" (29). Yet, from Robinson's perspective, she would not receive her father's smile if she was to present herself as she actually is. Thus the smile of the father figure here does not have any light or spirit, and is instead the sign of ignorance. As a result, the title, *By the Light of My Father's Smile*, is ironic, given that the father's smile here is due to mistaken beliefs: Robinson's being benighted, rather than knowledgeable, which is associated with being "enlightened". Robinson alters his thoughts in the world of death, which becomes a world of light because it is where he is able to see the truth. In the real world, he is actually in darkness since he is bound by his patriarchal religious views.[69]

In most of Walker's novels, male sexuality is usually depicted as a base desire, however, in this novel, we find there is a difference when it comes to Robinson. *By the Light* presents a priest who is very loyal to his wife, and who is very much interested in sexual relations with her. Once, after taking care of Langley and partaking in foreplay, he says "My name is husband". In this case, a husband in Robinson's mind is someone who looks after his wife's needs, one of these needs being sex. This is apparently in accordance with his patriarchal religious views. Yet he is not as willing as Langley to initiate sexual intercourse. A further significant point here is that Robinson does not run after other women for sex—he views sexuality as a duty within the strict frameworks of marriage. Even after the death of his wife

[69] Maggie and Robinson's relationship echoes Walker's relationship with her own father. Walker only came to understand, and accept, her father after his death. See *Living by the Word* by Alice Walker; pp. 9-17.

Robinson chooses not become involved in another relationship, unlike Samuel who initiates his relationship with Nettie before his wife has even died. Thus, in this novel, there is a difference in the portrayal of male sexuality. However, there are still some typically Walkerian male characters, such as Manuelito and Petros, who seek sex merely to satisfy their own desires. As mentioned earlier, after Petros had wooed 'the blond lady', there is not much written about him. Manuelito, who is having sex with Maggie at the beginning of the novel, disappears for a long time until he later meets her again. At this time, he is married and works in the army. These characters, who are defined by these acts given the brevity of their depiction, suggest that most men are unable to stick to someone they love. It appears that it is Robinson's religious beliefs that prevent him from running after any other woman than his own wife. In most of Walker's novels, if men find a better woman, regardless of everything else, they just follow their basic instincts. Robinson is held up as a counterpoint—if highly problematic due to his religious beliefs, which are critiqued by Walker on the whole—to this stock male 'gigolo' character. Manuelito and Petros, who are not religious, leave their partners for other women, which can be seen as demonstrating the sexual freedom of men. As discussed in chapter four, Lissie in *The Temple* has numerous relationships, which is seen as promoting a similar sexual freedom for women. However, Petros and Manuelito's freedom but does not benefit women, and is thus a negative attribute of these characters, where for Lissie sexual promiscuity is presented as a positive.

In *By the Light*, men's unrestricted sexual desire is depicted as a negative for it leads them to desiring any woman, solely for their own sexual needs; a self-centred sexuality that belittles the subjectivity of women. However, Robinson, whose religious viewpoints are characterised by Walker as oppressive towards women and their sexual freedom, is the only male character of this novel who, again because of the same religious beliefs, remains committed to his wife even after her death. There is at least one positive point that the novel shows of Robinson's

religious beliefs, which is, it restricts and tames his sexual voraciousness, and produces a sexuality focused on servicing the needs of the woman, rather than simply himself. The contrast between the religious and the secular with regards to male sexuality becomes sharper when Manuelito seeks to help Robinson. For despite wishing to convince Robinson that the priest's views on sexuality are far too stringent, he is, in fact, far more confused on this matter; Manuelito loves his wife, yet wants to marry Maggie. He wants to change Robinson following his punishing of his daughter, however Manuelito himself has left Maggie to suffer alone with this consequence, rather than seeking to comfort her. Manuelito instead adds another injury to Maggie's sense of self, by leaving her and marrying another woman.

However, while *By the Light* is anti-organised religion, in its depiction of priests as ignorant and oppressive towards women, in another way, the novel uses the same priestly techniques to convey its ultimate message. For Manuelito becomes a mentor to Robinson and successfully changes his mind, even if it is in the other world of the afterlife, and in order to change Robinson's religious views, Manuelito tries to preach to him and open his mind to reality and truth. During his life, Robinson's preaching failed to convince others, and now Manuelito is preaching to Robinson in the spiritual world. In one way, Walker in other novels shows how missionaries fail to succeed, and in this one she uses the same technique to alter Robinson, the failed male preacher. The way that Manuelito preaches is a little different from these previous figures as he is preaching in a different setting. And though Robinson changes his viewpoint after listening to Manuelito, it can never change his daughter's mind. Although Robinson has changed, he cannot change the past. Walker often shows how the past can affect the present and future lives of her characters, however, in this case Robinson only changes his mind after his death and it is impossible for him to come back to life and fix his mistakes. However, it shows that Walker again leaves some ray of hope for her male characters to change. Robinson changes, and blesses his daughters with 'the smile of their father's smile'. Although

Walker reveals an interest in reincarnation in *The Temple*, she does not use the same concept in this novel, as Robinson dies and never returns to the real world. However, Walker's viewpoint that life continues after death is a sub-motif in *By the Light*, as well as in *The Temple*. This is further developed in *Now is the Time*, which mainly focuses on the spiritual aspect of womanism.

The relationship between Manuelito and Robinson is very ironic as it is the first time that Walker's male characters try to help one another. This is a further explanation for why they meet in the world of the dead, for Walker's male characters never talk or help each other in the living world. Indeed, Walker suggests here that perhaps this transformation is not possible in the real world—in particular real world America—the transformations occur in a proposed or ideal world, underlining the longstanding tendency in her fiction to contrast the real world of corruption and social dystopia with an imagined utopian world of possibility. Womanism itself, in her later novels such as this, remains a utopian rather than concretely realisable concept.

Now is the Time to Open Your Heart: Religion and Identity

"It [meditation] is a medicine that plays no favorites: it can be used to cool down and calm, deepen and bolster in compassion".

(Alice Walker, *The Cushion in the Road 168*)

Now is the Time to Open Your Heart is a novel about healing through spirituality. The non-fiction books she writes after *Now Is the Time* such as *The Cushion in the Road* (2013) and *The World Will Follow Joy* (2013), share this spiritual theme as well. *Now Is the Time* can be considered the work in which the author shifts towards spiritual themes. Given that this theme is newly injected into her series of works, it is perhaps unsurprising that its implementation has

some deficiencies, such as its arguably simplistic presentation of Buddhism in the novel.[70] The spiritual beliefs that help the characters to heal are a mixture of African group healing, Buddhism, and womanism (taking the form here of spiritual, as well as political or social, guidance). These three belief systems constitute the main focus of this novel, which Walker engages in order to heal the characters depicted. Stephanie Mitchem writes: "African American folk healing is defined by a focus on connection with others, nature, the dead, and the unborn" (*African American Folk Healing* 100). This African-American healing process, then, is characterised by Mitchem as occurring through a connection between humans and both 'Mother Nature' and the wider Universe. It includes all of the creatures in existence, and encompasses even the world of the dead. To establish this close connection with Nature, they gather together and pray. To join the group, everyone is equal, regardless of their sex, colour, and class.[71] Then they pray to God, who, "is the most senior member of the community, the guardian of the community" (qtd. in Stephanie Mitchem 102). The God Mitchem describes is very similar to the divine in Buddhism, in this sense, that both relate to this world, and to 'the community'. This is to say that in Buddhism, what would be considered "God" by those who use such a term, is Nature, and Buddhist practitioners should, like the African-American group healers discussed here, create a very close connection with Nature. In this novel, Walker links these two spiritual belief systems to womanism. Both belief systems place emphasis on the wholeness of human beings, which is achieved through a connection with the universe, and Walker's conception of womanism also emphasises the unification of sexes. She believes that womanism is for "male and female" (*In Search* xi). The novel interweaves these notions to deliver the message that healing is possible for both male and female.

[70] Although Womanism includes spiritual elements, as discussed in the Introduction, the present thesis focuses on its aspect of 'human relations'.

[71] See Edith Turner, William Blogett et al. *Experiencing Ritual*: *A New Interpretation of African Healing*; pp. 3-5. See also Tracy Robinson. "Making the Hurt Go Away"; pp. 163-168.

Now is the Time begins with Walker's dedication of the novel to her late grandmother, Kate Nelson, and the main character is also named after her. Walker's grandmother had been shot dead by her lover because she had not wanted to leave her husband and flee with him. The Kate of this novel is in search of love, a type of love that transcends that which exists between human beings. Fittingly, for a novel whose main emphasis is the love of nature, Kate's surname is "Talkingtree". Thus, Walker wrote this novel in memory of her grandmother, and it is perhaps due to the circumstances of her death that Walker emphasises a difference between the love that Kate Nelson lost her life for, and the transcendent and eternal love that Kate Talkingtree is after.

This latter type of love is unconditional, and hence it suggests more encompassing qualities that the love that Walker's grandmother had been killed for never obtained –as the latter was worked by jealousy and possessiveness. This difference is reflected in the world that the author gives us in *Now is the Time*. Throughout her previous novels, the characters are always in intense, often life and death struggles to find love, and to live in peace regardless of their sex or colour. However, in this novel Walker introduces numerous characters who have only minimal conflicts with each other. *Now is the Time* presents a kind of love that resists sexism, racism, and classism. The message that it conveys is that people on earth should be considered as one family living on one home – the planet. Men and women should therefore love each other and look after their home. Yet this ideal conflicts with actual social conditions. In *Black Womanist Ethics,* Katie Cannon writes: "Both in the informal day-to-day life and in the formal organizations and institutions in society, black women are still the victims of the aggravated inequities of the tri-dimensional phenomenon of race/class/gender oppression" (68). In this most recent work, Walker does depict women in contemporary times, and she affirms the fact that black women are still oppressed. Nevertheless, she offers an idealist

ideology and scenario that in its utopian vision would result in everyone, including and perhaps especially black women, attaining peace.[72]

Walker engages Buddhism and meditation as a path which leads human beings to peace as they can love everything and everyone regardless of their nationality, race, or class. This general theme is communicated through the specific story of Kate and her attempt to reunite with the universe and to attain an empowered selfhood. As in the majority of her other novels (except *The Third Life*), in *Now is the Time* Walker employs Yolo and the other male protagonists as marginal characters who, like her earlier male characters, are only interested in sex and fulfilling their sexual desires. However, in this novel, Walker adds a spiritual dimension to her male characters; in this sense, although on his trip to Hawaii Yolo is found to have the same sexual needs as male characters of previous novels, he also becomes interested in Buddhism and spiritual concepts. Both Yolo and his new lover, Alma, turn to Buddhism through Aunty Pearlua, who teaches them about spirituality and how human diet and sex are connected to human characteristics and spirituality. "Aunty Pearlua was of the opinion that it was time for men to take another hard-to-keep vow … No drugs, no alcohol, no 'recreational' sex, no caffeine, and no tobacco" (166). This is a similar diet to the one Kate follows on her trip, as will be discussed below. Walker thus introduces the love of nature as equally available to both genders, as an opportunity for all of humanity to achieve redemption.

In one way, Walker's turn towards the belief system of Buddhism clarifies the difference between spirituality and religion. For while other more organised, dogmatic religions hampers women as they try to forge their identity, as in *By the Light*, here we see how women, or humankind more generally, are seen to benefit from engagement with the supernatural. The act

[72] In her non-fiction text *Living By the Word* (1988), Walker writes: "Our primary connection is to the Earth, our mother and father; regardless of who 'owns' pieces and parts, we, as sister and brother beings to the 'four leggeds (and the fishes) and the wings of the air', share the whole …. Our thoughts must be on how to restore to the Earth its dignity and a living being; how to stop raping and plundering it as a matter of course. We must begin to develop the consciousness that everything has equal rights because existence itself is equal. In other words, we are all here: trees, people, snakes, alike" (48).

of turning to religion can be seen as a sign of escaping from the real world, as famously suggested by Karl Marx, but spirituality is often considered to be an excursion into the inner self. As such, Gerri Bates writes: "Walker's masterful depiction of the character [Kate] is a realistic portrayal of a woman in search of the deepest truth of the self and the meaning of life" (157). Nevertheless, Walker's portrayal of Celie and her self-quest is more "realistic" than that of Kate, for its being grounded in the harsh truths of daily life. In *The Color Purple,* Walker shows how Celie becomes a strong character when she faces reality and turns away from religious belief, which is one component of her previous dependency, but in *Now is the Time*, after numerous marriages, Kate is still bewildered and turns to spirituality, which is arguably detached from the real world and its troubles. On her journey, Kate meets various people who have problems in their lives and find that prayer is the only way of finding solace. By contrast, in *The Color Purple*, Shug helps Celie primarily through actions rather than depending on reflection and prayer.

The question is, why did Alice Walker choose Buddhism? She rejected Christianity and the Christian God in her previous novels. She has shown numerous times that Christianity is not a religion that African-Americans can, or at least ought to, identify with. Christianity, as characterised in *The Color Purple*, *The Temple*, *Possessing*, and *By the Light*, is a religion that appears to be for whites, and it continues its colonial missionary project of wishing to change African-Americans (and Africans in *Possessing* and *The Color Purple*) for the ends of white society. However, according to Rita Gross, "Buddhism is a religious and spiritual system toward liberation" (*Buddhism After Patriarchy,* 14). Buddhism does not want to influence people towards adopting an ideology but towards what apparently lies beneath such human impositions: "To be liberated means to know things as they are" (*Buddhism After Patriarchy,* 8). Gross also makes it clear that "liberation, in Buddhist terms, is best defined as knowing how to untie the knot of existence" (*Buddhism After Patriarchy,* 8). In *Now is the Time*, Walker

also aims to unite all human beings with nature, and especially with the earth. In her non-fiction text *Anything We Love Can Be Saved*, Walker says: "All people deserve to worship a God who worships them. A God that made them, and likes them. That is why Nature, Mother Earth, is such a good choice" (25). Moreover, in an interview with Kirsty Young for *Desert Island Discs* on BBC Radio Four, she commented: "I was babysat by nature". For Walker, then, "God" is not a being as in the monotheistic theologies but nature and nature further resembles a mother, which her readers should look after and reunite with. Later in the same interview, she makes it clear that suffering – such as losing her eyesight in her early life – can turn into opportunities: "I found solace in nature and in books" (19:40). In her early childhood, Walker found that writing was a way of overcoming suffering, and that is how she became an author. In this novel, her characters also suffer, and when they relate their troubles to the group, the group members pray for them. Walker clearly conveys this message of discovering outlets and buffers for pain in *Now is the Time*. Although her characters are raped, damaged, and undergo suffering, she attempts show how they counter these miseries by finding peace through prayer and other spiritual elements, thereby discovering their own paths in life, just as Walker has done. In this sense, Walker does not want to heal the wounds of her characters in this novel as if they are not still there, just as she could not regain her eyesight through writing. She instead tries to bring them an inner peace that can lead to happiness, and this attainment of peace involves being close enough to Nature and developing a holistic world view. This is a panoramic perspective that opens womanism up to Universalist thinking. In her speech at TEDx in Ramallah, Palestine, Walker discussed the wars and bombings that human beings carry out, commenting that:

> All of us have suffered so much but actually suffering does have a purpose. And the purpose of it is that it helps you connect. It opens you in a way to the sufferings of other people. And that it is when we gather together is that we know

> our strength. It is beginning to know that we are one; any separation at all. We are one – one expression of humanity … It means to show up when we need each other; just be there (18:30).

This short except from *Now is the Time* resonates with the stance expressed above:

> They bombed eight different places in the world… It did not seem possible that people would bomb one another rather than talk. What fear was this, that kept silent until announced by the loudest sound on earth, the sounds of worlds being destroyed? Was it the fear that one's own terror would be glimpsed, one's own childhood of terror guessed? She [Kate] tried to imagine any of her friends deciding to drop bombs on their people. What would she and her friends drop instead? Food, blankets, matches, tents, music. (178).

Walker is offering a solution for a world that is destroying itself with war. Rather than conceiving of the world as of "different places", nations, peoples, Walker thinks of the world as a whole, as a home to all of its beings. And so to unite human beings together is also to establish unification with Earth, which, according to the novel, cannot be achieved unless they engage with spirituality. This is why *Now is the Time* is a different type of Alice Walker novel and, as such, should be read differently. Some critics[73] dismiss the text, but a more complex analysis would need to take account of its vastly different (to Walker's previous works) narrative and prose style.[74] This is why, for instance, some of her characters, such as Lalika and Missy, are heavily involved in the plot, then fade away for a long period of time, before

[73]In her review of the novel, Natasha Walter says: "This novel, sadly, is not trying to be fierce or subtle about New Age thinking". Diana Evans in "Healing for a Hurting World" writes: "It's a novel in very loose terms, although it could often be read as a memoir, essay or even sermon".

[74] For further information on authors' late style please refer to Edward Said's *On Late Style*; pp. 3-24. In this chapter, there is a discussion on Beethoven's last work. "The power of Beethoven's late style is negative, or rather *it is negativity*: where one would expect serenity and maturity, one instead finds a bristling, difficult, and unyielding –perhaps even inhuman- challenge" (12). Walker's most recent novel also reflects this trend. Most of the critics that castigated *Now is the Time*, expected Walker's recent novel to be more unified, with stronger plot and characterisation.

turning up again. As Walker puts it: 'just be there' –in other words, the characters in the novel might not be tied to the conventional expectations and motivations of plot, but by considerations such as momentary human need.

The novel begins with Kate's realisation that she cannot meditate (3) so she decides to leave her husband for a while and go on a trip. Like Fanny in *The Temple*, Kate tells Yolo: "I need to live alone" (30). On her boat trip through the Amazon rainforest, and thus deep within unbridled nature, she meets many of the novel's characters for the first time, each of whom are from different parts of the world. By gathering people from diverse backgrounds in one place, Walker is shrinking the world, contracting the space of action to one 'home', a metaphor for an increasingly smaller sense of the Earth. The boat trip is also significant because this microcosm of the world is not fixed, it is floating as if implying it is not limited to a single place, instead belonging to the whole earth. Gathering together and praying for each other indicates the form of support among a variety of subjective points of view, and this is reflected in the digressive form of the narrative. Subjects are mentioned as if they have just been talked about and then the story shifts to another character and another theme –these patterns move through the novel.

Kate is the most significant character in *Now is the Time* and the novel revolves around her quest for self-realisation. She brings this task to her husband's attention as she tells Yolo: "I need more of my own life" (30). However, her intention is never realised as she is never alone on her travels. In this 210-page novel, there are many characters, even more than in her other novels, and whilst on her travels Kate makes numerous friends. Essentially, Walker is making the point that Kate is not alone on her journey, accentuating this fact by placing her within a group of people who are helpful and welcoming. This point is also in accordance with womanism, as a womanist is "not a separatist, except periodically, for health" (*In Search* xi). Also, this group is a combination of men and women, which shows that both sexes are equal

in this process. Both of them can try for redemption through the love of Nature. In this group, as I am going to describe, everyone relates his or her story. By recounting their stories to the group they release themselves from the psychological effects that led them into sorrow. The group acts as an outlet for their suffering, a conduit for catharsis.

Although not alone in this journey, Kate can find her own self in the company of others. Before this trip she was a confused character who cannot even endure a single meditation session. Furthermore, examining the relationships she had before being with Yolo, we can see that Kate was seriously entangled with many other partners: "Kate had been married many times. Some of these marriages had been very short" (76). Her friendships with the people she meets on her travels are also very short; there are a few pages of description about them, but they soon fade away. Perhaps these relationships are short because, unlike her previous novels, it is not their depth that matters, but the spiritual connections that are the focus of this novel. When these characters relate their stories, they are sharing some core elements of their lives. This is how they open their hearts to one another. After listening to each story they pray, which is how Walker shows them opening their hearts and connecting. They are not praying to the Christian God, or any other God; they are just praying on a boat in the heart of nature. The milieu of the Amazon rainforest expresses the point that nature is listening to their prayers. The divine is represented in this novel by nature, 'Mother Earth', so they try to unite with this mother, through which they become connected to one another.

Kate's journey is purifying, as she cleanses her body and soul. She drinks "a frothy liquid that tastes like soapsuds" (49) which is meant to "provoke vomiting and diarrhoea" (49) which then cleanses her body and leads to a path of spiritual elevation. During her trip, Kate and her other friends on the boat take this potion, as they believe that "you could never put a sacred medicine into a polluted body" (49). Thus, in this novel, too, Walker is paying attention to the body, but here she is linking spirituality to physical being. In *The Color Purple*, Celie

obtains a better understanding of her identity when she discovers more about her body, and, in this novel, Kate's spiritual journey leads her to self-actualisation which is closely related to her physical purification.

The figure of Kate, then, presents a continuation of the quest for identity and the empowered self found in Walker's previous female characters. For instance, *Meridian* ends when Meridian leaves Truman a letter indicating the continuation of her quest of self-discovery, beyond the achievements recounted in the text. In *The Color Purple*, Celie's breaking free of her various oppressions finds her also entering a spiritual phase, which is clearly revealed in her final letter, a letter that is addressed to the whole Universe. *The Temple of My Familiar* also partially develops spiritual themes as it puts emphasis on unification of body and spirit. Thus Kate's story can be conceived as a continuation, and culmination, of Walker's motif of having her female characters embark on quests of self-discovery, quests that become increasingly spiritual as her canon of fiction develops. The reason Kate leaves Yolo is not because she wants to be alone or because she wants more time for herself and, even if that were true, her journey does not lead her to be alone. Kate is a character who wants change. She cannot keep anything for a long time and she has many friends and many partners.[75] She is even extremely temperamental in her marriages. Apart from her male partners, her previous couplings have also involved some female partners, such as Lolly. What she is lacking is spiritual direction. Thus Walker sends her on this unique trip so she can open her heart to nature and connect with the Earth. In this way, Kate can achieve peace and overcome the confusion she has felt preceding this voyage.

One of the significant points of distinction from her earlier work is that in this novel a woman leaves her family behind and goes on her travels. As seen in the first chapter of this

[75] That Kate has had many partners indicates that she has been through many different kinds of lives; perhaps some of them were similar to Celie's, Meridian's, or Fanny's. This lends further substance to the notion that Kate can stand as a representative culmination of the attempts in Walker's female characters to interweave body and spirit with Nature.

thesis, in *The Third Life*, Grange does this, which puts his wife and his son, Brownfield, in trouble. Similarly, Grange's lack of self-realisation causes him to leave his region; he returns home, somewhat transformed. However, in *Now is the Time*, as a similar quest is repeated but this time with a woman, again for reasons of lacking purpose and direction but Kate has greater self-awareness. Grange is fed up with the legacy of slavery and so leaves the South, while Kate leaves her family because she is bored with the materialistic world. Kate has a house of her own. She also has a good job as a writer and university lecturer and so is financially independent, inner peace is what she craves. This is a life-changing trip which alters Kate's view of the world. The journey in *Now is the Time* is constructive rather than destructive.

With regards to female bonding, we note the following instances that appear in the novel, and how they differ from Walker's previous accounts. On her travels, the first woman to describe her story to Kate is Sue, who tells of how she does not have a good relationship with her mother. Her mother "did not love" (43) her. This has had a great effect on Sue as she is always trying to build relationships with women rather than men. "Boys never interested me," said Sue, "I always got along well with them, but nary a romantic thought had I. Now, though, I'm a celibate" (43). She does not regret not having a boyfriend: "Why would I miss what I never had" (42). This sentiment is the result of her mother's dissatisfaction with her, which causes Sue to look for a surrogate mother. She is searching for a female bond to make up for the lack of a mother-daughter relationship. However, unlike *The Color Purple* in which Celie succeeded in finding a surrogate mother, in *Now is the Time*, praying and connecting with the Earth, as well as with other people, acts as a replacement for the dysfunctional mother–daughter relationship.

The novel then introduces another female bond, this time between Kate and Lolly, the lover with whom she once cohabited. The significant point concerning their relationship is the role of women in this household. In this marriage, one of them, Lolly, is lazy, while the other,

Kate, has to look after her. “There was a feeling of liberation that carried them for quite a number of months. Until Kate had begun to wonder whether Lolly ever intended to work” (78). Later, in her subsequent relationship, Kate complains to Yolo about this same issue but, in this marriage, Kate continues to serve Yolo: “I have carried in my body two of your children. I have cooked thousands of breakfasts and lunches and dinners for you. I have sat up with you when you’ve been sick ...” (31). Having been through both female and male partners, Although she has been in both homosexual and heterosexual relationships, she still cannot find her true self, for she consistently expends her energy on attending to her other. As such, female bonding in this novel does not lead to the resolution of issues concerning heterosexual relations as it did in Walker’s previous work –womanism takes on broader implications, beyond specific gender relations and towards greater psychic, spiritual, and environmental concerns.

Hence *Now is the Time* suggests that a solution can instead be found in spiritual pursuit. Missy’s case is an explicit example given by the novel of Buddhism being able to heal one’s problems. After she describes all her problems, including her having been raped by her grandfather (150), people gather together in a circle, putting their hands on Missy’s body to pray for her (153). Through Missy and the other characters in this novel, Walker affirms the idea that spirituality is the solution to everyone’s problem. However *Now Is the Time*, presents a simplistic picture of Buddhism, given that the characters get healed in the very short time span of the spiritual journey that the novel recounts. For instance, Missy’s story, which is narrated in six pages of the novel (149-151), finds her attaining peace is no time at all. In these pages readers learn that Missy had been raped by her grandfather and was still living in the same house as her attacker, along with her mother and siblings, all of whom admire the grandfather for his humour. The Buddhist group try to make her feel better:

> Lalika took one of Missy's hands. Kate took the other. Hugh and Rick placed their hands on her knees. Ah, said Armando, coming up behind them. *Are we praying?*
>
> Yes, they said *simply*, inviting him and Cosmi, who walked behind him, to join them.
>
> After *ten minutes* Missy opened her eyes wide, looked around at all of them, and asked: Did *anybody else* see dragons? (Emphasis added 153)

The instantaneity of the prayer's healing effect suggests that Walker can be seen to oversimplify the concept of Buddhism. In just "ten minutes" Missy has had a tremendous vision that is suggested to indicate her absorption in spirituality, when it is accepted by actual Buddhist monks that they may never attain such enlightenment. Here, as elsewhere in the novel, Walker's depiction of Buddhism and spiritual concepts can be seen as idealistic but also rather rushed, brief and simplistic, in regards to their processes, but her aim is arguably the outcome of inner peace and wholeness that is most important to the author.

Conclusion

Walker's later incarnations of womanism are very different from that posited by Walker in *The Color Purple*, which is also an example of a womanist novel, since there Celie endeavoured to strengthen her identity through female bonding, managing to gain faith in herself by rejecting faith in the spiritual, albeit in the form of organised religion. Walker gradually injected new ideas concerning womanism as her canon of works developed. For example, she started her series of novels with a male protagonist, *The Third Life,* where female bonding is a marginal theme of the novel. However, this motif of female bonding becomes the main theme of the majority of the works that follow. A central preoccupation with female homosociality has given way to the spiritual aspect of womanism.

In *By the Light* Walker shows that the time for missionaries is over, as Robinson is the last official priest in her novels.[76] She depicts him as being defeated in the world of the dead. This setting is significant as, although he changes his mind, the setting utopian and fantastic. Walker appears to imply that, in her ideal world, there will no longer be any need for organised religion. However, she effectively replaces this religion with womanism, another ideology, in which women and their sexual freedom are the primary focus. And, just as Manuelito preached to Robinson in order to introduce this new ideology, Walker arguably draws on a kind of priestly technique, the preaching and didactic prose of her later works, to spread her new religion.

Engaging with the supernatural and the spiritual is something Walker has done throughout her long career, as discussed in the third and fourth chapters with regard to *The Color Purple* and *The Temple*. In *By the Light*, however, Walker takes this focus to new levels, where these themes come to permeate both the construction of characters and their key dilemmas and life decisions, and the very style of her prose, where characters frequently take on the voices of didactic 'preachers'.

In all of her novels, Walker shows an interest in human relations. However, in *Now is the Time*, Walker seems to pursue collective peace for the whole of nature, the other aspect of womanism discussed in the introduction to the thesis. To achieve this, she suggests that women and men should be united with Nature. In *By the Light*, she presents Christianity as a religion that acts mostly against women, as it hampers women's sexual freedom, but in *Now is the Time*, Walker exclusively focuses on the spiritual aspect of womanism by creating a new ideology which is very similar to pre-existing spiritual belief systems. The clear point of these two novels is that Walker's interest in women is branching out and extending towards religious and spiritual themes. In *Now is the Time*, Walker pays less attention to the female body and rather

[76] Up to now there are seven novels by Walker which have been published.

more to the spirit. She conveys the message that if women and men pray together for each other – in other words, open their hearts – they can take steps to overcome even their most serious problems. The characters offer mutual support are always helping each other, regardless of sex, class, or race. In this sense, *Now is the Time* can be regarded as a fundamentally womanist novel in which Walker is striving for larger universals and global solutions.

Conclusion

Alice Walker's first novel was published in 1970, her most recent in 2004, yet there is a noticeable continuity in her fictional work across this thirty-four year time span. This continuity is related to the author's communication of her original concept of womanism, as this thesis has demonstrated.

As a male Iranian researcher, who has been raised in a patriarchal society not unlike to that which is depicted in Walker's novels, I can see ways to relate her stance to Iranian literature. Walker's womanism very much aligns with the treatment of female characters by Iranian female authors such as Zoya Pirzad, Sharnoosh Parsipour, and Azar Nafisi. Patriarchal rules have placed serious obstacles before Iranian women, hampering their ability to attain functional female bonds. At the same time, Iranian males, like the African-American males depicted in Walker's work, are arguably the first victims of patriarchy, given that this structure silences them and prevents them from attaining functional male bonds as well.

So I have focused on the term "womanism", officially introduced by Walker in 1983, has been shown in this thesis to have been initially developed in the author's earlier novels, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970) and *Meridian* (1976).

The Third Life portrays the possible need of African-American men to articulate their self-realisation and individuality. Walker suggests that if they set themselves free from the legacy of slavery, this can consequently lead their female counterparts to attain their own freedom. Further, *The Third Life* shows that, in order to empower themselves, women need to break the restricting chains of patriarchy and reinforce their feminine power through building

up their own female connections. As such, Walker's first novel already indicates the universal aspect of womanism – the unification of men and women – as a catalyst for empowerment amongst African-Americans in general. The conclusion of the novel emphasises this point by having Grange help Ruth to stand on her own feet, and to forge for herself her sense of personal and social identity.

The second novel explores the social aspect of womanism through the character of Meridian. Meridian, apparently a strong and independent African-American woman, wants to be the voice of her society as a Civil Rights activist; however, Walker shows how Meridian's dysfunctional mother-daughter relationship works as a barrier to this goal. *Meridian* thus portrays the significance of female bonding and female friendship in the process of achieving empowerment. Further, the novel ends when the protagonist leaves her partner, Truman, and continues her quest for self-realisation, which also resonates with its own sense of lack. The notion of female bonding in womanism is developed further in her next work.

Walker's most famous novel, *The Color Purple* (1982), fully develops the theme of female bonding. Its narrative intends to demonstrate how functional female bonding is vital for African-American women to achieve individuality, liberty, peace and happiness. Celie's network of female friends helps to set her free from the physical and mental abuse she suffers under patriarchy. Yet patriarchy is further critiqued through the universal aspect of womanism – along with the damaging effects of patriarchy on women, the novel communicates how it also emasculates African-American men, given that the three generations of Mister's family are silenced and disempowered. This thesis has also explored how *The Color Purple* develops the spiritual aspect of Walker's womanism, especially in Celie's closing letter to the universe.

Walker's fourth novel, *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989), this thesis has argued, deals with two aspects of womanism in depth. Firstly, Walker here redefines the socially accepted concept of marriage so that it facilitates, rather than obstructs, the individuality and liberty of

both women and men. Marriages, according to the novel, can endure if there is a mutual love between the partners that allows for each to freely explore their sexuality beyond their specific coupling. Secondly, the novel focuses on meditation and the unification of body and spirit, which takes the form of Fanny's healing process of massage and open dialogue. The thesis argues that *The Temple* is a novel about the unification of men and women, who become, simultaneously, both one and individual through love.

Possessing the Secret of Joy (1992), challenges a specific social convention of patriarchy, that of female circumcision. Apart from addressing this ritual's damaging emotional effect through the damaging of the female body, the novel also shows how circumcision ruins the potential of female bonding that Walker had earlier established as vital to the empowerment of women. The female body and feminine sexuality, both of which are vital to Walker's womanist project, is hampered by such genital mutilation; the lack of physical wholeness is presented as preventing such women from seeing themselves as equal to those who are uncircumcised. The novel's protagonist, Tashi, fails to regain a sense of physical wholeness following the procedure, and subsequently finds herself unable to maintain her previous relationships with both men and women. The other point that *Possessing* explores is that place and the culture of place are in direct relation to one's sense of self-identification. In Olinka, Tashi is circumcised like any other woman; however in America, she cannot find any woman with which she can identify; not even Olivia, who was once her best friend. The friendship between them instead becomes another of Walker's examples of dysfunctional female bonding.

In the last two novels, Walker mainly expands upon the spiritual aspect of womanism, largely departing from the theme of female bonding. *By the Light of My Father's Smile* (1998) explores how Christianity, as the figure of spirituality tamed as organised religion, is presented as a form of patriarchy that works against the freedom and liberty of both men and women, and which induces hypocritical behaviour in their interpersonal relationships. However, Walker's

most recent novel, *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart* (2004), emphasises the positive aspect of spirituality, here through the less striated religion of Buddhism. Female and male characters, in both novels, in fact, become closer and attempt to heal their past wounds through their engagement with meditation and Buddhism. In *Now Is the Time,* the characters are tired of the existing troubles of the world and they find that a spiritual solution is the best way to put an end to conflict. However, in a 210-page novel, with so many characters seemingly suffering from unresolvable problems, the spiritual resolution renders Walker's treatment of spiritual themes somewhat oversimplified. Yet, as this thesis has argued, for all their flaws, these last two novels are nevertheless important works in Walker's fictional canon, as they fully expand the author's conception of womanism in its spiritual aspect.

This development of Walker's concept of womanism, then, began with *The Third Life,* which gives an initial indication of the universality of the concept, and found its first major treatment with *The Color Purple,* which encapsulates the centrality of female bonding, and found its second instance in *Now Is the Time,* which encapsulates the centrality of spirituality. Across her seven novels, Walker has clearly developed her thoughts and ideas with regards to womanism, and there may yet be more developments to come, given that she is such a prolific writer who, besides her novels, has several collections of short stories, a number of poems, various non-fiction books, and is an activist to this day. I would suggest that given more space her wide range of poetry and short stories could be read under a similar approach to that addressed here –womanism, human bonding, and the growth of the spiritual quest.

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