

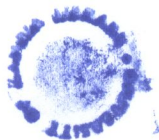
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**THE SELF AND THE COMMUNITY  
IN ALICE WALKER'S  
THE COLOR PURPLE AND MERIDIAN**

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By  
Dennis Tembo

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for  
the degree of Master in Literature



The University of Zambia

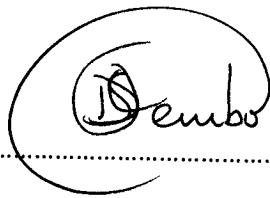
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**DECLARATION**

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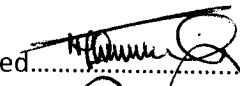
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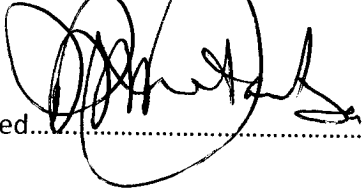
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**CERTIFICATION OF APPROVAL**

This dissertation of Dennis Tembo has been approved as fulfilling the requirements for the award of the degree of Master of Arts in Literature by the University of Zambia.

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## **Abstract**

This was a qualitative research. The research was mostly desk based, examining the primary texts The Color Purple and Meridian, as well as secondary sources of information such as critical articles in books, journals as well as the electronic sources on the internet.

The research mostly used the Feminist Literary Theory of Criticism and referred to other relevant theories like the Psychoanalysis Literary Theory of Criticism where necessary.

The self, the complete individual personality, is affected, in its construction by the community. The community, taken here to mean a group of people living in the same area in which they share a common background or interests, with its norms and values affect the development of the self as evidenced in Sula in Toni Morrison's novel and Brownfield in Alice Walker's novel The Third Life of Grange Copeland to mention but a few. How individuals interrelate with their communities has an effect on both the community and the self. The community in which individuals are situated do have their own challenges. The communities in which Celie and Meridian live in The Color Purple and Meridian are faced with challenges of racism and sexism. This is reflected by the circles in which power is exercised. There is the white world which has ultimate power followed by the Black American world which is enslaved in the White world. Within the Black American world is an oppressed world of the Black American Woman whose state is given as inferior and negative. In this world, the Black American Woman has to fight in order to attain an identity and an image of the self for herself.

The study examines how a female character in such an oppressive environment can interrelate with the community and still attain the self.

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Both novels present a female character as the protagonist; Celie in The Color Purple and Meridian in the novel Meridian. The study investigates how the concept of the

self and the community in the novels The Color Purple and Meridian has been created, developed and presented. The role of race, sex and religion in a community is examined especially in the way they each affect the development of the individual self.

The findings of this work show that a girl child in a world of men is not always safe and that the woman has to break some of the bonds that keep her in oppression for her to attain a sense of the self. The findings show that society looks at such a woman as a rebel but that by confronting her situations and oppressors the woman attains her identity and place in her community.

*To My late aunt, Alesi, my late father, Luke Servazio Chakaka Phiri and Maria Marcella Tembo. It is these lovely real human beings who gave me life and initiated me into the literary world. I love you so, so dearly.*

## **Acknowledgements**

Many people contributed in various ways to make this project possible. My sincere and deepest gratitude goes to my supervisor, Dr. F.K.M. Sumaili, who patiently offered guidance and read every word of my work regardless of how many times I gave it to him. He made this academic journey as challenging as it was exciting. My sincere thanks go to the Lecturers who took me on this academic journey, Dr. Sikalumba, Mr. Mundia and Dr. Lutato. I appreciate the presence of the Members of the Literature and Languages Department who provided the environment and the challenge to inspire me on. I am also grateful to the University of Zambia for providing the necessary facilities.

Many thanks go to Mr. Mkumba for ensuring my passage to study and for looking after my home during my long absence from home. He and Mr. Majere, to whom I am also greatly indebted, helped raise the funds for school fees and helped me deal with my various bills. The warmth and encouragement they offered me can never be repaid.

I also thank Michelle, who at all times reminded me that school is not all about being an adult and being too serious and forgetting that life can be fun.

I am thankful to my family and friends who were there when it mattered most.

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# 1. CHAPTER ONE

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## 1.1 Introduction

This work looks at the concept of the self and the community in Alice Walker's two novels, The Color Purple and Meridian. The work concentrates on Alice Walker's main characters in the two books and how these characters interrelate with their communities and still fulfil their individual selves. In The Color Purple, Celie is of principal interest while in the novel Meridian the focus is on the main character, Meridian. The interaction between these individual's self and their community forms an interesting study as the creation and development of these characters in their communities becomes the central focus. In looking at the construction of the Self and the Community, the concept of the self and the community is defined followed by the assessment of the challenges of racism and sexism<sup>1</sup> faced by the communities in The Color Purple and Meridian. As the American community in which the two novels are set has aspects of racism and sexism, the feminists' outlook of the self and the community will be explored. Lastly, Alice Walker's characterisation of the protagonist in the two novels will be discussed.

Celie and Meridian, the two novels' main characters, are both women who have got to be strong and overcome the circumstances that keep them in bondage. They have to fight the racist<sup>2</sup> and sexist<sup>3</sup> nature of their communities. In so doing they find themselves having to break most of the rules that govern their patriarchal communities. This is the only option that their community leaves them with in order for them to attain for themselves a sense of the self.

The self as used here is taken to mean the complete individual's personality, especially one that somebody recognises as his or her own and with which there is a sense of ease. This is also taken to include ones personality or an aspect of ones personality, especially as perceived by others. It is recognised that both Celie and

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<sup>1</sup> Discrimination of men or women because of their sex

<sup>2</sup> Prejudice against people of other races

<sup>3</sup> Belief that one sex is inferior to another in a number of ways

Meridian are viewed in a particular way by their communities. The community's view of the characters has an effect on the character's sense of the self and how they negotiate their individuality in these communities to create space for themselves. This also affects a person's individual interests and welfare within or outside the community.

The community refers to a group of people living in the same area in which they share a common background or interests. These are also part of the public or society in general. The community also has a web of relationships and interactions among themselves. How Celie and Meridian form their relationships, develop and maintain them is a part of what forms their self. The community plays a very important role in forming the self of the individuals in their communities. This means that the values of a community are very important in the development of its individuals.

The qualities of early experiences, particularly how children are raised and educated, shape the direction of a child's life.<sup>4</sup> This means that the growth of individuals is guided by the values and expectations of their culture. Individuals acquire values and skills valued by their community. The self image of an individual is based on their community's values and how they interact with it. Both Celie and Meridian are a product of their communities. They are shaped by the values and skills of their communities. Yet they must stand out as individuals from the mass of the community. How they do this is part of the study.

Kenneth H. Baldwin and David K. Kirby (1975) state that the history of any literature is the history of a unique series of quests, the stories of individuals in search of external community and internal harmony. Fictional characters seek to discover or create a mode of existence that provides a common bond with others at the same time that it allows for a sense of individual self autonomy. Without a sense of

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<sup>4</sup> Microsoft ® Encarta ® 2006. © 1993-2005 Microsoft Corporation.

community, a context to authenticate his or her existence and ratify their identity, the individuals are driven to isolation and finally to physical or spiritual destruction.

There is conflict that develops between the public and private life;<sup>5</sup> between the self and the community. This conflict creates a wilderness. It is only after the wilderness has been subdued and the spiritual solidarity of the community established that the individual can afford the self-indulgent luxury of the quest for internal harmony. Yet the wilderness is never subdued, and the solidarity of the community is, at any given moment, tenuous at best.

The community has a crucial role in the way a person develops ones self. The development of the self is guided by both intended and unintended experiences in the home, peer group and the entire wide community. The parents, guardians, friends and other community members influence the manner in which the self develops in the community. The individual's social skills, emotional self-control, reasoning strategies and other physical skills are shaped by the community.

The elders are important members of any community. They help in the transmission of values and skills to the young. The individual's interaction with adults contributes to the development of that individual's values and skill.<sup>6</sup> As the children participate in community life they adopt for themselves an identity which though unique to them is accepted by society. In this way the individuals incorporate their culture's values and norms into their reasoning, social interaction and self understanding. This is why Toni Morrison's view that "when you kill the ancestor you kill yourself"<sup>7</sup> is very crucial in the relationship between the self and the community.

Austrian physician and neurologist Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis theory states that a child's early experiences and environment shape one's personality for an

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<sup>5</sup> *Black Women Writers 1950-1980*, Mari Evans ed' (New York; Anchor Press, 1984)339

<sup>6</sup> *Black Women Writers 1950-1980* Mari Evans ed' (New York; Anchor Press, 1984)339

<sup>7</sup> *Black Women Writers 1950-1980*, Mari Evans ed' (New York; Anchor Press, 1984)344

entire life time.<sup>8</sup> An individual's early experiences are formative and provide a strong or weak foundation for later psychological growth. An individual's later experiences can modify or even reverse early influences. Celie's and Meridian's characters are seen to have been influenced by their experiences. Both eventually undergo a change due to later experiences. When early experiences are traumatic or abusive individuals can recover with appropriate help and community support. The inter play between the individual self and the community produces a unique personality.

American psychoanalyst, Erik Erickson, proposed psychosocial stages of personality growth that give emphasis to social influences. Erickson's stages involve a conflict in the social world with two possible outcomes; trust verses mistrust based on an individuals confidence that others will provide the nurturing and care in the individual's quest for self-understanding. In the quest for self-understanding, there is a complex confusion between self identity and the role expected of individuals. In Erik Erickson's psychosocial theory, the support of the family and the social world or community is important in the attainment of the self. This is the interesting investigation in this work that will analyse how Celie's and Meridian's communities contribute to the self image of the two characters. Celie in The Color Purple grows in an environment in which mistrust is the norm until she meets Shug Avery who provides Celie with a nurturing and caring attention that enables Celie to come to a self understanding. Meridian, too, grows up in a sexist system and has to rebel against this oppressive system to attain the self.

The way society treats its individuals may inhibit or encourage an individual's behaviour. The reaction of the community to an individual's self may be rewarding or prohibiting, punishing or rewarding depending on whether it approves a behavioural trait or not. This determines whether the behaviour will be repeated or not. This trait is very evident in Celie's upbringing as we shall see later. Human behaviour is affected by its consequences; that is the positive and constructive

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<sup>8</sup> Microsoft ® Encarta ® 2006. © 1993-2005 Microsoft Corporation.

ways that reinforcement encourages acceptable behaviour and punishment that can be used to guide an individual's behaviour by inhibiting unacceptable conduct. Individuals may develop behavioural difficulties because their personalities conflict with social expectations and demands. Alphonso and Mr. \_\_\_\_\_'s treatment of Celie in The Color Purple become an interesting aspect in the study. The insecure or inconsistent communities may cause individuals to develop insecure attachments that are characterised by uncertainty or distrust in the attachment figure. Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, Celie's step father, is abusive and cruel to Celie. He does not provide the consistent secure environment. Alphonso, Celie's husband, is equally abusive and cruel to Celie. Both relationships are dysfunctional and do not provide Celie with a nurturing and caring environment. Secure attachments are thus an important foundation for social and personality development arising from an individual's community. The role of Shug Avery becomes critical in Celie's development in The Color Purple.

For Celie and Meridian, who are embroiled in a racist and sexist environment, their community is itself polluted with negative behavioural traits. The communities in which they grow up and move into are themselves negative. The raising up of the individuals in such environments proves a challenge in the investigation of the concept of the self and the community in Walker's two novels.

The individual's social relationships are very important as they influence the growth of self-awareness and self understanding. Other people's responses to an individual's actions help to create a sense of individuality. These responses may produce emotional reactions of pride, guilt, shame and embarrassment. The evaluations of other people have an effect on the way the individual will perceive himself or herself. Their sense of the self may be enhanced or diminished. Individuals, when asked to describe themselves may describe themselves the way the community evaluates them. They will describe themselves the way they are viewed by others in the community. This is the case of Celie when she initially starts to look at herself as ugly because others have told her that she is ugly. John, too, in James' Baldwin's Go Tell it on the Mountain, is vulnerable enough to believe that

his face bears the mark of the devil because he has been told so by his step father Gabriel.<sup>9</sup> When individuals learn not to describe themselves by the labels that the community gives them, they are likely to be seen as rebels or misfits in their communities.

The self may also be developed through imitation of others. In imitating others, an individual may also acquire expectations about the consequences of their behaviour. When Harpo, Albert's misguided and immature son, in The Color Purple asks Celie for advice on how to control his wife, Sofia, Celie advises him to beat her. When Harpo tries to follow up on this advice, he is thoroughly beaten up by Sofia. Harpo learns from his experience that beating his wife will always leave him bruised. This checks his conduct.

Understanding how individual's think is also crucial to understanding an individual's development because the way a person perceives life and its events often determines how these events affect them. Individuals apply their thinking to new experiences and gradually modify these to better accommodate reality.

## **1.2 Background**

The challenge of the self, as already alluded to is directly related to the community. Celie's and Meridian's communities are cast in an environment tinted by racism and sexism. This is a portrayal of the American Southern communities which were emerging from the bondage of the dehumanising slavery during and after the reconstruction. Community or Society in this environment was constructed according to race and sex. It had layers which reflected the areas of community power and dominion. There was the community of the whites which had white men and white women. This was followed by the community of the Black American peoples. Within this second level was the community of Black American women who suffered oppression at the hands of the white world as well as from the Black American male world.

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<sup>9</sup> Howard M. Harper jr., *Desperate Faith* (Chapel Hill; The University of North Carolina Press, 1967) 143

Wade-Gayles (1984; 4) explains this reality in this way

“There are three major circles of reality in American society, which reflect degrees of power and powerlessness. There is a large circle of white people, most of them white men, experiencing influence and power. Far away from it there is a small circle, a narrow space, in which black people regardless of sex, experience uncertainty, exploitation and powerlessness. Hidden in this second circle is a third, a small, dark enclosure in which black women experience pain, isolation, and vulnerability. These are the distinguishing marks of black womanhood.”

This is the struggle that the Black American woman has been up against; the oppressive, sexism and racism in a sexist, racist and patriarchal world. In this world the Black American woman is seen as a beast of burden, sex slave and a machine for producing slave labour for the white man as well as a machine for sexual pleasure for both the Black American man and the white man.

This condition placed the Black American woman in a desperate position. However, Langston Hughes' poem, Mother to Son, shows that despite this situation, the Black American woman has been the sturdy bridge that has kept the blood line going.

*“Well, Son, I’ll tell you:  
Life for me ain’t been no crystal stair.  
It’s had tacks in it,  
And splinters,  
And boards torn up,  
And places with no carpet on the floor-  
Bare.  
But all the time  
I’ve been a-climbin’ on,  
And reachin’ landin’s,  
And turnin’ corners,  
And sometimes goin’ in the dark  
Where there ain’t been no light.  
So boy, don’t you turn back.  
Don’t you set down on the steps  
‘Cause you finds it’s kinder hard.  
Don’t you fall now-  
For I’ve still goin’, honey  
I’ve still climbin,*

*And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.”<sup>10</sup>*

Illustrated in Hughes' poem is the plight of a desperate mother, a representation of the Black American woman, encouraging her son that despite her appalling situation she has moved on. She encourages her son that in spite of everything, he should not lose hope but soldier on, never to turn back. This portrays a life full of pain and suffering but with determination and hope for a better future. This was the Black American woman who was twice burdened and denied the privileges of firstly the white world and secondly of the Black American man's world which they were expected to serve without question.

This status core denied the woman of her self and her self identity. She was dehumanised and forced to deny herself and accept herself as wood;<sup>11</sup> without feelings, ambition, needs or plans. This reduced her status to that of an amenity.

Celie, in The Color Purple, says “I don't fight; I stay where I'm told but I'm alive. ... He beat me ... I make myself wood. I say to myself, Celie, you are a tree.”<sup>12</sup> For one half of the novel, Celie's method of resistance to violence of all kinds is to endure. To pretend that she is wood, too tough and too thick to break.

Set in this background, both The Color Purple and Meridian reflect these conflicts. Individuals like Celie and Meridian have to struggle and negotiate their places and make an effort to acquire an identity for themselves.

In order to help us understand how the characters in the two novels negotiate their places in their communities, resort shall be had to the feminist literary theory of criticism.

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<sup>10</sup> Langston Hughes, *Selected Poems of Langston Hughes* (New York; Vintage Books, 1987) 187

<sup>11</sup> Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (New York; Washington Square Press, 1982)

<sup>12</sup> Walker (1982)

Feminists have also had their say about the racist and sexist American Society. They have castigated this kind of social order which has marginalised many people in the communities.

They have postulated that the social construction of communities has been patriarchal in nature and consequently contend that the prevalent trend is that society has adopted a culture in which the man is its most powerful, valued and privileged member. They have argued that the concerns of communities have mostly been those of the man; his history, his struggles and his perception of injustices at the exclusion of the concerns of the woman. Feminists have reconstructed this status quo and given focus to the woman and her concerns. Their work and literature has endeavoured to give prominence to the issues of the woman as shall be seen in the section dealing with the theoretical framework.

Feminists have protested against the subordinated and negative portrayal of the woman in communities. They have argued that most communities are largely influenced by the socially constructed patriarchal society. They argue that in most communities, the positions of power and decision making are in the hands of the man and the woman occupies a subordinated position.

The woman in these communities and literary constructions is cast in feminine qualities of tenderness, self-sacrificing, patience, docility, understanding, self-effacement, cowardice and humility. She is also cast as indecisive and weak whose main preoccupation is home making and producing babies. She is seen in the traditional imagery of the woman, to use Meridian's words, she is an "Obedient Daughter," "Devoted Wife," "Adoring Mother" stages forming the traditional stages of a woman's life.<sup>13</sup> This is in direct contrast to the casting of the man who is portrayed as strong, tough, self assertive, arrogant, aggressive, fearless, courageous, determined and brave. Examples of such portrayals are many and include those found in James Baldwin's characters Elizabeth, John's mother and

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<sup>13</sup> Alice Walker; *Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and K. A. Appiah eds. (New York; Amistad Press Inc, 1993) 170

Gabriel in Go Tell it on the Mountain. To John and indeed the reader, James Baldwin presents Elizabeth as representing patience, endurance and long suffering. She in part reminds us of Faulkner's Dilsey<sup>14</sup> whose love like that of Elizabeth keeps the family together. This is in sharp contrast to the portrayal of Gabriel who is cast as a bitter sadistic religious zealot who wields family power and exercises it at will and without question.

The reason given for such a portrayal of the two sexes is that they are constructed in male-centric societies. Feminists have argued against this and have pointed out that to be born female is a biological phenomenon while to live as a feminine or masculine being is a social construction. The argument here is that individuals are oriented by their communities to live their lives in a masculine or feminine way.

A variety of sources have been cited for this situation. Among the oldest and perhaps most relied upon basis has been the Bible. They have attributed this problem of the subjugation of the woman to the Bible. Mayes (1981:1) says that "According to the book of Genesis, God created man. Woman was not only an aftermath, but also an amenity. For close to two thousand years this has justified her subordination and explains her inferiority." Feminist Writers have taken on the Bible and have contended that the Bible, having been written by the man in a patriarchal system, does nothing more than serve the interests of the man. They have argued that the subordination of the woman was not ordained by God but by the man who had an interest to serve. If this is the case then a woman can only attain her selfhood by being "deviant" or a "rebel" against the male constructed world.

Alice Walker, a black Feminist activist, has argued against this traditional portrayal of the woman. She has disagreed with the Biblical interpretation of the subordinated position given to the woman. Walker, the Pulitzer Prize winner, has argued that "Women have little voice in the Bible, and what voice they do have is

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<sup>14</sup> William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* (New York; Vintage International, 1954)

given to them only to illustrate the deviousness, silliness, untrustworthiness and general insignificance of their sex. The only thing that makes them worthwhile is the birth of a son; they expend much of their energy trying to bring this about.”<sup>15</sup> Walker, who was born on February 9, 1944 in racially segregated Eatonton, Georgia, experienced some of the effects of racism and sexism.

In Meridian, Meridian has to rebel against the socially constructed traditional images of the woman. She is a daughter but not obedient, a wife but not devoted and a mother but not adoring.<sup>16</sup> She disobeys her mother, ends her marriage and gives up her child for adoption and joins the civil rights campaign.

Most prominent Black American authors like Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison have been cited for having spent most of their energies on the representations, in their works, of the black people’s struggles against racism and classicism.<sup>17</sup> Black women feminists like Walker have argued that texts by these prominent Black American authors mostly represented the struggles of the Black American male subjects against the domination of the white male. They observed that the silent Black American female voice could not be adequately represented by the voice of the white man or the elitist and racist white feminists or the sexist Black American man who mostly got preoccupied with their own concerns or were blind to the forms of the Black American woman’s oppression and expression. This gave rise to Black American female authors having to write to represent the Black American woman’s experiences and point of view. This enabled the Black American woman to express herself and challenge the boundaries that traditionally kept her in seclusion.

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<sup>15</sup> Walker Alice, *Anything We Love Can be Saved*, (London; Phoenix 1997) 27

<sup>16</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and K. A. Appiah, ed. 171

<sup>17</sup> *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature* Wilfred Guerin. L., ed. 5th ed (Oxford; Oxford University Press, 2005)

Alice Walker is a product of this oppression. Alice Walker is not only a writer but also an activist in feminist/ womanist<sup>18</sup> causes, and issues of social and economic justice.

While most feminist writing has challenged social injustices like racism and written about inter-racial relations, Walker has written about intra-racial relations. She shows the challenges of sexism faced by the Black American woman. She has chosen to give a voice to the woman whose voice was inhibited by poverty, sexism, racism, motherhood, home making responsibilities and slavery. She has endeavoured to bring to the fore the oppressed lives of the black woman and how the woman can overcome sexism. Walker has also shown how a woman's liberty lies in breaking some of the rules of the patriarchal society. She casts her characters as rebels who go against the socially constructed norms of the traditional woman in a patriarchal world. She casts her women characters as those who have the capacity to bond with other women for emancipation. In this way Walker, in her works, portrays her version of the ideal woman.

As Walker writes about these things, she has not turned "her back upon the men of her community"<sup>19</sup> like some of the white elitist feminist do. She has shown that the racist question is not very far from the sexism that the Black American woman experienced. She shows that racism does contribute to the degrading of the Black American woman. She shows how the beastly Black American man is himself a victim of a racist society. Brutalised by his racist environment, the Black American man in turn turns his frustration on the Black American woman.

Alice Walker acknowledges the fact that the Black American woman writer is not taken seriously because she is born a woman and is a Black American. She also acknowledges the fact that a woman is mostly "... dependent on material things- fine cars, furs, big houses, pots and jars of face cream- ..." as opposed to awareness

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<sup>18</sup> The terms Africana Feminist, Black Feminist and Womanist used as defined by Walker will be used interchangeably to mean one and the same.

<sup>19</sup> Guerin 233

that "... love, fulfilment as women, peace of mind, should logically come before, not after, selling one's soul for a golden stool on which to sit. Sit and be bored."<sup>20</sup> Yet Walker's works have endeavoured to show that a woman, on the other hand, values relationships, and is most concerned in her dealings with others to negotiate between opposing needs so that relationships can be maintained.

True to the cause of Black feminists, Walker's works have shown by exploring and interrogating the ways in which the experiences of races as in racism has affected the experiences of gender as in sexism. In the novels, The Color Purple and Meridian, Walker has paid special attention to the examination of ways in which the patriarchal society has constructed the experience of gender and especially that of the woman.

In these novels, Alice Walker has presented females as leading characters. She has situated her characters in a racist and sexist environment in which they have to find their own identity. The characters have had to overcome most of their society's stereo-type patriarchal norms for them to find their self identity and liberty. Walker sees the self as being part of the community;<sup>21</sup> the inner self being a continuum between the inner self and the outer world. She suggests that for the woman to survive and liberate herself she needs the support, strength and wisdom from her fellow sisters which they also draw from nature.

The work specifically looks at the lead female characters in Alice Walker's novels The Color Purple and Meridian. The challenge will be to examine how a woman, who has opposed the stereo-type patriarchal social construction of the position of the woman in society, has defined the position of the woman in her works and how she actualises the concept of the self and the community. The themes that come out in her works of rape, violence, isolation, troubled relationships, multi-generational perspectives, sexism and racism will be central to the exploration of and portrayal of the self and the community. These themes are important as they

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<sup>20</sup> Alice Walker, *Warrior Marks* (New York; Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch, 1994) 74

<sup>21</sup> Evans 457-475.

show the oppressed lives that the women experience. These women who at first can only talk to God mature into assertive individuals.

### ***1.3 Statement of the Problem***

The Black American woman in America faces a lot of challenges; from racism to sexism and all related problems. The problem that this research seeks to examine is how the two novels of Alice Walker, portray the concept of the self and the community. Both novels The Color Purple and Meridian present lead characters that are female. The paper will examine how the novels create, develop and present the concept of the self and the community in a racist and sexist world.

Black American literature is dominated by male characters that play leading roles. These, like their male authors, present a world that is centred on the patriarchal type of societies which are insensitive to the woman's concerns. Alice Walker, among others, is redressing this imbalance by creating works that have women as leading characters. Her works and characters focus on and are sensitive to the issues that affect the woman and her community.

Equally of interest is the examination of the two novel, The Color Purple and Meridian in the context of the Feminist literary criticism. This enables the study of the Black American womanhood in which Walker has created a feminine perspective of womanhood and written works that originate from a woman's consciousness. The Color Purple and Meridian offer a woman's perspective from the inside and as a result the novels upset the traditional patriarchal portrayal of the woman inside out and upside down, exposing them as poor reflectors of the truths of black woman's humanity. The two novels take us into the minds of women characters as created by a woman and expose their thoughts and feelings; defining themselves as being much more than the patriarchal society has cast them to be.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Gloria Wade-Gayles, *No Crystal Stair: Visions of Race and Sex in Black Women's Fiction* (London; The Pilgrim Press, 1984)

The research looks at how The Color Purple and Meridian project the vision of the world, society, community, family, the female characters and their lovers and how individuals, Celie and Meridian, negotiate their way in their communities in order to attain their self.

The study compares and contrasts how the concept of the self and the community is presented in both The Color Purple and Meridian.

## ***1.4 Aims and Objectives of the Study***

### **1.4.1 Aim**

The aim of the study was to examine how the concept of the self and the community in the novels The Color Purple and Meridian has been created, developed and presented.

### **1.4.2 Objectives**

- 1.4.2.1 The objective of the study is to examine the concept of the community in Alice Walker's The Color Purple and Meridian.
- 1.4.2.2 The study examines how the concept of the self is created, developed and presented by Alice Walker in her novels The Color Purple and Meridian.
- 1.4.2.3 The study explores how the self interacts with the community to produce a wholesome individual in the two novels.
- 1.4.2.4 The research seeks to establish how the individual's perception of ones society affects the development of that individual's self concept.
- 1.4.2.5 The research examines the role of society in establishing the individual's perception of society and how this contributes to that individual's development of the self.
- 1.4.2.6 The study establishes how the individual's self interrelates and affects ones community.
- 1.4.2.7 In doing this, the role of race, sex and religion in a community is examined especially in the way they each affect the development of the individual self.

## ***1.5 Rationale***

In this emerging global village, people from all races, sexes and economic backgrounds will have to share space. In such an environment, matters of racism, sexism and economics will, everyday, be a challenge to this generation and to generations to come. Given this situation, it is important to examine the relationship between the community and the self. It is important to explore how individuals negotiate their way towards the attainment of their self in their communities.

There is an element in which the attainment of the self involves individuals going against the established norms of the community. There is also the rapture of relationships even between mothers and daughters. This creates a lot of strain and stress in relationships. The individual might wonder if the rapture in relationships is necessary for the attainment of the self. The rapture of relationships must be seen as the building blocks towards the creation of more wholesome future relationships and communities as opposed to destroying them.

For communities to be safe and secure, the underlining problems of communities and how individuals overcome them become necessary. This study examines the self and the community. This is beneficial towards establishing stable individuals, communities and the proper integration of people from different social stations.

The findings of this research are of value to all individuals and communities. The findings are also an addition to the body of knowledge that already exists.

## ***1.6 Methodology***

This is a qualitative research. The research is mostly desk based, examining the primary texts identified above, as well as secondary sources of information such as critical articles in books, journals as well as the electronic sources on the internet.

## ***1.7 Chapters***

The work has six chapters which are as follows

## **Chapter 1**

Chapter 1 has the introduction, the statement of the problem, the rationale, the methodology, the theoretical framework and the definition of the operational terms

## **Chapter 2**

Chapter 2 has the literature review.

## **Chapter 3**

Chapter 3 contains the synopses of the texts under study. These texts are The Color Purple and Meridian. Both texts are written by Alice Walker.

## **Chapter 4**

Chapter 4 establishes the texts in their oppressive settings. It particularly concentrates on the setting in terms of the racist and sexist environment as projected in the texts. The chapter looks at the social structures and patterns that have kept the woman under oppression. The role of religion in the texts is subjected to a review. The purpose of this is to analyse the communities in which the stories are set. This leads to the analysis of the self in the next chapter.

## **Chapter 5**

Chapter 5 looks at the concept of the self and the community. It explores the breaking point at which the individual manages to attain the self in the community. The individuality of Celie and Meridian and how they attain the self is examined in the light of their communities. Of special interest in this chapter are the challenges of racism, sexism and religion that their communities face. The chapter examines how Celie and Meridian break the bonds of their communities for them to attain the self. Also examined are the catalysts that enable the characters to have a new way of looking at things to spur them into rebellion and eventual freedom.

## **Chapter 6:**

Chapter 6 compares Celie and Meridian in their quest for the self in their communities. The chapter looks at the similarities and the differences between the journeys of the dual towards the self. In conclusion it gives a summary of the common features that emerge as important for the woman to attain the self in such communities.

## **1.8 Theoretical Framework**

Guerin L. Wilfred (2005; 16) has indicated that no single theory is adequate to a complete understanding of a text and that often several theories would have to be used together. This research will apply a number of literary theories of criticism but will specifically use the feminist literary theory of criticism and where necessary the psychoanalysis literary theory of criticism.

Feminism as a literary theory of criticism is based on the realisation that there is unequal power relationship between men and women in society. Judith Fletterly asserts that Feminism, like literature, is political and that its politics is male.<sup>23</sup> Feminism supports women's struggle against oppression especially patriarchy and sexism.

Patriarchy is a word that is derived from the word Patriarch, which refers to the dominant rule of the father as the head of the family. It is also used to refer to systems or organisations like political, economical, industrial, financial, religious or social, whose positions of power and decision making are in the hands of men. In such arrangements women are seen as subordinates. The male roles are given superior and positive attributes while the female roles are given inferior or negative attributes.

"The basic Western civilisation is pervasively patriarchal (ruled by the father)-that is, it is male-centred and controlled, and is organised and conducted in such a way as to subordinate women to men in all cultural domains: familial, religious, political, economic, social, legal and artistic. From the Hebrew Bible and Greek philosophic writings to the present, the female tends to be defined by negative reference to the male as the human norm, hence as an Other, or kind of non-man, by her lack of the identifying male organ, of male powers, and of the male character traits that are presumed, in the patriarchal view, to have achieved the most important

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<sup>23</sup> Judith Fetterly, *The Resisting Reader; A Feminist Approach to American Fiction* (London; Indiana University Press, 1978)

scientific and technical inventions and the major works of civilisation and culture.”<sup>24</sup>

In this view feminists have perceived modern civilisation as pervasively biased in favour of the male species. Millett in Sexual Politics<sup>25</sup> has criticised capitalism, male power, crude sexuality and violence against women. She believes that the root cause of all this lies in capitalism which has placed enormous powers to the male species. She argues that this is more crudely seen in literature in which she accuses male writers of having distorted the image of the woman by associating her with male deviances. This, she argues further has led to the interior colonisation of the woman. Millett has concluded that the “interior colonisation” of the woman by the man is “studier than any form of segregation.” And that the male species has influenced the oppressive culture and social order of community life.

Another term used in feminism is phallocentrism which looks at the phallus or the male sexual organ as the source of power. From this point of view the feminists are seen as being envious of the men because they lack the phallus.

The feminists give attention to the term discourse. This term is understood as a system of thought and communication between people. Communication is seen as being instrumental in the articulation and communication of common sense knowledge and assumptions as well as more formal ideologies. Through discourse, dominant ideologies in society are communicated to members of a given society. This means that the main ideologies of society become so entrenched in its members that it becomes very difficult for any one to challenge or give alternatives to these patriarchal definitions of social values. Feminists believe that discourses, however dominant, are subjective and can be challenged.

Feminists see the question of discourse as pervading the literary world. They argue that most of the literary canons and texts have been constructed from the male

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<sup>24</sup> Maggie Human, *Feminist Criticism: Women as Contemporary Critics* (Brighton; Harvester, 1986) 89

<sup>25</sup> Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (London; Virago 1977) 24-25

point of view; written by the man for the man. They explain that such literary works have projected male concerns at the expense of female concerns. This is seen as a result of the bias of society in which the woman with her concerns is treated as invisible.<sup>26</sup> Most works regarded as great literature have given focus on male protagonists- Oedipus, Ulysses, Hamlet, Tom Jones, Faustus, The Three Musketeers- who portray masculine traits and ways of feeling and “pursue masculine interests in masculine fields of action.”<sup>27</sup> In such literary constructs the woman plays a marginal and subordinate role and is never presented as autonomous. These works are tailored for the male readers while leaving the female readers either alienated or forced to adopt the perspective of the male reader which is against herself. The woman is forced to adopt male values and ways of perceiving, feeling and acting.

Another aspect closely associated with the issue of discourse is the question of language use which Saussure<sup>28</sup> terms linguistic theory. In this theory attention is drawn to the use of language in literature. The theory contends that there is bias in the way language is used. The use of words like “man,” “mankind” to refer to human beings in general and the use of the pronouns “he” “his” to refer back to gender neutral nouns like “God,” “human being,” “child,” “inventor,” “author,” “poet” are examples. This is especially reflected in literary works constructed in the English language which French theorists criticise as irredeemably male-engendered, male-constituted, and male-dominated.<sup>29</sup>

Showalter’s<sup>30</sup> linguistic model gives the view that women speak man’s language as a foreign tongue and prefer that the woman’s voice should be heard despite the creative impediments encountered by the woman. The result of the woman having to use language as a foreign tongue is that the woman has resorted to silence. This silence is seen as arising from circumstances of being born into the wrong class,

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<sup>26</sup> Ellison Ralph, *Invisible Man* (New York; Vintage International, 1947)

<sup>27</sup> Human 90

<sup>28</sup> Human

<sup>29</sup> Human 92

<sup>30</sup> Elaine Showalter, *Speaking Gender*, (London; Routledge, 1989)

race or sex, being denied education, becoming numbed by economic struggle, muzzled by censorship or distracted or impeded by the demands of nurturing.

In addition to the problem of language vocabulary and syntax, there is the problem of the dominant male linear logic which tends to downgrade the classification and worth of the woman. This is said to force the woman into complicity “with linguistic features that impose on females a condition of marginality and subservience, or even of linguistic nonentity.”<sup>31</sup> Even though a woman writer may have to use this “male” language, feminists, apart from identifying subjects they consider exclusively feminine, have also identified sex-related writing strategies. Guerin L. Wilfred. (ed.) (2005;226) explains the identified sex-related writing strategies as:

“The use of associated rather than linear logic, other “feminine” artistic choices such as free play of meaning and a lack of closer, as well as a genre preference such as letters, journals, confessional, domestic, and body-centred discourse. As Showalter has observed “English feminist criticism, essentially Marxist, stresses opposition; French feminist criticism, essentially psychoanalytic, stresses repression; American feminist criticism, essentially textual, stresses expression.” All three, however, being woman centred or *gynocentric*, must search for terminology to rescue themselves from becoming a synonym for inferiority.”

Feminists contend that there is a difference between what is natural to a person and what is acquired as a result of social relations or through discourse. Feminists use the term gender to make clear the distinction between female and male on one hand and what is feminine and masculine on the other. Feminists argue that to be a male or a female is simply a matter of sex and determined by biology while to be feminine and masculine are patterns of sexuality and behaviour imposed on an individual by culture and social norms.<sup>32</sup> These are twin poles of gender which Millett simply identifies as biology and culture.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Human 92

<sup>32</sup> *Modern Literary Theory*, Jefferson. A. & D. Robey eds (London; B. T. Batsford Ltd, 1991)

<sup>33</sup> Millett

The point that the feminists make is that one is naturally born either as male or as female while this is not the case with living as a feminine or masculine being. Feminine or masculine orientation is a creation of the dominative patriarchal system which imposes certain demands on the females and makes them believe these values which are attached to all females as natural. Attributes of tenderness, self-sacrifice, patience, docility, humility, understanding, self effacement, cowardice and other considered feminine qualities are socially constructed and considered as negative and inferior by society. The conclusion of the feminists to this is that gender is socially and culturally constructed while biology is natural. The result of this conclusion is that feminists are of the view that gender roles are given to the women by the male-centric society. Feminists challenge the social, ideological, institutional and personal power relationships between male and female in the male constructed world.

Within the feminist concept Showalter has expounded on what she calls the psychoanalytic model. This model identifies gender differences in the psyche and also in the artistic process. In this context, the feminist concerns are placed in the social context which acknowledges class, racial, national and historical differences which are seen as determinants among women. This model offers a collective experience that unites women over time and space - a binary force.<sup>34</sup>

In Showalter's psychoanalytic model, the self is seen as still linked to the voice of the mother which is taken as the source of all feminine expression. To gain access to this place is to find an immeasurable source of identity.<sup>35</sup>

It is argued that it is because men "abstract themselves" from the material world as they separate from their mothers and enter the patriarchy that they adopt a "violent and aggressive posture toward the world left behind, which is now constructed as an 'object.'" For them the mother represents "the tie to nature that must be overcome to inaugurate civilisation as men understand it (a set of abstract

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<sup>34</sup> Elaine Showalter, *Speaking Gender*, (London; Routledge, 1989) 226

<sup>35</sup> Showalter 229

rules for assigning identity, appropriate social roles and the like that favour male power over women).” Because women are not required to separate from the mother, “no cut is required, no separation that launches a precarious journey towards a fragile identity predicated on separation that simply denies its links to the physical world”. Men think in terms of rights while women think in terms of responsibility to others. As Riukn and Ryan<sup>36</sup> put it, in the mother child relationship might be found more of the constituents of identity than are given during the later Sigmund Freud’s oedipal stage.

Feminists have introduced gender as an important literary criticism which questions the image of women as portrayed and perpetrated in literature. They contend that in most literary works, the woman has been presented from the male-centric point of view. Literary works have tended to portray the woman in two dominant stereo-types; as a mother who is beautiful, enduring, humble, self-sacrificing or as a witch, a cunning schemer who lives on her exploits of man, a mysterious kind of person- terrible and yet irresistible. Classical examples of these are Delilah and Circe.<sup>37</sup> The feminists challenge these images of a woman.

Showalter, in her Biological model, identifies as most problematic the fact that most texts tend to mirror the woman’s body when dealing with the woman. The question that this raises is whether the women are reduced to mere bodies. However, Showalter praises the “shocking frankness” of women writers who relate the intimacies of the female experience of the female body.<sup>38</sup>

Society, through the patriarchal ideology, has marginalised the woman by giving her an image of custodian of societal values and norms. Some dominant literature has picked on this image to represent the woman in literature as a symbol of cultural values. Society has called the woman who upholds the cultural image that has been placed on her as good and the one who challenges it as bad. Feminists

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<sup>36</sup> Showalter 271

<sup>37</sup> Reference is made to the Bible and Greek Literature.

<sup>38</sup> Showalter

have seen this as a tactful way of tying the woman down to her traditional role, so that the woman who challenges this culturally valued position is considered a rebel.<sup>39</sup>

Feminist critics have identified subject matters in literature written by women which they have taken as distinctively feminine. These matters have to do with special experiences of women like gestation, giving birth and nurturing. Others include mother-daughter and woman-woman relations in which the most important issues are the personal and affectional issues. They claim that no other person can write accurately and realistically about these feminine issues other than the woman herself.

Feminists further demand and claim for equal opportunities with the man. They stand up to challenge their subordinated positions as members of society. Feminist literary criticism reconstitutes the way in which literature is dealt with in order to do justice to female points of view, concerns and values.<sup>40</sup> Feminist literary criticism brings to light and counters the covert sexual biases written in written works. It identifies the recurrent and distorted images of the woman and challenges these in their reconstruction of literary works. These critics have set their goal to enlarge and re-order, or displace altogether the male-centric literary canons.

Judith Fetterley in analysing the poetry of Emily Dickinson<sup>41</sup> identifies and defines the condition of the woman in a patriarchal culture. She points out that the woman's primal act of consciousness is the sense of loss, a phenomenon that Freud in his massive phallocentrism is said to have arrogantly analysed as "a lament for a specific bit of flesh rather than for the possibility of personhood which it represents". In this condition the woman is disinherited, cast out, where the woman is the "Other", the "Outsider", a moaner among the children; never really a

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<sup>39</sup> Olal-Odur F, *Theory and Criticism of Literature* (Kampala; Makerere University, 1998) 216

<sup>40</sup> Human

<sup>41</sup> Fetterley vii-xxvi

child because she is never allowed to be fully self indulgent; never really an adult because she is never permitted to be fully responsible and is forever a “young moaner;” a “little woman.” The woman is in the condition of being taken as superhuman, subhuman but never simply as human. Worse than the loss is the confusion of consciousness which obscures the nature of the loss itself.

The woman finds herself enclosed in societal myths and images and dogmas and definitions and laws and strictures and God and Man, and fear. She is deceived into believing the theory about the bit of flesh and the bite of the apple and is kept from knowing of what she is deprived of.<sup>42</sup> In this state the condition of the woman is that of isolation, cast out and consequently her self image tends to be monstrous, all because that is the consequence of the patriarchal predication that to be human is to be male, in which the woman is forced in every way to identify with man and yet incessantly reminded of being a woman.

Fetterly calls the American literature male and argues that to read this literature is to be forced to identify with the male. She further argues that this literature has not left the woman alone. This literature, which is considered classic, insists on its universality at the same time as it defines that universality in specific male terms. In this condition, the woman loses her self personhood; her self image and her self identity.

In most of the American fiction, the woman, the mother or the daughter is seen as the scapegoat. This is the situation in William Faulkner’s As I lay dying<sup>43</sup> in which Addie Bundren is seen as the main cause of the Bundren family’s suffering as they transport her decomposing dead body from the Bundren farm to be buried forty miles in Jefferson. The same scenario prevails in The Sound and the Fury<sup>44</sup> in which the problems of the Compson family members like Quentin, Benjy and others are blamed on Candace’s moral conduct. Quentin drowns himself in the Charles River

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<sup>42</sup> Fetterly

<sup>43</sup> William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying* (New York; Vintage International, 1985)

<sup>44</sup> Faulkner (1954)

in Cambridge, Massachusetts as a result of his perceived loss of family honour because Candace, mostly called Caddy, has become promiscuous. Benjy, the idiot's suffering is presented as being caused by Caddy's absence.

In such fictions "the female reader is co-opted into participation in an experience from which she is explicitly excluded; she is asked to identify with a selfhood that defines itself in opposition to her; she is required to identify against herself."<sup>45</sup> In this type of environment with the pervasive male bias of this kind of literature the experience of being human is equated with the experience of being male. This makes even the most low male to gain a sense of superiority because which ever way he is cast he still is able to look down at the woman as his inferior being.

Fetterley<sup>46</sup> is of the view that most of the available major works of American fiction constitute designs on the female reader a fact that keeps the designs of American literature unavailable to the consciousness of the woman reader. If the woman reader is going to read this literature, it would be to read and subscribe to a literature designed against her. This literature teaches a woman to think like a man and to identify herself with a male point of view and to accept as normal and legitimate a patriarchal system of values which promotes the male image and point of view. The end result of this is that it promotes misogyny or the hatred of women as a sexually defined group. In this situation, the woman either accepts the designs against her or she becomes a resisting reader who even as she reads she rejects the ideology being propagated by a particular piece of work. The paradox of this is that the woman finds herself struggling with an identity crisis of being intellectually male and sexually female.

This is the reason Toni Morrison,<sup>47</sup> the first black woman Nobel Laureate for literature, lamented that each time she picked up a piece of literary works to read, she found nothing that suited her and so decided to write something that she and

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<sup>45</sup>Fetterley xii

<sup>46</sup>Fetterley xii

<sup>47</sup>Toni Morrison is a renowned American Author

other women like her would enjoy reading. What the woman reader like, Toni Morrison, found oppressive is the fact that when one reality which is against the woman is encouraged, legitimised and transmitted and when that limited vision endlessly insists on its comprehensiveness, then it creates the conditions necessary for the confusion of the consciousness in which impalpability flourishes.

From the feminist point of view, Toni Morrison's stand could be seen as that of a resisting reader who has began exorcising the male mind that is so deeply implanted in literature. This step is significant as male-centric history has often defined the woman and denied her the opportunity to be heard and to define herself. The world and everything in it has been defined and named by the man right from the time of Adam in the Bible who was asked by God to name everything that had been created including the woman.<sup>48</sup> There was no dialogue or discussion in this process. Consequently, feminism is a drive towards self knowledge and a part of the refusal by women of the self destructiveness of male dominated society. The aspect of the woman having a voice is significant considering the power of the taboos that were placed upon the woman like the one that St. Paul of the Bible prescribed for the woman "I permit no woman to teach or have authority over men but to keep silent."<sup>49</sup>

Feminists of Marxist orientation have avoided separating the "personal" identity from class identity and have instead directed attention to the underpinnings of cultural productions such as economics that have inhibited the woman's creativity, expression and ability to maximise production. Feminist critics have further postulated that criticism should have a cause and that to be engaged criticism must be ideological and moral; that is, it must be revolutionary.

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<sup>48</sup> *The Holy Bible* (Colorado Springs; International Bible Society, 1984) Genesis Chapter 2:19-23

<sup>49</sup> *The Holy Bible* (Colorado Springs; International Bible Society, 1984) 1st Timothy Chapter 2:11-12

## 2. CHAPTER TWO: Literature Review

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George Washington William's *History of the Negro Race in America from 1619 to 1880*<sup>50</sup> shows that racism entrenched in religion was ruthless in its attempts to keep the Black person under subjection and subjugation in America. He shows the condition of the Black person in America. In New York, for example, the Dutch system of domestic slavery was sanctioned into law on 24<sup>th</sup> October, 1684. With the passing of the law, slavery became legitimised in the province of New York under the British government. It considered a Christian duty to "devoutly and duly" ensure that the province had a constant supply of "merchantable Negroes at moderate rates."<sup>51</sup> It was in this zeal that the good Queen of the Church of England built up a church alongside the institution of human slavery.

Dazzled by prospects of riches, a lengthy Act for regulating slaves was passed. The law stipulated that it was illegal for any one to trade with the Negro slave. The violation of this law led to a fine and a prison sentence. Under the Act, Negroes were not permitted to meet together if their number exceeded three. If they did violate this law, they were liable to whipping or being sent to jail. It was an offence for a Negro to strike a freeman no matter the circumstances; injustice or provocation the Negro was subjected to.

This is the case of Jim in Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.<sup>52</sup> Jim is in this situation when he makes an exception on whom he can strike when he believes that he is being insulted by another human being, "I wouldn't think nuff'n; I'd take en bust him over de head. **Dat is, if he warn't white.**"<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Richard Barksdale and Keneth Kinnamon, *Black Writers of America; A Comprehensive Anthology*, (New York; Macmillan Publishing Company, 1972) 391-407

<sup>51</sup> Barksdale and Kinnamon (1972) 391

<sup>52</sup> Samuel Langhorne Clemens, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (New Delhi; Prentice-Hall of India Private Ltd, 1986) 67

<sup>53</sup> Emphasis mine

The conditions for blacks in the Christian colony of New York were terrible; they were not allowed family relations, they had no property, no school and were neglected in life. When they died, they were buried in a common ditch. Their testimony was not admissible before the courts of law. Their white masters exercised absolute power over their lives and bodies.

Blacks were kept in ignorance and were considered as wicked creatures that the white person could not do without, yet lived in dread of due to their increased population. The black race was further viewed as a brutish and bloody species of humankind who were descendants of the cursed seed of the biblical Canaan. To the white person, the black person was only fit to live as a slave and they also believed that to elevate the black person above this state was to invite them to violence; to cut the throat of the white person. This belief justified the attempts to ensure that the black person was kept in perpetual servitude.

The effect of such blatant racism was total on the black person. The black people regarded themselves to be less than human, on the same level with animals. An example of such an effect is one narrated by Booker T. Washington<sup>54</sup> in *Up from Slavery*:<sup>55</sup>

“I asked one coloured man, who was about sixty years old, to tell me something of his history. He said he had been born in Virginia, and sold into Alabama in 1845. I asked him how many were sold at the time. He said, ‘*There were five of us; myself and brother and three mules.*’”<sup>56</sup>

Slavery and racism did not only dehumanise the Black people but also attempted to turn them into brutes, beasts. In this way the black people were robbed of their pride and identity. The black people were reduced so low that with tearful eyes and feeble voices they faintly cried “I am happy and contented- I love this condition.”<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Booker T. Washington was a former slave

<sup>55</sup> Barksdale and Kinnamon 412-429

<sup>56</sup> Emphasis mine

<sup>57</sup> Barksdale and Kinnamon 270

Henry Highland Garnet in *A memorial Discourse Delivered in the Hall of the House of Representatives, February 12, 1865*<sup>58</sup> makes an interesting reflection on slavery and comments that slavery commenced its dreadful work in kidnapping unoffending men in a foreign and distant land, and in piracy on the seas. He observes that the plunderers were not followers of Muhammad, nor the devotees of Hinduism, nor benighted pagans, nor idolaters, but people called Christians, and thus, he says, the relentless traders in the souls and bodies of men fastened upon Christianity a crime and stain of which it shudders and shrieks and that this was a most heinous iniquity ever perpetrated upon hopeless women and children.

Garnet describes how the Christian slave traders thrived on slave trade and the suffering that the black people had to go through as they were transported across the seas to the American continent. He talks about those slaves who died in the middle passage, those who suffocated between the decks of the floating slave-pen frightened and over-packed and those who, weakened by illness and dehydration were cast out on to the open sea to drown. Garnet asks an interesting question; if such were the deeds of 'mercy' wrought by the angels, then "tell me what works of iniquity there remain for devils to do?"<sup>59</sup> The point that Garnet makes is that the white man who professed to be Christian was in the forefront of committing heinous crimes against the black people.

The root of the Christian white man's treatment of the blacks lies in the belief that the black man is a descendant of the cursed son of Ham, Canaan. Ham, having seen his father's nakedness, had his son, Canaan, cursed to be a slave of his brothers' descendants by Noah.<sup>60</sup> The African experience as described by Garnet in his *Memorial Discourse* alluded to earlier was understandably painful:

"I was born among the cherished institutions of slavery. My earliest recollections of parents, friends and the home of my childhood are clouded with its wrongs. The first sight that met my eyes was a Christian mother

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<sup>58</sup> Barksdale and Kinnamon

<sup>59</sup> Barksdale and Kinnamon 270

<sup>60</sup> The Bible; Genesis Chapter 9

enslaved by professed Christians ... The first sound that startled my ear, and sent a shudder through my soul, were the cracking of the whip and the cranking of chains.”

And the deep reflection of the African to such inhumane treatment was radical:

“Let us examine this demon, which the people have worshipped as a God. Come forth, thou grim monster, that thou mayest be critically examined! There he stands. Behold him, one and all. Its work is to chattelize<sup>61</sup> man; to hold property in human beings. Great God! I would soon attempt to enslave GABRIEL or MICHAEL<sup>62</sup> as to enslave a man made in the image of God and for whom Christ died. Slavery is snatching man from the high place to which he was lifted by the hand of God, and dragging him down to the level of the brute creation, where he is made to be the companion of the horse and the fellow of the ox.”

The dehumanising institution of slavery was legalised by the white man and legitimised by a particular interpretation of the Bible. As Richard Wright explains, the ultimate aim of slavery and religion in individuals was only a naked will to power; “Wherever I found religion in my life I found strife, the attempt of one individual or group to rule another in the name of God.”<sup>63</sup>

The above view is also articulated by James Baldwin who in The Fire Next Time<sup>64</sup> says that the principles governing the rites and customs of the churches in which he grew up were blindness, loneliness and terror. In this work Baldwin presents the church as a place of refuge for emotional cripples and a mask for self hatred and despair. In Baldwin’s view, the world’s racial problem has created a society that is entirely hostile, and, by its nature, seems determined to cut its individuals down. He contends that the situation has reached explosion levels. “We human beings now have the power to exterminate ourselves; this seems to be the entire sum of our achievement. We have taken this journey and arrived at this place in God’s name. This, then, is the best that God (the white God) can do.” Baldwin ends his

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<sup>61</sup> **Chattel** refers to an item of personal property that is not freehold land and is not intangible.

**Movable property:** Chattels are typically movable property chattels personal, e.g. furniture or cars, but may also be interests in property chattels real, e.g. leases

<sup>62</sup> Emphasis in both names GABRIEL and MICHAEL as appears in the original text.

<sup>63</sup> Richard Wright, *Black Boy* 150-1

<sup>64</sup> Howard jr. 137-161

reflection with a call to have this white God replaced; the death of the traditional God of western civilisation. Baldwin believes that man's only hope for the discovery of truth lies in the relentless examination of one's own inner nature. He argues that one can rarely face in others what one cannot face in oneself. He identifies the key to this dilemma as being in knowing where one comes from. The clarion call is that if you know where you come from there is really no limit to where you can go. He argues that individual and social transformation cannot happen by an act of God but by the individuals in a given community who would in turn conceive God as a means of liberation and not a means to control others. Baldwin is committed to the belief that an individual's fate can be changed through the individual's discovery of his own nature, accepting it and involving other people in the community in concerted social action through love.

Hassan Ihab (1961)<sup>65</sup> discusses what he sees as a way in which a black person can confront his destiny. He is of the view that there are three general ways in which a black person can confront their destiny especially in the south; he could accept the role that has been created for him by the whites, or he could repress his dislike of the Jim Crow<sup>66</sup> social relations while striving for a middle way of respectability or he could reject the situation and adopt a criminal attitude and carry on an unceasing psychological scrimmage with whites, which often flared forth into physical violence. The last option is seen by the whites as the black destructive attitude as it is seen as breaking the established social order.

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<sup>65</sup>Ihab Hassan, *Radical Innocence: Studies in the Contemporary American Novel*, (New Jersey; Princeton University Press, Preston, 1961) 168-179

<sup>66</sup>Segregation was an attempt by white Southerners to separate the races in every sphere of life and to achieve supremacy over blacks. Segregation was often called the **Jim Crow** system, after a minstrel show character from the 1830's who was an old, crippled, black slave who embodied negative stereotypes of blacks. Segregation became common in Southern States following the end of the Reconstruction in 1877. During Reconstruction, which followed the civil war (1861-1865), Republican governments in the Southern States were run by blacks, Northerners, and some sympathetic Southerners. The Reconstruction governments had passed laws opening up economic and political opportunities for blacks. By 1877 the Democratic Party had gained control of government in the Southern States, and these Southern Democrats wanted to reverse black advances made during the Reconstruction. To that end, they began to pass local and state laws that specified certain places "For White Only" and others for "Colored." Blacks had separate school, transportation, restaurants, and parks, many of which were poorly funded and inferior to those of whites. Over the next 75 years, Jim Crow signs went up to separate the races in every possible place. From *Encarta 2006 Encyclopaedia © 1993-2005*.

Ralph Ellison in Invisible Man<sup>67</sup> presents a nameless narrator who remains invisible throughout the novel. The invisible man has been taught to despise his own black people who have no place other than that of subordination to the white man in the American history that he has been taught. The invisible man has not developed a clear sense of the self and has no confidence to challenge Bledsoe - and his lies and betrayal - and Norton.

The subversive doctrine of the Invisible man's grandfather in Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man advocates submission. Like Celie who behaves like wood, the Invisible Man is told by his grandfather;

“Live with your head in the lion's mouth. I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open.”<sup>68</sup>

The Invisible man who has always felt that “white is right,” is forced to realise that the only way to his self identity is in rebellion. He begins to understand what the mad doctor tells him: “Play the game, but play it your own way ... .” The Invisible man realises that to have a self identity, he first has to become a rebel against the fallacy of the socially constructed utopian vision. He comes to see the absurdity of the paint slogan which says “If it's Optic, It's the right white,”<sup>69</sup> and puns it in his own form to assert his identity: “I yam what I am”<sup>70</sup> while guzzling yams in the Harlem street.

Ellison's discussion of the concept of black identity in the Invisible Man is emphasised in the question of the “Blackness of Blackness.”<sup>71</sup> The optic paints need black to attain their whiteness. This awareness of the irony of opposites leads to an attempt to reconcile the opposites: “There is a mystery in the whiteness of

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<sup>67</sup> Ellison Ralph, Invisible Man (New York; Vintage International, 1947)

<sup>68</sup> Ellison 86

<sup>69</sup> Ellison 190

<sup>70</sup> Ellison 231

<sup>71</sup> Ellison 12

blackness, the innocence of evil, and the evil of innocence.”<sup>72</sup> As Ellison’s Invisible man becomes more aware of these complexities the more invisible he becomes. Like a sleep walker he has to fight half naked and blindfolded with other Negro boys to earn his scholarship; much to the amusement of his white spectators. His experience with the influential Norton at the Negro’s sharecropper’s and Trueblood and the Negro Veterans in a pub has him expelled from college by Dr. Bledsoe. Dr. Bledsoe gives the Invisible man sealed letters of what the Invisible man believes are letters of recommendation to his Northern friends. The Invisible man hopes that the recommendation letters will help him get a good job and a higher status in society. All this time, the Invisible man tries to leave his real identity and adopt another in his quest for a utopian vision of a successful future but a future dependent on others. At each of these moments the Invisible man becomes more and more frustrated and invisible.

Only through the actions of a rebellious pervert, Mr. Emerson’s queer son, does he discover that the letters have done him no good. They were meant to keep “the nigger boy running.” It is only at this time that he finds a job through his own efforts. It is only at such times and other similar moments of realisation that he finds self identity and attracts the interest of others.

In the epilogue to Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man, the problem of identity is said to be a function of place. “If you do not know where you are,” the Invisible man informs Mr. Norton, “You probably do not know who you are.” This statement relates to the Invisible man’s quest for identity.

The North does not offer him the identity he came in quest for. When calamity befalls him, it is only Mary, his Harlem Landlady who recognises him as an individual.

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<sup>72</sup> Ralph Ellison, “change the joke and slip the Yoke,” *Partisan Review* (Spring 1958; 218)

But again the Invisible man joins yet another community in which he is compelled to abandon his identity- the Communist Brotherhood. This Brotherhood forces him to conceal his identity and take on one given to him by the Brotherhood.

Ellison shows that it is only when the Invisible man rebels and breaks the rules of his different communities to be his own man does he emerge as an individual attracting real attention from others.

Gloria Wade-Gayles (1984) has situated the position of the Black American woman in the American economic system of capitalism. She is of the view that this economic system is oppressive and that it has divided people into groups based on their race, sex and class. She sees capitalism as having created three major circles of reality in the American community which reflects degrees of power and powerlessness. She signals out the large and dominant world of the white people and the narrow and oppressed space of the Black American man in which lies a small enclosure of the Black American woman in which she experiences pain, isolation and vulnerability. The Black American man, dehumanised by the White world, vents his frustration on the Black American woman. This position is reflected in the stereotype definition of the Black American woman:

“Sapphire. Mammy. Tragic mulatto wench. Workhorse, can swing an axe, lift a load, pick cotton with any man. A wonderful house keeper. Excellent with children. Very clean. Very religious. A terrific mother. A great little singer and dancer and a devoted teacher and social worker. She’s always had more opportunities than the man because she was no threat to the white man so he made it easy for her. Curiously enough, she frequently ends up on welfare. The black ones are very exotic though, great in bed, tigers. And very fertile. If she is middle-class, she tends to be uptight about sex, prudish. She is unsupportive of black men, domineering, castrating. Very strong. Sorrow rolls right off her brow like rain. Tough, unfeminine. Opposed to women’s rights movements, considers herself already liberated.”<sup>73</sup>

This definition of the Black American woman is taken to be influenced by the patriarchal portrayal of the woman in general. What originally was the Black

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<sup>73</sup> Wade-Gayles 5

American woman's double jeopardy of racism and sexism has amounted to triple jeopardy for the Black American woman in white America where apart from racial and sexual oppression is added class oppression. Wade-Gayles (1984) argues that the capitalist system has sidelined the Black American woman to yet another level of economic oppression in which she is sidelined from the mainstream economic activities because she is a Black American woman. This has made worse the negated position of the Black woman who has been relegated to a permanent domestic caste.<sup>74</sup>

This state has impressed upon the minds of the Black American woman the notion that the Negro's skin and the Black American woman's sex are a prima facie evidence of subjection. She has found herself caught in the "tripartite crossfire of masculine prejudice, white illogical hate and Black American man's lack of power." She has thus been relegated to the position of a "slave of the slave"<sup>75</sup> in such an oppressed state, the black American woman has had to prove that she is a real woman in the stereotype sense and that she will stand by her man regardless.

Elaine Showalter ed. (1989) gives a picture of the way the southern black American woman was portrayed in The United States of America. The picture painted is that of a lesser being than others' image. This image implied different things to the different racial and class groups. To a white man the black American woman was a mammy, "a good looking wench", like Faulkner's Dilsey<sup>76</sup>. The black American woman was no more than a servant, a rival or a "wise indefatigable adviser". While to a black American man the black American woman was mostly seen as "charming, soft spoken, perhaps backward woman" who was a religious fanatic. This portrayal of the woman was laden with racism and sexism which was entrenched in the people's language, their mythologies, images and stories. The Christian religion as it was being presented, for all its purported love and care for

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<sup>74</sup> Wade-Gayles 8

<sup>75</sup> Wade-Gayles 8,9

<sup>76</sup> Faulkner (1954)

humanity, legitimatised societal stereotype image of the woman as a marginalised being.

Showalter Elaine (1989:82) states that Walker's

“... willingness at all turns to challenge the fashionable belief of the day, to re-examine it in the light of her own experiences and of early won principles that she has previously challenged and absorbed. There is a sense in which the “forbidden” in society is consistently approached by Walker as a possible route to the truth.”

As such, it is not surprising to find Walker's character giving up her child and right to the traditional concept of motherhood in pursuit of the “forbidden” outer world. Walker's characters will also be found indulging in lesbianism<sup>77</sup> and practicing abortion<sup>78</sup>. These characters present lesbianism as natural and freeing. Walker presents rebels in her characters who show that by rebelling and opting for the other forbidden route, her characters find truth and freedom; discovering a sense of self worth.

Walker also expands her mother image of her female characters from the restrictive confines of a home to a wider society. In this light the protagonist in Meridian,<sup>79</sup> despite giving up her own child, manages to become a mother to the wider community.

Andrew Hacker (1992) makes a definition of what race is and makes a distinction between what is meant by “black” and “white”. He postulates that white denotes European antecedents, while black stands for Africa. The basic argument is that since the human species began in Africa, the black people are those whose ancestors remained on the continent and stagnated while whites are descendants from those who migrated to cooler and more challenging climates and hence experienced development. This understanding has resulted in the presumption that the human races are at different levels of evolutionary development. As a result of

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<sup>77</sup> Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*, (New York; Washington Square Press, 1982)

<sup>78</sup> Alice Walker, *Meridian*,(New York; Pocket Books, 1986)

<sup>79</sup> Walker (1986)

this assumption, the white race has implied a higher civilisation based on a superior inheritance while the black race has implied a people from a primal continent which has got an inferior species of humanity. This belief that members of the black race represent an inferior strain of the human species, the Africans -and Americans of African origins- are seen as “languishing at a lower evolutionary level than members of other races.”<sup>80</sup> Africa is seen as the most backward, least developed and regarded as barely worth the world’s attention, a region no longer expected to improve in condition or status.

During the slave era, the Black Americans were seen as having ancestors that originated from a primal continent laden with ignorance, disease and sorrow. They were associated with the slave experiences of capture, transportation and eventual servitude of slavery. They were associated with the image of the “savage”. With emancipation, the ideology that had provided the rationale for slavery did not disappear. Blacks continued to be seen as an inferior species not only unsuited for equality but un-meriting even of a chance to show their worth.<sup>81</sup> Most white people still believe that compared with other races, anyone with black traits is more likely to carry primitive traits in their genes. This prejudice is compounded by the belief that such people lack the intellectual and organisational capacities that the modern world needs.

The Nobel Prize winner, William Shockley has claimed to have evidence that showed that black Americans are lower than the whites on the evolutionary scale while Arthur Jensen Professor of psychology at the University of California has stated his position that black American children and consequently members of the entire race are genetically inferior.<sup>82</sup> This contextualises the sentiments of Toni Morrison, a Black American woman author and Nobel Prize winner, that “At no moment in my life have I ever felt as though I were an American.”<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Hacker 27

<sup>81</sup> Hacker 16

<sup>82</sup> Hacker 30, 38

<sup>83</sup> Hacker 39

Lowell Jaeger (1999) has postulated that almost all of Walker's writings focus on issues of civil rights emphasising especially the plight of the black American woman, who suffers the dual oppression of racism and sexism. She endeavours to show a link between racism and sexism. The racially segregated and abused man takes out his frustration on the woman as a result of his powerlessness in the face of racial oppression. This, she postulates, is equally as a result of the characters' mistaken definition of themselves. She further argues that the white man's racism is not the only factor that perpetrates black American violence. She shows that the black American man's trait of not taking responsibility for his actions and always blaming the whites for his own behaviour is part of the black American man's own creation. She argues that the black American man can not just attribute his violence against the woman on racism. This black American man's violence against the black woman has exerted enormous pressure on the black woman. Walker shows this great oppression of the woman at the hands of the black American man. In so doing Walker has also depicted the strengths of the black woman who, in spite of the great odds against her, has managed to survive and blossom.

Lowell Jaeger (1999) further postulates that though Walker presents her male characters as pathetic, weak, stupid and heartlessly cruel, both her male and female characters undergo character reformations. She presents great triumphant outcomes of great suffering and injustice in her female characters while her male characters are shown to suffer the consequences of their evil, becoming isolated, dehumanised and fearful as their injustices towards others inevitably turn back upon them.

Lowell Jaeger (1999) argues that given the context, The Color Purple may be seen as a story of transformation. This is not the kind of change that is pressed on society by political movements, legislation and law enforcement but something more difficult and vital "the transformation of individual hearts away from brutality and meanness and toward strength and self-direction."

In her Library Journal interview<sup>84</sup> Walker has said that to her, family relationships are sacred. Her works reflect this in how they depict the emotional, spiritual and the physical devastation that takes place whenever family trust is betrayed. The Encyclopaedia of World Biography on Alice Malsenior Walker<sup>85</sup> states that the focus of Walker's works is on black women, who grow to reside in a larger world and struggle to achieve independent identities beyond male dominion.

Walker's works do not focus so much on racial violence among strangers but on the violence among friends and family members, a kind of deliberate cruelty, unexpected but always predictable. In The Third Life of Grange Copeland, the violence first of the grandfather Grange on his family and later that of his son, Brownfield, wreck havoc on the close family members especially the women and children till the repentant grandfather Grange comes back and murders his own son to protect his remaining family from the cycle of repeated cruelty. In immediate danger was his granddaughter Ruth Copeland.

Walker's works portray the transformation of individuals as not merely being personal. She projects the fact that social change is linked to personal change and that this struggle for change must be inner as well as outer directed.<sup>86</sup>

Walker's writings also do suggest that it is time for the black man to stop blaming others for his own weakness and be bold enough to take responsibility for his actions. Also inherent in her writings is the call that the black American people should not allow themselves to be oppressed but that they have to work hard to overcome the bondage of oppression.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> <http://www.bookrags.com/biography/alice-malsenior-walker>

<sup>85</sup> <http://www.bookrags.com/biography/alice-malsenior-walker>

<sup>86</sup> Showalter 84

<sup>87</sup> Alice Walker, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, (New York; Pocket Books, 1988)

Debra A. Bailey<sup>88</sup> has observed that the publication of the novel The Color Purple unleashed a storm of controversy. It triggered off a heated debate about black American cultural representation. A number of male black American critics complained that the novel reaffirmed old racist stereotypes about pathology in the black American communities and of the black American man in particular. Critics also charged Walker with focusing heavily on sexism at the expense of addressing notions of racism in America. Nonetheless, The Color Purple also had its ardent supporters, especially among the black American women who praised the novel as a feminist fable. The heated disputes surrounding the novel are a testimony to the resounding effects the work has had on the cultural and racial discourse in the United States of America. Alice Walker's The Color Purple weaves an intricate mosaic of women joined by their love for each other, the men who abuse them and the children they care for.

Debra A. Bailey notes that though Alice Walker has worked in a variety of genres, including children's literature, poetry, non-fiction, and screenwriting, she is best known for her novels, which give voice to the concerns of an often doubly oppressed group: the black American woman. She is best known for her Pulitzer Prize-winning novel The Color Purple, which extends and solidifies many of the themes she first touched upon in her early work, which includes Meridian.

Meridian focuses on women's lives and examines how the past and the present interconnect and construct the future. Meridian, Walker's second work of long fiction, is set against the turbulent backdrop of the civil rights movement, which gained force in the 1960s, triggering sit-ins, demonstrations, and protests against the racist and segregationist policies that controlled and shaped the lives of black Americans in the South.

A tireless crusader on behalf of women, Walker in her later career defended her work against censorship and continued to speak out against the horrors of

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<sup>88</sup> Bailey, Debra A. *SparkNotes on The Color Purple*.  
<http://www.sparknotes.com/WileyCDA/LitNote/id-118.html>

domestic violence, sexual abuse, and genital mutilation, a ritualistic practice employed by several indigenous African cultures. Not precisely aligned with broad feminist concerns, Walker has often labelled herself a “womanist,” establishing her primary goal as a writer and individual to free women from oppression in all of its forms. Walker is also a student of history, and she strives to create a dialogue in her work between the past and the present in an attempt to elucidate eternal truths as well as eternal struggles and hardships. Like Meridian’s father, Walker has an abiding love of and respect for Native Americans and sees their plight as instructive and an important correlative to the black experience in the United States throughout the centuries.

Walker’s various aesthetic and social concerns are harmoniously combined in Meridian, an exploration of a young woman’s coming of age and her journey from loneliness, guilt, and self-doubt, to self-acceptance, empowerment, and love. Meridian is set on a path to greater self-realisation and endures the hardships of firmly established community stereotypes and irrevocably establishing her identity amid the chaos of social upheaval, sexual alienation, and people who are not always approving or supportive of either the woman or her cause.<sup>89</sup>

Catherine Lavender<sup>90</sup> observes that The Color Purple is an example of a “woman’s novel.” Not that it is written by a woman, but that it carries on an identified tradition of women’s writing in terms of narrative strategies, themes addressed, and voice. This, she argues, is not to say that all women write about the same things, but that there is a tradition known as women’s literature, which has developed with a consciousness of women’s traditions of writing as distinct from men’s ways of writing.

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<sup>89</sup>Bailey, Debra A. *SparkNotes on The Color Purple*.  
<http://www.sparknotes.com/WileyCDA/LitNote/id-118.html>

<sup>90</sup>Encyclopaedia of World Biography on Alice Malsenior Walker;  
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alice.Walker>

Black American theorist and writer Bell Hooks (in Gloria Watkins) has argued in an essay, "Writing the subject: Reading *The Color Purple*"<sup>91</sup> that The Color Purple is a parody of the tradition of the "Slave Narrative;" stories written by male and female former slaves about their experiences under slavery. She notes that some slave narratives were collected among ex slaves in the 1930's and further argues that slave narratives connect the plight of the individual slave to that of other slaves as a plea and a demand for political and social change.

Hooks also says that the essential part of a slave narrative is that it tells as truthfully a story as is possible and suggests that Walker employs some fictions to make her own point in The Color Purple. She also argues that slave narratives emphasizes racial oppression while Walker is more concerned with sexual oppression.

Hooks makes yet another argument that slave narratives use the fact of their authors' literacy to prove the narrators' worth as intellectual and human souls. Additionally, Hooks raises questions. She asks why Celie writes and inquires if there are any other ways in which she can tell her story than writing. Hooks asks what the effects of Celie's telling her story are as opposed to writing it.

Hooks summarises the gist of the writings of Alice Walker. She says that Walker's works typically focus on the struggles of African Americans, particularly women, and their struggles against a racist, sexist and violent society. She says that Walker's writings also focus on the role of women of color in culture and history.

As already pointed out, Walker's works have been mostly criticised for their portrayal of the black American man who, particularly in The Color Purple, has been depicted as either mean and abusive like Fonso and Albert/Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ or as buffoons like Harpo.

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<sup>91</sup>Henry Louis Gates, Jr., ed., *Reading Black, Reading Feminist*, (1990)  
(<http://www.library.csi.cuny.edu/dept/history/lavender/walker.html>) and  
(<http://sunsite.unc.edu/docsouth/narratives.html> )

### 3. CHAPTER THREE: Synopses

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#### 3.1 *Meridian*

##### 3.1.1 Key Facts<sup>92</sup>

<b>Full book title</b>	<u>Meridian</u>
<b>Author</b>	Alice Walker
<b>Type of work</b>	Novel
<b>Language</b>	English
<b>Time and place written</b>	Mid-1970s
<b>Date of first publication</b>	1976
<b>Publisher</b>	Harcourt Brace Jovanovich
<b>Narrator</b>	The narrator is anonymous, describing the action in a simple, declarative manner.
<b>Point of view</b>	Third person
<b>Tone</b>	The tone of the work is detached, offering distant yet impassioned glimpses of characters' lives, presenting Meridian and her friends with dignity and sympathy.
<b>Tense</b>	Past
<b>Setting (time)</b>	1950s through 1976
<b>Setting (place)</b>	Various locations in Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi; Chicokema, Atlanta's Saxon College; various small communities; New York City
<b>Protagonist</b>	Meridian Hill
<b>Major conflict</b>	Against the backdrop of the civil rights movement, Meridian struggles to define herself and resolve her ambiguous relationship with her mother.

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<sup>92</sup> Reference also made to *Sparknotes* and *CliffsNotes Higgins, Charles, and Regina Higgins*.  
<http://www.cliffsnotes.com/WileyCDA/LitNote>

<b>Rising action</b>	Meridian searches for self-acceptance and self-knowledge while finding a role for herself in college life and then in the civil rights movement.
<b>Climax</b>	Meridian rebuilds her life and restores her faith in social progress through activism and voter registration in small communities in Alabama and Georgia.
<b>Falling action</b>	In good health, Meridian embraces an unknown future with confidence.
<b>Themes</b>	The difficulty of idealism; the interconnection of past and present
<b>Symbols</b>	The Wild Child; the tank; the Sojourner; the Sacred Serpent Mound

### 3.1.2 List of Characters

**Meridian Hill:** A young civil rights worker and the protagonist of the novel.

**Truman Held:** Truman Held is Meridian's former lover and an active participant in the civil rights movement.

**Lynne Rabinowitz:** Lynne Rabinowitz is a white Jew from the North, and Truman's eventual wife.

**Anne-Marion Coles:** Anne-Marion Coles is Meridian's friend at Saxon College and a radical member of the civil rights movement.

**Gertrude Hill:** Gertrude Hill is Meridian's mother. A former teacher, Gertrude is deeply religious and has a rigid and unyielding sense of morality and propriety.

**Meridian's Father:** Meridian's father whose name is not given is a former history teacher and farmer.

**Tommy Odds:** Tommy Odds is a friend of Truman's who works on voter-registration drives in Mississippi.

**Eddie:** Eddie is Meridian's husband and the father of her son.

**The Wild Child:** The Wild Child is a pregnant orphan who lives in the slums surrounding Saxon College.

**Louvinie:** Louvinie is a West-African slave girl on the Saxon plantation. Children are drawn to her and her ability to tell frightening tales of the supernatural.

**Miss Winters:** Miss Winters is a music professor at Saxon College.

**Mr. Reynolds:** Mr. Reynolds is a professor at Saxon College and Meridian's employer who offers Meridian money and food in exchange for sexual favours.

### 3.1.3 Plot Overview

Truman Held arrives in Chicokema, Georgia, to meet Meridian Hill who is his former lover. He first sees her staring down a manned tank as she leads local schoolchildren to a sideshow attraction displaying a mummified woman, on a day not allowed to the poor and black children. After collapsing and being brought home unconscious, she and Truman meet and talk. In a flashback, to New York City ten years ago, Meridian is unwilling to assert that she will kill for the black revolutionary organization, to the dismay of the others assembled.

Further back in time, the thirteen years old Meridian does not accept Jesus into her life. This causes her mother to withdraw her love from Meridian

Meridian, back in the present, goes back to her roots as a former civil rights worker, and commits herself to live and work amongst the people. Truman does not understand Meridian's fainting spells and paralysis that grip her but admits that he cannot let her go.

Meridian meets Anne-Marion when she goes to Saxon College. While campaigning in the local neighbourhood for voters, Meridian meets a pregnant and homeless teenager called the Wild Child. Meridian takes the girl into her custody bathes and feeds her. The Wild Child, however, escapes into the street, is hit by a car, and dies. Meridian, Anne-Marion, and other students and neighbourhood residents carry the Wild Child's casket onto the campus grounds. The president of the college does not allow them to use the collage chapel for the funeral service. In the night students riot and chop down the Sojourner, the school's iconic magnolia tree.

Still back in time, Meridian's father returns sixty acres of his farmland to the Cherokee, Walter Longknife, who once owned it. Walter Longknife camps on the land for a brief period of time and then gives it back to Meridian's father. The area is then made into a historical site in which blacks are not allowed to enter.

As a teenager, Meridian becomes pregnant, marries, and drops out of school to have the baby, who disrupts her lifestyle. As her marriage to Eddie is breaking up, Meridian notices the presence of white civil rights workers in the black neighbourhood. Later, the house in which they are staying is bombed. The incident prompts Meridian to join the movement. At the headquarters, she meets Truman. The two are soon demonstrating together and get beaten, arrested, and jailed together with other activists. Meridian's mother does not approve of Meridian's involvement into political activities. Meridian is offered a scholarship to Saxon College.

Meridian gives up her child, Eddie Jr. and starts school. She is weighed down with guilt for failing her mother and giving up her child.

Meridian makes effort to adjust to college life. After the death of the Wild Child, Meridian moves off campus and actively participates in the civil rights protests and demonstrations. She falls in love with Truman and they start dating. Their relationship is affected by the arrival of white female college students from the North who volunteer to assist the movement. Truman is attracted to one of the volunteers, Lynne, and starts a romantic relationship with her. Even though Truman and Meridian momentarily resume sexual relations, Truman continues his relationship with Lynne. Meridian is impregnated by Truman and has an abortion. She then has her tubes tied. After Lynne leaves, Truman tries to renew his relationship with Meridian, asking her to have his children but Meridian turns him down.

As graduation is approaching, Meridian again falls ill, losing her sight and becomes unconscious. She is bedridden for a month. She is taken care of by one of Saxon's

few black instructors Miss Winters. Anne-Marion, Meridian's friend, decides that she is unable to love Meridian and walks out on her.

Truman and Lynne are married and live in Mississippi. Lynne's whiteness becomes a danger to both of them and the movement especially when a fellow rights worker, Tommy Odds, is shot and loses the lower half of one of his arms. As a result Lynne is excluded from the marches and meetings. Truman grows more and more distant from his wife even when they have a daughter, Camara. He visits Meridian in Alabama. He tries to win back her love, but Meridian rejects his advances.

Truman visits Meridian regularly and after the death of Camara, Lynne visits Meridian in search of Truman. Due to illness Meridian has lost most of her hair.

Back in time to Lynne's younger years, she leaves her family behind, marries Truman and joins the movement. After the shooting, Tommy Odds rapes her and returns later with three friends and encourages them to do the same, but his friends refuse. Lynne decides to leave and tells Truman what has happened. Truman does not believe her.

Tommy is of the view that Lynne is with Truman simply to atone for her sins, out of guilt for the racism blacks have suffered for centuries. He shares this view with Truman. The relationship between Lynne and Truman grows increasingly distant. Lynne eventually capitulates to the sexual advances of Truman's friends and other men in the community. With time, the men grow tired of her. The now pregnant Meridian relocates to New York where she starts to live on welfare. Truman also moves to New York, where he practices artist. In New York Lynne visits Truman's apartment to inform him that their child, Camara, has been attacked and been hospitalized. At the apartment she finds that Truman is living with a young white woman. Truman sends for Meridian when Camara dies. Meridian arrives and comforts both Truman and Lynne. Lynne has recollections of southern Jews and how they treated her. She does not regret leaving behind her past and its association with the white oppressors.

The final part of the novel opens with the Atlanta funeral procession of Martin Luther King, Jr. Meridian still struggles with questions of radicalism and how the movement finally turned out eight years later. Truman does not bother about such issues like Meridian. Meridian is in her town, urging the blacks to vote and try to change their lives. She remembers the time she frequently attended church services. She remembers an old man whose son had been killed while working for the movement address the worshippers. The man does not say much but his symbolic presence and the churches role in keeping the memory of the slain hero alive helps Meridian regain her wavering desire to kill on behalf of the rights of blacks.

She and Truman go on with their voter-registration crusade in earnest.

Truman lets Lynne know that he loves her as a friend and will support her.

Truman once again asks for Meridian's love. Meridian rejects his proposal and tells him that her feelings have changed. Cured of her illness, Meridian moves on, leaving Truman behind to continue the work that she started in Chicokema. Truman collapses while reading the poems Meridian has posted on the wall. When he awakens, Truman decides to continue the internal struggle that Meridian has managed to free herself from.

## **3.2 *The Color Purple***

### **3.2.1 Key Facts**

<b>Full book title</b>	<u>The Color Purple</u> <sup>93</sup>
<b>Author</b>	Alice Walker
<b>Type of novel</b>	Historical fiction
<b>Genre</b>	Epistolary novel, confessional novel
<b>Language written</b>	English

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<sup>93</sup> The spelling has been retained as spelt in its American spelling as used in the book publication and has been used like that in the whole work.

<b>Time and place written</b>	1982, California
<b>Date of publication</b>	1982
<b>Publisher</b>	Simon & Schuster Inc.
<b>Narrator</b>	Celie (and Nettie at times)
<b>Point of view</b>	Celie speaks in the first person through a series of private letters she writes to God and, later, to Nettie. The letters from Nettie are also read through Celie's eyes.
<b>Tone</b>	The tone is very confessional and uninhibited, as Celie's letters to God are private, much like journal entries.
<b>Tense</b>	Present
<b>Setting (time)</b>	1910–1940. Though <u>The Color Purple</u> is a historical novel, it never refers to any factual events. There are no dates, little sense of the passage of time, and very few mentions of characters' ages.
<b>Setting (place)</b>	Rural Georgia
<b>Protagonist</b>	Celie
<b>Major conflict</b>	Celie is verbally, physically, and sexually abused by several different men, leaving her with little sense of self-worth, no narrative voice, and no one to run to.
<b>Rising action</b>	Shug Avery teaches Celie about her body, God, sexuality, and love, and helps Celie locate Nettie's lost letters. These actions enable Celie to find her voice and sense of self.
<b>Climax</b>	Bolstered by the self-confidence she has gained through her relationship with Shug Avery, Celie suddenly lashes back at Mr. _____ in an angry verbal tirade. She then moves to Tennessee with Shug Avery and opens her own clothing store.
<b>Falling action</b>	Celie returns to Georgia as a successful entrepreneur and finds that Mr. _____ has undergone a personal

transformation of his own. After Alphonso's death, she inherits her family's home and welcomes the returning Nettie, Samuel, Olivia, and Adam into the house.

### **Themes**

The power of narrative and voice; the power of strong female relationships; the cyclical nature of racism and sexism; the disruption of traditional gender roles

### **3.2.2 List of Characters**

**Celie:** A young black Georgia girl who faces adulthood believing that she has been raped by her father and that he killed both of their babies.

**Nettie:** Celie's sister.

**Fonso/Alphonsoo:** Celie and Nettie's stepfather.

**Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ / Albert:** The moody, vicious man whom Fonso chooses as Celie's husband.

**Celie's Mother:** She loses her mind after her husband is lynched, mutilated, and burned. After she marries Fonso, she is constantly pregnant and ill.

**Annie Julia:** Albert's wife who is killed by her boyfriend while coming home from church.

**Shug Avery (Lillie):** A blues singing, no-nonsense woman who teaches Celie about love and self-esteem.

**Harpo:** Albert's misguided, immature son and Sofia's husband.

**Kate and Carrie:** Albert's sisters.

**Sofia:** Wife of Harpo.

**Bub:** Albert's son.

**Albert's Daddy:** A carping, prejudiced man; he dislikes Albert's relationship with Shug Avery.

**Tobias:** Albert's toadying brother; he is fascinated by Shug Avery.

**Odessa:** Sofia's sister; she, Shug Avery, and Mary Agnes, alias Squeak, are able to get Sofia out of prison.

**Jack:** Odessa's husband.

**Swain:** Harpo's musician friend who helps Harpo build the juke joint.

**Henry ("Buster") Broadax:** Sofia's boyfriend; built like a prize-fighter.

**Mary Agnes (Squeak):** Harpo's girlfriend;

**The Mayor:** An arrogant, power-wielding white man; he is responsible for putting Sofia in prison.

**Miss Millie:** The mayor's wife

**Bubber Hodges:** The prison warden; Mary Agnes' (Squeak) uncle who rapes her.

**Miss Beasley:** Nettie and Celie's teacher.

**Corrine:** Reverend Samuel's wife. She and her husband buy Celie's babies from Fonso.

**Samuel:** A missionary who takes Nettie with him and his family to Africa; after his wife, Corrine, dies, he marries Nettie.

**Olivia:** Celie's daughter

**Adam:** Celie's son. He marries Tashi.

**Joseph:** Spokesman for the Olinka village.

**Billy:** Miss Millie's little boy.

**Eleanor Jane:** Miss Millie's daughter who does odd jobs for Sofia.

**Grady:** Shug Avery marries him.

**May Ellen:** The woman Fonso marries after Celie's mother dies.

**Daisy:** The woman Fonso marries after May Ellen leaves him.

**Tashi:** An Olinka woman whom Adam falls in love with.

**Jimmy Hodges:** Bubber's brother; Squeak's father.

**Jolentha (Suzie):** Mary Agnes (Squeak) and Harpo's little girl.

**Henrietta:** Sofia's youngest child

**Jerene and Darlene:** Two women who sew for Celie's Folkspants, Unlimited.

**Doris Baines ("Jared Hunt"):** An elderly white missionary, whom Nettie and Samuel meet on their sojourn to England. She is accompanied by her "grandchild," Harold, a small black child.

**Germaine:** Shug Avery's nineteen-year-old last-fling lover.

**Stanley Earl:** Eleanor Jane's husband.

**James:** Shug's son; a schoolteacher who lives on an Indian reservation; he is married to Cora Mae, and they have two children, Davis and Cantrell.

### 3.2.3 Plot Overview

Celie, the protagonist and narrator of The Color Purple, is a poor, uneducated, fourteen-year-old black girl living in rural Georgia. Celie writes letters to God because her father, Alphonso, beats and rapes her and has told her to confide only in God. Alphonso has impregnated Celie twice; the first time with a girl and the second time with a boy. Both babies are stolen by Alphonso and given away. Celie believes that Alphonso has killed her children. Celie's mother becomes very ill and dies. Alphonso marries a new wife but continues to rape Celie.

Celie and her younger sister, Nettie, learn that a man called Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ wants to marry Nettie. Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ has a lover called Shug Avery. Shug Avery is a singer whose photograph captivates Celie. Alphonso refuses to let Nettie marry Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, and instead offers Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ Celie as wife. Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ in time accepts the offer, after an additional offer of a calf is made. Nettie runs away from Alphonso and takes shelter at Celie's house. Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ is still interested in Nettie, and he makes his move on her. Nettie runs away. Because Celie does not hear from Nettie, she believes that Nettie is dead.

Mr. \_\_\_\_\_'s sister, Kate, on a visit to her brother's home urges Celie to fight back against Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ rather than surrender to his abuses. Harpo, Mr. \_\_\_\_\_'s son, falls in love with Sofia. Shug Avery comes to town to sing at a local bar, but Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ does not allow Celie to see her. Sofia, pregnant gets married to Harpo. Celie is surprised by Sofia's boldness in the face of Harpo's and Mr. \_\_\_\_\_'s attempts to treat Sofia as an inferior. Harpo's attempts to beat Sofia into submission consistently fail, as Sofia is the physically stronger of the two.

When Shug Avery falls ill and Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ takes her into his house. Shug Avery is at first impolite to Celie, but the two women become friends as Celie takes charge of nurturing Shug Avery back to health. Celie becomes sexually attracted to Shug Avery. Sofia becomes frustrated with Harpo's consistent attempts to subordinate her and moves out of their home, taking the children with her. Months later, Harpo



opens a juke joint where Shug Avery sings every night. Celie's feelings towards Shug Avery grow.

Shug Avery opts to stay when she learns that Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ beats Celie when she is away. Shug Avery and Celie's relationship grows intimate, and Shug Avery asks Celie questions about sex. Sofia returns for a visit and gets in a fight with Harpo's new girlfriend, Mary Agnes.

One day, in town, the mayor's wife, Miss Millie, asks Sofia to work as her maid. Sofia answers with a mischievous "Hell no." The mayor slaps Sofia for her insubordination, but Sofia returns the blow, knocking the mayor down. Sofia is sent to jail. The women and Mary Agnes manage to get Sofia's prison sentence changed to work for twelve years as the mayor's maid.

Shug Avery returns with Grady as her new husband. Although she is married to Grady, Shug Avery starts a sexual relationship with Celie, and the two sleep in the same bed. One night Shug Avery enquires from Celie about her sister. Celie believes that Nettie is dead because she had promised to write to her but never did. Shug Avery reveals that she has seen Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ hide away many letters that have come in the mail. Shug Avery manages to get one of the letters and they find that it is from Nettie. Celie and Shug Avery find many more letters in Mr. \_\_\_\_\_'s trunk that Nettie has written and sent to Celie over the years. Celie is angry and reading the letters she has to struggle to keep herself from killing Mr. \_\_\_\_\_.

Celie learns from the letters that Nettie made friends with a missionary couple, Samuel and Corrine, and travelled with them to Africa to do ministry work. Samuel and Corrine have two adopted children, Olivia and Adam. Nettie and Corrine become close friends, but Corrine, noticing that her adopted children resemble Nettie, speculates if Nettie and Samuel had a relationship. Suspicious, Corrine tries to limit Nettie's role within her family.

Nettie becomes disillusioned with her missionary experience, as she finds the Africans egotistical and obstinate. Corrine becomes ill with a fever. Nettie discovers, from Samuel's narrative that the two adopted children are actually Celie's biological children. Nettie also learns that Alphonso is really only Nettie and Celie's step-father, not their biological father. Their biological father was a storeowner whom white men lynched because they resented his success.

Nettie admits to Samuel and Corrine that she is their children's biological aunt. The ill Corrine at first refuses to believe Nettie but she accepts Nettie's story as she dies. In the meantime, Celie visits Alphonso, who confirms Nettie's story. He admits that he is the women's stepfather. Celie begins to lose faith in God, but Shug Avery helps her to re-imagine God in her own way, rather than in the traditional image of the old, bearded white man.

Sofia is released from her servitude by the mayor six months early. At dinner one night, Celie angrily confronts Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ for his years of abuse. Shug Avery reveals that she and Celie are going to Tennessee. Mary Agnes chooses to go with them. In Tennessee, Celie designs and sews pants, turning her hobby into a business. Celie returns to Georgia for a visit, and finds that Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ has changed his ways and that Alphonso is died. Alphonso's house and land are now hers, so she moves there.

Nettie and Samuel marry. Adam marries Tashi, a native African girl whom he falls in love with. Tashi goes through female circumcision and facial scarring. Adam also goes through the facial scarring ritual in solidarity with Tashi. The whole family returns to America together with Tashi. Emotionally drained but joyful by the reunion with her sister, Celie notes that though she and Nettie are now old, she has never in her life felt younger.

Celie and Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ reconcile. The financially, spiritually, and emotionally independent Celie is no longer bothered by Shug Avery's passing flings with men. Sofia remarries Harpo and now works in Celie's clothing store.

## 4. CHAPTER FOUR: **Setting of Texts**

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### 4.1. **MERIDIAN**

#### 4.1.1 **General Setting**

The novel is set in a racist and sexist environment. It is set against the turbulent backdrop of the civil rights movement which gained force in the 1960's. It reflects the times of the Civil Rights movement in America; especially the time in which black Americans were being sensitised to participate in the nation's voting process. The sensitisation triggered sit-ins, demonstrations and protests against the racist and segregationist policies that controlled and shaped the lives of black Americans in the South.

The text also reflects the entrapments of the woman in a society which is patriarchal in nature. The woman is trapped in a society that is programmed to serve the interest of the man. She is presented as a mindless body, a sex creature, something to hang false hair and nails on. The society expects the woman to be subordinate to the man and to concentrate on the roles of the woman: sister, obedient daughter, submissive wife and adoring mother. At best the society sees the woman as man's slave and at worst as man's sexual object. Sex and motherhood are presented as entrapments of the woman and like Meme,<sup>94</sup> pregnancy spells doom. For a woman to attain full liberty and a sense of the self she has got to rebel against these traditional patriarchal notions of sex and roles of motherhood.

#### 4.1.2 **Setting in terms of Time and Place**

Meridian is set in time between 1960 and around 1970. It covers the period of the presidency of J. F Kennedy,<sup>95</sup> the assassination of Martin Luther King. It also covers the time of President Nixon<sup>96</sup> who was President of the United States of America from 1969 to 1974.

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<sup>94</sup> Alice Walker, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (New York Pocket Books, 1988)

<sup>95</sup> Alice Walker, *Meridian* (New York; Pocket Books, 1986) 33

<sup>96</sup> Alice Walker (1986) 195

### 4.1.3 Social Stratification

The novel Meridian reflects many aspects of the characters' social relations in their environment. Most outstanding of these are those that deal with the rich and the powerful and those that deal with race relations. The woman is presented as a victim of both vices. The woman is portrayed to be at the bottom of the social ladder. First on this social ladder is the white man. Below the white man is the white woman. The black man is below the white woman and at the bottom of the black man is the black woman.<sup>97</sup>

The child, especially the black child has no say in this community. The children can be aborted, killed or raped at will. The community in the text does little to protect the child apart from what Meridian does; present the Mayor with the decomposing corpse of a child who has drowned in an overflow from the water systems that only benefits the white population.

The white community in Meridian is shown to enjoy all the privileges of life in the face of acute poverty among the black people whom they are determined to keep under oppression.

The black children are chased about by grown white men brandishing axe handles. Old black women are dragged out of stores and beaten on the sidewalk, their humility of a lifetime doing them no good in their challenging racist environment.

On television, black people are never shown unless they have shot their mothers or raped their bosses' grandparent. If at all they are featured in news, especially during the civil rights movement, the news caster, who would look astonished, would hold a handkerchief over the mike when he presents it to the black person but removes it when he talks into it himself.

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<sup>97</sup> Gloria Wade-Gayles

Saxon college is also expected to produce ladies who would subscribe to the patriarchal image of a lady. Meridian and Anne-Marion are seen as rebels because they do not conform to the dictates of their community;

“Like Meridian, Anne-Marion was a deviant in the honors house: there because of her brilliance but only tolerated because it was clear she was one, too, on whom true Ladyhood would never be conferred. Most of the students - timid, imitative, bright enough but never daring, were being ushered nearer to Ladyhood every day. It was for this that their parents had sent them to Saxon College. They learned to make French food, English tea and German music without once having the urge to slip off the heavily guarded campus at five in the morning to photograph a strange tree as the light hit it just the right way - as Meridian had - or to risk being raped in a rough neighbourhood as they attempt to discover the economic causes of inner-city crime, as had Anne-Marion.”<sup>98</sup>

The regular saying at Saxon is that one can do anything there as long as one wore spotless white gloves. The implication of this is that because the gloves must remain clean and white, there is very little else that the girls can do. Meridian and the other students feel that they have two enemies at Saxon; the institution of Saxon itself which wants them to become something – ladies - that is already obsolete, and the larger, more deadly enemy, white racist society. In this context, Meridian, the former wife and mother, feels her waking moments to seem fragmented, surreal.

Ideology plays an important part in Meridian. Capitalism is credited for the achievements among the people of the white community. The members of the black community are obsessed by the ideology of Christianity which seems to oppress them even further. The members of the civil rights movement are using the socialist ideology to pursue their voter campaign. But Anne-Marion is able to look beyond the blanket of ideology. She is bold enough to declare that she is willing to put ideology aside in order to have a feel of life. “Fuck Democracy, Anne-Marion would say, biting into a cookie. Fuck the Free World. Let the Republicans

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<sup>98</sup> Alice Walker (1986) 39

and the Democrats<sup>99</sup> - as – we – know - them fuck each other’s grandmothers.”<sup>100</sup> Like Lynne does with Mrs. Turner, Meridian attacks the folly of ideology which does not meet the practical needs of the people.

Of all the civic and religious leaders, it is only on the rebellious Meridian’s head that Anne-Marion sees a halo<sup>101</sup> “as if her head, the spike of her natural, had learned to glow.” Instantly, Anne-Marion realises that they had a wrong upbringing and she bases her case on their religious ideology. Anne-Marion realises that religion has been one of the many socially constructed institutions that has oppressed the woman and that the woman will find her holiness and freedom in rebellion like Meridian.

#### **4.1.4 The Economic and Inter Gender Relations**

The economic power in Meridian resides with the white community. The black community is left to wallow in poverty on the periphery of society. The governance system is run by the whites. This is the reason there is a civil rights campaign to get the black people involved in the political process of the society.

A military tank is stationed in the community of Chicokema. It has been in the community since the sixties when the townspeople, who were white, felt under attack from “outside agitators”- those members of the black community who thought that equal rights for all should be extended to blacks. This is the tank that Meridian faces as she leads a protest against the racist division of days to view the fake mummy woman, Marilene O’Shay.

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<sup>99</sup> Republicans and Democrats are two ideological political parties in the United States of America. The Republicans are pure Capitalists while Democrats have policies influenced partly by socialist concerns.

<sup>100</sup> Alice Walker (1986) 118

<sup>101</sup> A halo is a circle of light around a saint’s head; a ring or circle of light around the head of a saint like in a religious painting

The inscription on the circus wagon categorises the prevailing concepts of a woman; an obedient daughter, a devoted wife and an adoring mother.<sup>102</sup> These concepts of obedient daughter, devoted wife and adoring mother help to keep the woman subservient. Any deviation from this image is seen as wrong and rebellious. This is the case of the story of the mummy woman in the circus wagon. She is presented by the supposed husband as seeking pleasure elsewhere while her husband provides her with the comforts of life. The image of the woman being presented is that of a “‘goddess,’ who has been given ‘everything’ that is, ‘a washing machine, furs, her own car and a full time housekeeper cook.’ Her only duty was to ‘lay back and be pleased.’”<sup>103</sup> Her husband kills this woman because she has dared to go outside the home to seek her pleasures while expecting her husband to foot her bills.<sup>104</sup> The man is easily forgiven while he cashes in from displaying the supposed body of his wife together with the crime she is alleged to have committed. This is the patriarchal established arrangement with its entrapments that the woman would have to fight against in order to have her freedom and have a sense of the self.

Meridian is not cut out for domestic chores as the members of the patriarchal world would expect. She is frigid in bed and simply endures her sexual experiences. Making love to her is like an assault. Eddie complains; “And tonight, please, open your legs all the way.”<sup>105</sup> Meridian has to ask to find out what he means and Eddie explains; “I have to fight to get your legs open; ... They’re like somebody starched them shut.”<sup>106</sup> Eddie complains further; “You just don’t care about it anymore,”<sup>107</sup> he moans, burying his head in the pillow next to hers. Sex is clearly very important for Eddie. For Meridian, she does not see how he can feel she was less interested in sex for she feels that she has never shown anything approaching interest. She can not even imagine why any woman should have interest in sex. Yes, she loves the

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<sup>102</sup> Alice Walker (1986) 19

<sup>103</sup> Deborah E. McDowell in *The Self in Bloom: Walker’s Meridian* in *Alice Walker Critical Perspectives Past and Present* by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and K. A. Appiah (eds) (1993)

<sup>104</sup> Alice Walker (1986) 20

<sup>105</sup> Alice Walker (1986) 64

<sup>106</sup> Alice Walker (1986) 64

<sup>107</sup> Alice Walker (1986) 64

warmth, the lying together and the peace. She endures the sex because it gives her these things. She would have been just as happy, even happier, without it.<sup>108</sup> But Eddie is said to be good to her because he does not cheat on her or beat her.

Meridian recalls her experiences with George Dexter, the owner of Dexter funeral home. Dexter would entice her into his office with candy for a “swift, exploratory feel.”<sup>109</sup> Meridian never enjoyed these sessions. The only part she liked was when he sucked her nipples.

In the absence of Dexter, his assistant took over the show. In an effort to convince her of his serious intentions to have sex with her, he organises for an episode of sex with another girl of about sixteen for Meridian to watch. For as much as Meridian’s body wanted to have sex, she never had any intention of giving in to sex. She was suspicious of pleasure. “She approached it, gazed upon it with longing, but retreat was inevitable.”<sup>110</sup>

The magazines Meridian reads never help: they only convince her that a woman’s body is a mindless body, a sex creature, something to hang false hair and nails on.<sup>111</sup> The magazines help her know for sure that her marriage is breaking up.

After the child has grown a bit and Eddie deserts Meridian in pursuit for sex, Meridian would take the child to spend the day with his uncle, his father’s baby brother who was only three years old. Meridian takes the moments alone to meditate on her condition, unconscious, at first, of what she did. She realises that she is still only seventeen years old and yet she is already a drop-out from high school, a deserted wife, a mother and a daughter in-law.

Meridian unconsciously resents the institutions that have held her down; wifehood, motherhood and the institute of being a daughter in-law. She is suspicious of

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<sup>108</sup> Alice Walker (1986) 64, 65

<sup>109</sup> Alice Walker (1986) 66

<sup>110</sup> Alice Walker (1986) 67

<sup>111</sup> Alice Walker (1986) 71

pleasure and sex because she sees these things as entrapments that lead to a woman's bondage. As a wife, a woman is overwhelmed by her husband whose demands are endless; from being a sex tool to being a servant. As a mother, the woman is trapped by the duties of motherhood, especially child minding. To Meridian, motherhood was like being restricted in "ball and chain."<sup>112</sup> As a daughter in-law, the woman has got to strive to subscribe to the patriarchal social expectations of a good daughter in-law and win the approval of her in-laws.

The men co-modify<sup>113</sup> women and in this case even in death. Marilene O'shay's husband, Henry, is cashing in on the display of the supposed corpse of Marilene O'Shay. Meridian is enticed into sexual grappling at the embalmers by gifts of chocolate. Later Meridian gives in to the sexual grappling from her professor, Mr. Reynolds, in exchange for some food and money to buy school requisites. These acts that compel women to give up their selfhood in exchange for gifts slowly begin to have an effect on Meridian who becomes determined to break free from these chains of oppression.

Back in time, Mrs. Hill's mother (the mother of Meridian's Mother) is married to a man who has many admirable qualities but has no desire to raise children - though he enjoys sex with any willing, good-looking woman who comes his way. He also beats his wife and children with more pleasure than he beats his mules.<sup>114</sup> This pictures the relationship between men and women in an unbalanced state. The man does not want children but enjoys his sex very much. The man not only enjoys sex with his wife but with any willing good-looking woman who comes his way. The man is also pictured as a monster that beats his wife at will. He is portrayed as enjoying beating his wife more than he enjoys beating his mules.

The result of this unbalanced relationship between men and women is that Meridian's mother grows up scurrying out of her father's way. Later, when she is in

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<sup>112</sup> Alice Walker (1986) 69

<sup>113</sup> This is a concept in the Marxist ideology that interprets certain treatment of women as treating women as goods for sell.

<sup>114</sup> Alice Walker (1986) 123

her teens, she learns to be scurrying out of the way of white men. It is pointed out that this was especially necessary because she was good-looking, defenceless and black. This marks a continuation of a life dominated by the dominant male who treats his wife as an appendage to his property. This fear of the husband is translated into a fear for all the men.

Meridian's grandmother and later her mother grow up in environments in which they are not allowed any choices. This is a different environment from the one in which Meridian grows up. Meridian has the freedom to make choices. She can decide to leave her child and go to College or indeed decide to join the civil rights movement. These are the choices that her two elderly women did not have. As a slave, her great-grandmother had to plead to be with her children. The ability to make a choice and act on that choice also reflects the levels of freedom; the freedom to be free to do what one wants to do or what one wants to be, the freedom for self expression both in word and deed. This reflects the passage of time and the fact that the community has undergone change with time.

#### **4.1.5 Sexual Relations**

Sexual relations in Meridian are presented as vile. Meridian originates from a background of physical abuse which forces her to partner with stronger male partners she does not love in order to escape from harassment and other male pursuits.<sup>115</sup> Her marriage to Eddie is an accident as her mother never tells her the truth about sexuality. She endures the marriage which ends in divorce. She eventually has to succumb to sexual abuse from a man who promises her financial support. When she finally falls in love with Truman; she discovers that Truman is false, that Truman is a senseless womaniser. His interest is only conquest and dominance. He is adventurous and mesmerised by the white ladies and anything foreign as a way to assert his dominance. She gets out of a marriage, survives sexual encounters with Truman and gives away one child and aborts another. In these acts Meridian has done what the patriarchal society would not expect her to do. She is not an obedient and dutiful wife and she is not an adoring mother. She

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<sup>115</sup> Alice Walker (1986) 61, 62

has rebelled against the cherished norms and values of her society to attain a sense of her individuality.

No one has told Meridian the truth about her sexuality. Her mother, Gertrude Hill, only tells her to be sweet without specifying what she means. Her mother never uses the word "sex" and has told her nothing about what to expect from men and from sex. Gertrude lacks any concern about her daughter's morals. Having told her nothing, she expects her to do nothing. When Meridian leaves the house in the evening with her "boyfriend", the one who is always eager, her hot-breathing lover, one who always takes her straight to the nearest lovers' lane or its equivalent, which in their case is the clump of bushes behind the city dump, her mother only cautions her to "be sweet." Meridian does not realise that this is the euphemism for "Keep your panties up and your dress down," an expression she has heard and been puzzled by. And while not enjoying the sex, she has it as often as her lover wants it, sometimes every single night. This is the reason why her pregnancy comes as a total shock to her. She did not know that having sex could produce a pregnancy.

Truman's sexual ideology is presented as contradictory. He wants a virgin who is as experienced in worldly sexual matters as he is himself. Because he is obsessed with the idea of a virgin, Meridian conceals the fact that she is a mother. And as Truman wants to make love to her, Meridian is scared because she has no worldly sexual experience to speak of. When he makes love to her it is almost impossible to penetrate her; it is as if her vagina is sealed shut by a taut muscle that fights him. It is only later that he begins to understand why her vagina has been clenched so tightly against him. She has been intermittent with fear. Meridian's fear is due to the fact that for her, sex has always been burdened with ugly consequences. She is afraid because if she does not make love with him she might lose him, and if she does make love with him he might lose interest as he must have seemed, to her, to have done. This is one of the reasons Meridian gives as to why their relationship does not work out. Meridian feels that in Lynne, Truman finds his ideal; a woman who is a virgin and eager for sex and well to do enough to have the "worldly

experience.” Lynne understands Truman better. She calls him a vampire who sucks the blood of young white virgins to keep him vigorous. Lynne’s analysis of the situation is that Meridian and Truman should smoke reefer, fall into each “other’s black arms and fuck their brains out.”<sup>116</sup>

After Truman and Meridian make love, Truman discovers that Meridian has a child. He believes that he cannot have a woman who has had a child and worse still a woman who has had a child and then given that child away. As a result, a strong repugnance arouses in him against her. Truman takes it as normal that he should find Meridian guilty of this, forgetting his own various immoral relationships. This is evidence that Truman’s ideas of a woman conforms to the patriarchal image of a woman as a faithful and dutiful wife and an adoring mother.

Truman has always wanted a virgin and has been raised to expect and demand a virgin. He has never questioned his own thinking. Yet he has been as predatory as the other young men he associates with, “as eager to seduce and ‘devirginize’ as they.”<sup>117</sup> Not once has he asked himself where he expects his virgin to come from short of heaven. This reasoning by Truman reflects the fact that the men believe that the women are there for their pleasure and that they must present themselves before the men in unblemished conservative manner. This dehumanises the woman to the position of an appendage to the man, a subservient being to the man.

To Tommy Odds, sex is a race weapon. He believes that the best way to revenge for the injustices brought upon him by the whites is by raping their women. He uses sex as a weapon of the racial war. He rapes Lynne after he loses his lower part of the arm in a racial related shooting as he emerged from the Liberty Trinity Baptist Church. To him, Lynne is guilty because she is white.

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<sup>116</sup> Alice Walker (1986) 146

<sup>117</sup> Alice Walker (1986) 142

Randolph Kay, the Movie Star and Tom Johnson have lived with white women for years before they leave them in order to please their fellow black people. Despite the fact that they have been living together in harmony for a number of years, they still leave the white women because of racial hatred. Tom justifies the whole affair as just a matter of pussy. "That's all. Just a matter of my *personal*<sup>118</sup> taste in pussy."<sup>119</sup> The whole relationship is reduced to just a question of personal taste in "pussy".

Lynne takes sex as a form of charity and a form of reparations for the atrocities committed by her white race. When Tommy Odds rapes her, she is sympathetic of his predicament after the loss of his lower arm. She thinks of his black people who live without hope and as he enters her, she does not resist any longer. And near the end of her ordeal her arms stole around his neck and before he leaves she tells him that she has forgiven him and kisses his slick rounded stump that is now the colour of baked liver.<sup>120</sup>

Lynne who once lived in the East Village, the Lower East Side, on 12<sup>th</sup> Street could not walk down the street without "niggers" wanting to have sex with her;

"What could I do? I'm a woman, right? They never let up until they got me in bed. Then the crying and the pleading when I didn't feel like giving 'em any. So usually I just said Fuck it! I've got to get some sleep. So get up on me, nigger. Just don't take all night. Sometimes I'd go to sleep with 'em still at it. ... I got so tired. Begging, listening to people begging, is tiring. Besides, you don't know what's going on in the cities. There are all these white girls that are so fucked up with guilt they're willing and happy to keep a black guy, even if he's obviously a junk bum. Not like me, at least I try for the classier bums - what's a screw between friends, anyhow?"<sup>121</sup>

Truman's interpretation of reality is different. He feels that Lynne has always fantasised being raped by a black man. Truman, too, is not innocent of the vice. He has wanted to make love to Lynne because she is white and he has wanted to force

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<sup>118</sup> Emphasis as it appears in the text

<sup>119</sup> Alice Walker (1986) 136

<sup>120</sup> Alice Walker (1986) 159

<sup>121</sup> Alice Walker (1986) 151, 152

her to have him in ways that would disgust and thrill her.<sup>122</sup> But then, Lynne grows on him and proves to be a hard worker who does better than black women who always want to argue a point instead of doing what they were told to. And Lynne likes doing things for Truman.

Lynne's mistake has been to view all the black people as a people who have suffered without hatred. This belief makes her like a child in awe of them. She neglects to think of the black people as individuals. Individuals like Tommy Odds whose thin defence against hatred brakes down under personal assault. Revenge is his only comfort.

Lynne, despite her trauma, gives Tommy Odds some credit for his choice of his victim of rape. Some blacks have, in their frustration, gone off to get drunk on the week end and gone on to stab another black man to death. Others have gone on to marry a black woman in order to possess, again erroneously, their own whipping post. To Lynne, this is proof of a kind of a weird personal growth on Tommy's part.

Lynne also offers sex as a way to show gratitude. Alonza, Altuna's brother, has been kind to her and has shown her kindness and friendship. For his kindness, Lynne invites him to sleep with her. In his gratitude, he licks her from her ear lobes to her toes. Lynne hopes that being Aonza's friend will protect her from sexual assault. This is not the case. The assaults from whichever black man wants to take her continue. Lynne is so traumatised that she comes to believe that the men who sleep with her do so because they love her. She tells herself that she can live with the constant rape as long as the blacks do not hate her. When the black men stop coming to her for free sex or rape, she believes that she needs them more than they need her.

Gertrude Hill sees sex in terms of children and motherhood. For her, motherhood is taken in the traditional patriarchal sense. Meridian looks at her mother as "Black

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<sup>122</sup> Alice Walker (1986) 157

Motherhood personified;" encompassing the patriarchal aspect of the great marriage and motherhood institutions which Meridian is in terrible awe, comprehending as she does the horror, the narrowing of perspective, for the mother and for the child, it invariably meant.

Eddie, once Meridian's husband, enjoys sex for fun. He is frustrated in his sex life with Meridian because he feels that Meridian does not open her legs sufficiently enough to allow him complete access to her sex canal. He has to struggle to reach her.

Mr. Reynolds, a professor at Saxon College, does not mind taking advantage of the needy students like Meridian. He is a predator who offers Meridian money and food in exchange for sex favours.

The doctor from Saxon College who performs an abortion on Meridian tries to take advantage of Meridian. He offers to tie Meridian's fallopian tubes in exchange for sex. For this doctor, sex can be used as payment for a service rendered. He is one other man who does not have any problems with the co-modification of women.

The sex ideology of the two races is also base. At times, Lynne entertains the idea that black men are rapists. She entertains the idea that all that black men are interested in is the rape of white women. And like Sybil<sup>123</sup> she fantasises on the idea. To Lynne black people are like art; an interest and a fascination.

To Tommy's three friends, the ones he comes with to gang rape Lynne, Raymond, Altuna Jones and Hedge, rape is only so when the victim dies in the process. In fact for Altuna Jones rape is having sex with a corpse.

Motherhood is no better for Meridian; she finds herself in a labour that lasts for a day and a half. Her motherhood is characterised by unwelcome night duties to her

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<sup>123</sup> Ralph Waldo Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York; Vintage International, 1947)

baby. The duties are so demanding that she frequently thinks of scratching the baby out of her life; to strangle that soft, smooth, helpless neck to push down that kinky head into a tub of water, to lock it in its room to starve. The thoughts of murdering her own child are so strong that she forces herself to think of methods of killing herself instead. This is far from the patriarchal expectation of a mother. The patriarchal established society expects motherhood to be sweet and a mother to be adoring of her child. Meridian revolts against this image.

Eddie's conduct does not help. He does not mature beyond the excited school boy hero and his aim of being in school is merely to complete school without caring whether he learns anything or not. His frustration comes from the fact that he is not contented with the sex that Meridian is giving him. To him a woman has a duty to provide good sex services to the man. This image fits in the patriarchal image of a woman as a devoted wife. This is the image that Meridian rebels against.

Even if Meridian's mother, Gertrude Hill, enjoyed joining her body to her husband's in sex and enjoyed having someone with whom to share the minute occurrences of her day, no one has warned her that this enjoyment and joining of bodies can result into pregnancy and babies. Pregnancy, for her, proves to be a difficult time. It is a time which makes her distracted from her body. Her mind and her body are divided. She does not know what part of herself is hers and which one is not. Her frail independence gives way to the pressures of motherhood and she learns with much horror and amazement that she cannot even afford to be resentful, that she has been "caught" in the bondage of motherhood. She cannot blame anyone for her condition. She feels like she is being buried alive, walled away from her own life, brick by brick.<sup>124</sup>

Like Meridian, Gertrude decides to rebel. She never learns how to cook well, never learns how to braid hair prettily or to be any other way creative in her home. She could have learned had she wanted to but her refusal to do so is deliberate and a

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<sup>124</sup> Alice Walker (1986) 50, 51

protest; a protest against those she cannot express her anger or shout out to that it was not fair. Gertrude passes on the things she rebels against onto her daughter as the ideal things to follow. Meridian does not miss the point her mother is trying to hide from 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.”<sup>125</sup>

For both Gertrude and Meridian, motherhood is an entrapment from which they seek escape. Marriage is a false institution, a prison which steals a woman’s independence and happiness. Sex, for the mother and daughter, is a lie and a deception which provides a false sense of joy. No sooner is one enjoying sex than they are trapped into the prison of wife and motherhood. This feeling runs very deep and can be traced from Meridian’s great grandmother, Feather Mae, who, even at that far back period in time, is able to put into a coherent thought process even before she married Meridian’s insatiable great grandfather that she would soon be becoming a woman:

“And would soon be married, soon be expecting, soon be like her own mother, a strong silent woman who seemed always to be washing or ironing or cooking or rousing her family from naps to go to work in the fields.”<sup>126</sup>

It is thus not surprising that Meridian, too, rebels against this bondage and opts for a life outside the home. Truman, the man she comes to love and with whom she wants to make hot, quick, mindless love whenever he is near her, confirms her reluctance in giving herself fully to a man. Even if she trembles and feels faint with desire each time she is with him, he leaves her for the white exchange student girls. When he tries to come back into the love life of Meridian, Truman’s motives are shallow. It is for a selfish reason. He makes a ridiculous proposal to Meridian; “Have my beautiful black babies.”<sup>127</sup> His only reason for getting back to Meridian in these words is that Meridian must give him black babies.

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<sup>125</sup> Alice Walker (1986) 51

<sup>126</sup> Alice Walker (1986) 50

<sup>127</sup> Alice Walker (1986) 116

Despite all the sexual experiences that Meridian has, one baby and one abortion she has not once been completely fulfilled by sex. This proves the futile nature of sex in Meridian. It is an illusion of happiness.

Meridian believes that Truman leaves her to date the white girls just for sex. She thinks that Truman is merely fascinated by the idea of having sex with white girls and that he would not fall in love with them. As far back as Meridian can remember it has always been understood that while white men would climb on black women old enough to be their mothers - "for the experience"- white women were considered sexless, contemptible and ridiculous by all. For Truman this seems not to hold water as he is clearly infatuated with the white girls.

Meridian's views show the prejudices of the time. She regards her strong point to be that she is black. But being black means that she is seen by the white race as exotic and a sex object with which the white boys would be initiated into adulthood. She is black and female, the two tags that banish the black woman into a being less than human;

"She was black, wasn't she? And female. (Not a lady, not even a woman, since both these words conjured up something larger than sex; they spoke of a somebody as opposed to a something.) Yes, it was understood about white men. Some of them liked the black women for sex and said so. For the others it was a matter of gaining experience, initiation into the adult world. The maid, the cook, a stray child, anything not too old or repulsive would do."<sup>128</sup>

This relegates the woman to someone worse than a slave. She is cast as a sex tool and one without an identity.

#### **4.1.6 Religion**

There are two brands of religious beliefs reflected in Meridian. Meridian's mother subscribes to the old patriarchal form of religion. This form of religion negates the position of the woman. The woman in this is expected to be submissive to the man and to be a mother. This is the reason Meridian's mother finds it very difficult to

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<sup>128</sup> Alice Walker (1986) 107

forgive Meridian when she gives up her child to pursue a college education and civil rights campaigns.

Gertrude urges Meridian not to abandon her son, Eddie Jr. she argues that Meridian must want her child especially that she originates from her Christian home. Delores, one of the friends who accompany Meridian to face her mother challenges Gertrude's view; "The last time God had a baby he skipped too."<sup>129</sup> The idea here is that God cannot be used to justify the imprisoning of a woman on account of motherhood. If God abandoned the actual task of being a parent to His son and left the task to another man Joseph and the woman Mary, Meridian is equally justified to let her mother bring up her son too.

Gertrude is so brainwashed by religion that she literally believes that the church building, that is the mortar and the bricks, to be holy; she believes that this holiness has rubbed off from years of scripture reading and impassioned prayers. She believes that holiness covers the walls of the church like paint. She literally takes the church building to be the house of God and believes that she feels the presence of God whenever she enters the door to the church.

Meridian's mother is not happy that her daughter, Meridian, is participating in the civil rights movement. Her reasoning is that God separated the sheep from the goats and the black from the white folk. This stance shows resignation to the oppressive system. Gertrude has surrendered and forces herself to be contented with the oppressive patriarchal status quo. "It never bothered me to sit in the back of the bus, you get just as good a view and you don't have all those nasty white asses passing you."<sup>130</sup> She justifies the unfair status quo and gives it authentication by tracing its origins from the Bible. It is no wonder that Gertrude spends most of her time making the ill fitting prayer pillows.

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<sup>129</sup> Alice Walker (1986) 89

<sup>130</sup> Alice Walker (1986) 85

Mr. Reynolds gives another aspect of the hypocritical nature of the old patriarchal religious belief. He limps Meridian round his desk. He emerges as an elderly man who exploits a younger girl's sexuality in exchange for gifts of food and money. He is a typical "sugar daddy" of the time. The astonishing thing about this fact is that Mr. Reynolds is an elder in the Episcopalian Church and has won an award as the Masonic Temple's Man of the Year 1935-36.<sup>131</sup>

The old form of Christianity is also portrayed as hypocritical as it fails to meet the immediate needs of the people. When the Wild Child dies and Meridian and the girls try to give her a decent funeral in the college chapel, the authorities deny the body entry into the chapel.

Mrs. Turner, too, reflects the narrowness of the old patriarchal type of religion. She believes that prayer alone will make miracles happen. She does not believe in voting in order to improve her community; "The good Lord He take care of most of my problems. You know he heal the sick and race<sup>132</sup> the dead. Comfort the uncomfortable and blesses the meek."<sup>133</sup> Lynne challenges her to life's realities; Mrs. Turner needs the road in front of her house fixed, she needs an improved house and sanitary and health facilities. Lynne asks Mrs. Turner if these problems can be resolved by prayer or indeed questions if Jesus Christ is pleased that she leads a poor quality of life.

For the likes of Mrs. Hill and Mrs. Turner, religion is an opiate, a comforting myth which dims the horrors and brutalities of oppression. They relinquish all responsibility for their own welfare to God.

The second brand of religious belief is the religion that Meridian finds being practiced in a Baptist Church. This church is more concerned with the daily occurrences in the lives of the people. It is involved in the struggles of the people. It

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<sup>131</sup> Alice Walker (1986) 111

<sup>132</sup> For *raise*: in reference to Jesus Christ's miraculous powers to raise people from the dead

<sup>133</sup> Alice Walker (1986) 102

encourages the people to vote<sup>134</sup> in elections and commemorates the death of prominent civil rights activists. It is responsive to people's needs and proactive in addressing the concerns of the people.

The minister in the Baptist church tells members of his congregation, in a voice imitating the civil rights leader, Martin Luther King Jr., to take responsibility for their lives.

“He told the young women to stop looking for husbands and try to get something useful in their heads. He told the older congregants that they should be ashamed of the way they let their young children fight their battles for them. He told them they were cowardly and pathetic when they sent their children into the white neighbourhood to go to school. He abused the young teachers present who did not, he said, work hard enough to teach black youths because they obviously had no faith in them.”<sup>135</sup>

This is radical when compared to the old conformist religion.

While the old religion preached conformity and perseverance, the new religion preached self reliance, hard work and freedom. The preacher implores his congregation to vote for black candidates in the election of the twenty-third. The new religion is not obsessed with the holiness of the church building or heaven but on what is relevant in the peoples' lives in the present. For this new religion, church is more about communal spirit, togetherness and righteous convergence.<sup>136</sup>

#### **4.1.7 Intra Gender Relations**

The concept of motherhood is common in both races. The nature of this motherhood is characterised by rejection.

Lynne is rejected by her parents because she rebels against the prevailing social patriarchal and racial order to cross the race divide. She gets involved with and gets married to a black man, Truman.

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<sup>134</sup> Alice Walker (1986) 198

<sup>135</sup> Alice Walker (1986) 195, 196

<sup>136</sup> Alice Walker (1986) 198,199

Meridian disobeys her mother and abandons her child for her college education and civil rights movement activities. Then, even further back in time, Meridian, at the age of thirteen, is unwilling to accept Jesus into her life, a decision that prompts her mother to withdraw her love. Meridian's mother, Gertrude Hill, is repulsed by Meridian because she does not accept Jesus in her life in the traditional patriarchal way in which she is required to subordinate herself to God, Jesus and the men in her community. Gertrude Hill writes Meridian to tell her that she has failed not only to honour just her parents but anyone else. This is the oppressive biblical misunderstanding that Gertrude Hill tries to impose on her daughter Meridian. This obscures Meridian's sense of identity as it places her below the male folk. This biblical teaching places the woman in subordination to the male folk.

Equally of importance are the sex views expressed by Meridian. She expresses some of the sex stereotypes of her community. The black community represented by Meridian's grandmother, an erect former maid and midwife, holds strong opinions. Firstly, she professes that she has never known a white woman she liked after the age of twelve, secondly, that a white woman is useless except as a baby machine which would continue to produce white people who would grow to oppress her and thirdly, that without servants all the white people would live in pigsties. She portrays the white women as lazy and machines for producing babies and who soon sink into permanent oblivion.

The black woman on the other hand is portrayed as always trying to imitate Harriet Tubman<sup>137</sup> - escaping to become something unheard of and outrageous; becoming soldiers knowing all about enemy installations and radio communication. Some black women go away and come back, years later as doctors or school teachers. Other women go away married to men but come back married to their fellow women. Tongues wag for a time but they gain an acceptance with time. There are also other black girls who go away and return as good-time girls, who come back

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<sup>137</sup> Harriet Tubman (1820?-1913), born Araminta Ross, was an African American who fled slavery and guided runaway slaves to freedom in the North for more than a decade before the American Civil War(1861-1865)

home full of lewd stories about their exploits in the big city. These are watched seducing the local men with dazzling ease. These command attention. Only those who reject this experience and adventure fall into the domestic quagmire that even the most intelligent white girls appeared to be destined for.<sup>138</sup> In her joining the Civil Rights movement and her leaving her child with her mother, Meridian joins the rebellious women who break the long traditions of women who conform to social dictates.

Meridian realises that in her relationship with Eddie, she has lacked courage, initiative and a mind of her own. She notices, though, that Truman does not want a general besides him. He does not want a woman who tries to claim a mind of her own. Truman wants an attractive woman who is asleep, one who is passive and docile. Meridian is not that kind of woman and Truman has to be told that he has got to respect Meridian and he is in the end left behind as Meridian faces her own future on her own.

## **4.2. THE COLOR PURPLE**

### **4.2.1 General Setting**

The community in The Color Purple is set against the background of racism and sexism. The black community is deprived of all social, economic and human privileges and are forced into an existence of severe hardships. The results of this are very clear; suffering, pain, and an existence that is dehumanising; an existence that denies the people in the black community of their individual identity.

### **4.2.2 Setting in terms of Time and Place**

The Color Purple, which was published in 1982, reflects situations that prevailed in rural Georgia of the United States of America (USA). The events reflect the USA of between 1910 and 1940. The author does not give us any dates and most of the information about the setting of the novel is derived from the descriptions that are

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<sup>138</sup> Alice Walker (1986) 109

given in the text.<sup>139</sup> These descriptions range from how people behave and the clothes they wear to the mode of transport that the people use.

It is noticed, at the start of the novel, that Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ arrives at Fonso's home and inspects Celie from the horse-back like a commodity for sale and that Celie goes to town for the first time in a horse drawn wagon with Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ in which Corrine, the missionary Samuel's wife, seeks rest after coming from the shop. After Celie establishes that the baby that Corrine is carrying, whom she calls Pauline, is actually her baby Olivia, they have a good laugh with Corrine. Corrine jokes about Celie's 'Horsepitality'<sup>140</sup> as "she looks at the horses flicking flies off they rump."<sup>141</sup> When Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ returns and hears the two women laugh, he treats them like infantile adults. He scolds them asking why they are laughing like fools. The women are shown to be under the dictates of the man and have no say in what they want to do, not even to laugh.

It is also noticed that by the end of the novel, people are no longer riding in horse drawn wagons but driving cars. Sofia's prize-fighter boyfriend Henry "Buster" Broadax, the Mayor and his wife Miss Mollie, Odessa and her husband Jack, Shug Avery and Celie are all driving cars by the time the novel concludes. This is a long period of time. Apart from the passage of time, the women are shown to be taking charge of their own lives regardless of what the men think or say about them.

The time span is also indicated by the events in the lives of the characters; Celie is an elderly stable woman by the end of the text, very different from the fourteen years old girl who has been abused by a man she has known to be her father. About thirty years have passed since Celie and Nettie last met. At the time Celie is twenty years old. It is clear that we are looking at a time frame of about fifty years. Celie's two babies, Adam and Olivia, have grown into adults; Adam has fallen in

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<sup>139</sup> *Cliffsnotes on Walker's The Color Purple*, Gary Carey (ed.) (Lincoln, Nebraska; Cliffs Notes, Inc., 1996) 10

<sup>140</sup> As appears in the original text

<sup>141</sup> Walker Alice, *The Color Purple*, (New York; Washington Square Press, 1982) 22, 23, 24

love with an Olinka woman, Tashi, whom he marries. The brutal men are more in the background supporting the reunion of the women and the whole family.

### 4.2.3 Social Stratification

The whites live in a better part of the community with privileges that the blacks do not have. They are treated better than the blacks. Even the white children are more respected than the elderly black people. Sofia, despite being a mother of six children, is still called a girl.

The economic enterprises in the community are at first solely controlled by the white community. Celie's real father is a very good entrepreneur. He has land and does very well in farming. Everything that he turns his hand to prospers. He opens up a store in which he sells dry goods. His store does so well that he talks his two brothers into helping him run it. Then the white merchants begin to get together and complain that this store is taking away all the black business from them. The argument of the white business owners is that the store the black men own takes business from them. They then interfere with the free market by lynching their black competitors. Thus race relations, in this instance, are shown to motivate lynching.

At the shops we see how the black woman, Corrine, the wife of Reverend Samuel, attempting to buy some cloth is treated with impunity by the store's clerk. "He say, Girl you want that cloth or not? We got other customers sides you."<sup>142</sup> She is treated like a child, an infantile adult, talked to like a child by a businessman who needs her money for his business to succeed. She is called a girl though she is an elderly woman and forced to buy thread which she does not voluntarily choose to buy. Corrine does not retaliate against the store's clerk because she realises that in her community she is in a subordinate position to the white man and that any confrontation with a white person will be to her disadvantage as Sofia proves later.

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<sup>142</sup>Alice Walker (1982) 23

Sofia is imprisoned because she stands up to her white oppressors. Sofia in her domestic duties after her imprisonment is badly treated by the white family of the Mayor and his wife, Miss. Millie. Her master's children are treated with utmost respect.

When Sofia stands up to the Mayor and beats him down in a brief fight she is seen to have broken the social norm in which the black person is in servitude to the white person. The consequence of her act is clear: imprisonment.

In the black communities, the men hold the power. They are seen to have the economic and physical power. Celie's oppression at the hands of the men in her life is testimony of this. Mr. \_\_\_\_\_/ Albert, Fonso and the others treat Celie with contempt. They abuse Celie - beating and raping her.

The advice Celie gives to Harpo is the traditional and normal view of the community. She advises Harpo to beat Sofia. But when Sofia beats Harpo the act is seen to be out of the normal expected community behaviour. In the patriarchal society, a man is the one who is expected to beat the wife. The wife is expected to persevere with the beatings of the man because the man looks at women, and especially wives as good for beating.<sup>143</sup>

The now seventeen-year old Harpo asks his father, Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, why he beats his wife, Celie, who is now about twenty-five years old. He asks this question just after Celie has been beaten by Mr. \_\_\_\_\_. Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ beats Celie just like he beats the children. The difference being that Celie is beaten more often than the children. And when Celie is being beaten, the children are able to watch the abuse through the cracks in the wall. Mr. \_\_\_\_\_'s answers to Harpo's question as to why he beats Celie are most tyrannical. He gives four reasons; the first is that Celie is beaten because she is stubborn, the second is because Celie is a woman, the third is that Celie is a woman and all women are good for beating and the fourth, Mr. \_\_\_\_\_

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<sup>143</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 24

says, is because Celie is his wife and that as his wife she is especially good for beating. This is the same answer Harpo is given years later when he asks how he can make his own wife, Sofia, do as he pleases. To this seeming predicament of Harpo's Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ asks if Harpo ever beats his wife. This implied that the way to relate to a woman and turn her into a robot that does man's bidding is by beating her.

Harpo is having his lessons from his role model, his father, Mr. \_\_\_\_\_. He is learning how a husband and a father are supposed to behave and treat others. And from the way the lessons are going, it is clear that Harpo is likely to grow into another fierce father who will be a womaniser and wife beater unless he is challenged along the way. When Harpo tries to seek clarification on his father's statement from Celie, his question reveals the fact that Harpo has adopted some of his society's values. He asks Celie; "Why you stubborn?" The implication of this question is that Celie has an option not to be stubborn. The implication is that if Celie stopped being stubborn she would not be beaten. The reality is that by so doing Celie would further be silenced. She is being asked to avoid the abuse by being passive; to stop asserting herself in order to avoid further abuse. Yet Celie's main problem is that she does not assert herself. What the men in her life are unhappy about is that Celie, despite the abuse does not break down. However, Harpo's question also makes clear that Celie cannot avoid the abuse that comes to her because she is a woman and a wife. And like Brownfield and Grange in The Third Life of Grange Copeland<sup>144</sup> the cycle of brutality goes on.

For Celie who has suffered abuse all her life, there are no options at the moment but to accept her status of being a black woman who is a black man's property. Celie accepts the situation in which Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ takes out his frustration of being a black man, abused under the system of racism, on her.

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<sup>144</sup> Alice Walker (1988)

Celie responds to the constant abuse by manipulating her own emotions and in the process sinking deeper into the abyss of silence, losing more and more of her individuality. She does not fight. She imagines herself to be wood, strong and unmoving. "I make myself wood. I say to myself, Celie, you are a tree." She is, in a sense, a woman buried alive. She is a woman who has lost her self identity.

The rape of Mary Agnes by her uncle, Bubber Hodges, the prison warden, is evidence of the lack of respect for a woman and the perverted male attitudes that see a woman as a sex object. Despite being her uncle, Hodges rapes his niece instead of protecting her. This is first, because of the perverted male attitudes and second, because Mary Agnes has black blood and, according to the law of the time, she is a slave with no rights, no dignity and no identity.

Annie Julia, Albert's wife, is killed by her boyfriend. This violent act shows the impunity with which man regards the life of a woman. This is in addition to the other violence against the woman that is witnessed in the text. Celie, Mary Agnes (Squeak), Miss Millie who is the Mayor's wife, Mary Ellen, Daisy all suffer one kind of abuse or another at the hands of the men in their lives.

The relationships within the community of black women have their own challenges. Some women ascribe to the tenets of the Patriarchal arrangement of community life. Celie encourages Harpo to beat Sofia in order to make her fit in with what she then thinks is the proper role of the woman. Kate and Carrie, Albert's sisters, come to "inspect" Celie and her house keeping. Celie wins their support because she is clean and able to maintain the house as opposed to Annie Julia who, according to the two sisters, was not so clean.

Mr. \_\_\_\_\_'s sisters come to inspect the wife while his brother comes to take a look at Mr. \_\_\_\_\_'s girlfriend, Shug Avery. The two sisters subscribe to the traditional patriarchal ideology with regards to the role of a woman. She has to do domestic work, look after the children well and offer sex services to the man. The brother is interested to see how good this girlfriend of Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ is. The question

in such a mind is “is this woman beautiful and can she be sexually exciting in bed?” In such a mind, the value of the woman is not in her person with her own identity but in her ability to serve domestically and sexually; what Sofia describes as treatment associated with a dog.

The experiences of Nettie with the missionary family are no different. The man brings in the children and the wife accepts them in the family despite her suspicions that the children are as a result of her husband’s cheating on her. The only time she raises the question is when she is about to die, a time when the knowledge of truth will not be of any practical use to her. This situation is similar to that of Celie. Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ brings the sick Shug Avery home to be taken care of by Celie. Celie is not consulted; bearing in mind especially that Celie is the wife of Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ while Shug Avery is Mr. \_\_\_\_\_’s mistress with whom he has had three children. Celie stands aside as Shug Avery arrives in her (Celie’s) home. “Come on in, I want to cry. To shout. Come in. With God help, Celie is going to make you well. But I don’t say nothing. It not my house. Also I ain’t been told nothing.”<sup>145</sup> Celie cannot even give a word of welcome to Shug Avery because she has never, and does not feel like Mr. \_\_\_\_\_’s house is also her house. She feels more like a slave of the house. Celie is indeed more than buried in her grave of slavery.

In Africa the African families have the same sexism witnessed in America. The woman is submissive to the husband who has the final say in everything that takes place and the woman is at the service of the man. Nettie makes an observation in her letters to Celie that the way men in Africa speak to their women remind her of her own father and generally the men in America; they listen just long enough to issue instructions.<sup>146</sup> The woman’s voice is silenced. Her value is only recognised in association with the man. Nettie is not respected because she has no husband. Olivia is teased that she is very intelligent and may grow up to be one of the chief’s wives.

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<sup>145</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 50

<sup>146</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 149

The difference between the American woman and the African woman is that the African woman can graduate and become an honorary man. In this state she is independent and respected. This honour, however, only comes if the woman has had children- five in the case of the Olinka Catherine- and her husband has died.

Shug Avery, who is in control of all her relationships with both men and woman, is seen as a deviant and a social out cast.

In The Color Purple, the problem of sexism is shown as cutting across the racial divide in that women, regardless of race, face the same problem of sexism.

#### **4.2.4 The Economic and Inter Gender Relations**

The economic power in The Color Purple rests with the men who regard their wives as domestic beings who do domestic work and who are generally weak. The women are expected to be subordinate to the men.

Fonso commends Celie to Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ on account of her being a good domestic worker. This view gives emphasis to the fact that the value of a woman to a man, among other things, is in her being a good domestic worker. One who will do her domestic work without question. This view is also held by Carrie and Kate, the two sisters of Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ who despise their brother's late wife, Annie Julia, because she "was a nasty 'oman<sup>147</sup> about the house."<sup>148</sup> Her crimes are that she does not cook and acts as if she has never seen a kitchen before. In contrast, Mr. \_\_\_\_\_'s sisters praise Celie because she keeps the house clean, cooks well and is good with the children. Corrie makes her point clearer; "When a woman marry she spouse<sup>149</sup> to keep a decent house and a clean family."<sup>150</sup> And Kate adds her voice to Carrie's views; "And you right about Celie, here. Good housekeeping, good with children, good cook."<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> For woman

<sup>148</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 27

<sup>149</sup> For Supposed

<sup>150</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 27

<sup>151</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 28

Kate, who has shown kindness to Celie, rebukes Harpo, Celie's step son, and admonishes him to help Celie bring in water. Harpo's response to this projects the patriarchal view of domestic duties:

"Women's work, he say.  
What? She say  
Women's work. I'm a man."<sup>152</sup>

The issue in question here is that domestic work, like drawing water, is a woman's responsibility. A man, even when he is able to, cannot do a woman's work simply because he is a man.

It is the men in Celie's life who are the bread winners. However, all the domestic and field work is done by Celie. The responsibility of raising the children is hers. When her mother is ill Celie takes over all her mother's responsibilities. At a tender age of fourteen she becomes burdened with cooking, cleaning and caring for her many brothers and sisters. At this age she also becomes a sex slave to the man she has always known to be her father.

Tobias, Mr. \_\_\_\_\_'s brother comes to visit Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ to have a look at Celie. He immediately notices Celie's hard working qualities. He sees an economic advantage with this aspect of Celie. He observes; "Always busy, always busy, he say. I wish Margaret was more like you. Save me a bundle of money."<sup>153</sup> It is obvious that Margaret is not as hard working as Celie and as a result Tobias is spending more money than he would have if only Margaret was as hard working as Celie.

When Shug Avery comes to sing in the Lucky Star in town for the first time since Celie got married to Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, her advertising is done by Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ who sticks posters on the trees and has sixty posters with him still. Celie is compelled to help Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ look his best when he meets his mistress, Shug Avery. Celie is left behind as Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ goes to the Lucky Star. Celie is left to labour in the cotton field like a mule. Meanwhile, Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ is having so much fun and sex with his

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<sup>152</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 28, 29

<sup>153</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 60

mistress, Shug Avery, that by the time he comes back home he is exhausted to the point of being sick.

Celie accepts the fact that her husband is having an illicit affair with a blues singer because she has a tragically small amount of self worth. She has been so brutalised that she is silenced. Instead of questioning the actions of her husband, Celie is resigned to her situation. She accepts the status quo because it has always been like that and this status quo has never been challenged.

Another reason for Celie's tolerance of her husband's infidelity with Shug Avery is because Celie is fixated with Shug Avery. Having been told that she is ugly, she feels happy that she is sharing her man with Shug Avery whom she considers fantastically beautiful.

Overall, Celie's acceptance of her husband's conduct with the glamorous Shug Avery is a resignation to her life's status quo, the status quo of a woman who lives a life in a narrowly defined sexist and racist society.

The fact that Celie is labouring in the cotton field while Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ is having fun and a lot of sex with his mistress, Shug Avery, is indicative that the woman or the wife is treated like a beast of labour for economic purposes. This is blatant exploitation of the woman. Celie is once again co-modified by Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ just like Fonso did in his bargaining with Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ to get rid of Celie.

As a result of her experiences Celie does not find men to be likeable. To her, most men look pretty much alike.<sup>154</sup> Most of them have been brutal to her. So to her men are not appealing. They have abused and silenced her. When Celie laughs with relief after seeing a baby she feels is her baby, Olivia, Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ ridicules her; "Why you sitting here laughing like a fool fer?"<sup>155</sup><sup>156</sup> Celie's confidence and sense

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<sup>154</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 23

<sup>155</sup> "Fer" to mean *for*

<sup>156</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 24

of the self are constantly attacked. Her self identity is pulverised by such and many more dehumanising abuses and verbal attacks.

Reflection on her mother's life, Sofia recollects the following:

"She under my daddy thumb. Naw, she under my daddy foot. Anything he say, goes. She never say nothing back. She never stand up for herself. Try to make a little stand sometime for the children but that always backfired. More she stand up for us, the harder time he give her. He hate children and where they come from. Tho from all the children he got, you'd never know it."<sup>157</sup>

Sofia's mother, as a woman, is always under the thumb of her husband and her husband never loves children. The mother and the children are hated yet the man keeps on having more children because he loves sex. The woman is used as a beast of labour and a sex slave. In these circumstances, the woman is dominated by the man and has no room to actualise her self identity as she is dominated by the man. The only option for a woman to attain her own identity in these circumstances is to rebel against the established patriarchal society.

There is also a view presented in The Color Purple in which a man regards a woman as untrustworthy because she is considered to be full of trickery. This fits in with the way Lady Macbeth<sup>158</sup>, Circe<sup>159</sup> and Delilah<sup>160</sup> are presented and interpreted. The basic label is that of one who seduces. Man sees the woman as a dangerous being who seduces man to his doom. When Harpo brings Sofia home for the first time so that his father, Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, can meet her, Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ accuses Sofia of seducing Harpo so as to make him take responsibility of a pregnancy that is not his. Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ asks the pregnant Sofia;

"Who the father? He ast."<sup>161</sup>  
She looked surprised. Harpo, she says.  
How he know that?

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<sup>157</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 46

<sup>158</sup> William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*

<sup>159</sup> Greek enchantress: in Greek mythology, the daughter of Hecate and the Sun, who lured sailors to her island where she made love to them and then turned them into pigs.

<sup>160</sup> From the Bible: *Judges Chapter 16*

<sup>161</sup> For asked

He know. She say.

Young women no good these days, he say. Got they legs open to every Tom, Dick and Harry.

Harpo look at his daddy like he never seen him before. But he don't say nothing.

Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ say, No need to think I'm gon<sup>162</sup> let my boy marry you just cause you in the family way. He young and limited. Pretty gal like you could put anything over on him.

...

She say, What I need to marry Harpo for? He still living here with you. What food and clothes he git, you buy.

He say, your daddy done throwed<sup>163</sup> you out. Ready to live in the street I gues<sup>164</sup>.

She say, Naw<sup>165</sup>. I ain't living in the street. I'm living with my sister and her husband. They say I can live with them for the rest of my life. She stand up, big, strong, healthy girl, and she say, well, nice visiting. I'm going home."<sup>166</sup>

Mr. \_\_\_\_\_'s assumption is obvious, Sofia is trying to pin a pregnancy on Harpo that is not his or if it is his, then she has been chased from home and she is now homeless and has picked on Harpo for shelter. His reasoning in this is that a woman will seduce a man and make him take responsibility of a pregnancy. This looks to have been certainly the situation of the time but not for Sofia. She has got pride and she is definitely different. She is not going to depend on a man who himself is still being looked after by his father. She makes it clear that her sister has accepted that she can stay with her and her husband. This is like a slap in the face of the Patriarchal Mr. \_\_\_\_\_. In Mr. \_\_\_\_\_'s patriarchal community, Sofia is a rebel who has behaved in a manner inconsistent with the community's patriarchal establishment.

Harpo says nothing as his father verbally abuses Sofia. He is internalising the lesson that his father is teaching him about women. He will also expect women in his life to be under his control. He has been raised to think that women can only exist in the context of the patriarchal society in which they are subordinate to men.

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<sup>162</sup> For *going*

<sup>163</sup> For *thrown*

<sup>164</sup> For *guess*

<sup>165</sup> For *no*

<sup>166</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 38

Harpo's frustration, later on, results from the fact that he would like Sofia to take up her traditional role of wife and mother. Unfortunately for him, Sofia does not subscribe to this traditional notion. So the roles traditionally considered male are taken up by Sofia while those traditionally considered to be female roles are taken up by Harpo. We see Sofia taking a ladder and climbing up the roof of the house to fix the roof while Harpo is in the kitchen washing the dishes.

This image that is painted of Sofia is exactly what Harpo is complaining about;

"I tell her she can't be all the time going to visit her sister. Us married now, I tell her. Your place is here with the children. She say, I'll take the children with me. I say, your place is with me. She say, you want to come? She keep primping in front of the glass, getting the children ready at the same time."<sup>167</sup>

For a man who has been brought up in a patriarchal community, his frustration is evident. His mentor, his father, asks him;

"You ever hit her?  
Wives is like children. You have to let 'em know who got the upper hand. Nothing can do that better than a good sound beating."<sup>168</sup>

That's the only solution that a patriarchal man can think about. In frustration Harpo turns to Celie, a woman who has grown up under sexist oppression. His problem is how to make Sofia mind, how to take her a peg down. As might be expected, Celie's answer reflects what society has taught her as the norm of life;

"Beat her."<sup>169</sup>

But then, Sofia is not the usual woman of the time. Celie describes her as "a big strong girl;"

"Arms got muscle. Legs too. She swing that baby about like it nothing. She got a little pot on her now and give you the feeling she all there. Solid. Like if she sit on something, it be mash."<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 42

<sup>168</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 42

<sup>169</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 43

<sup>170</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 41

She orders Harpo about even to care for the baby.

And so, it comes as no surprise when Harpo is next seen with his face a mess of bruises. His lip is cut and one of his eyes is shut like a fist. He walks stiffly and his teeth ache. Harpo has had to come up with reasons to explain his disfigured face. For Celie, Sofia's headstrong independence is an alien and frightening phenomenon. Celie observes that although she likes Sofia, Sofia does not act like her. She is different. Sofia is much a woman as she is a man. She mothers like a mother and fights like a man.

In this light, Sofia comes forth as a typical rebel in this patriarchal community. Yet this is what a woman in such a society must do for her to attain selfhood.

The second Marriage of Celie's mother is presented as an attempt by the man to deprive Celie's mother of her economic empowerment after the demise of her first husband. Fonso marries Celie's mother purely for economic reasons, to be able to control the huge estate that comes to her after the demise of her first husband.

The Mayor's wife, too, is economically dependent on her husband. She is not the Mayor herself. The prestige that she enjoys comes from the fact that her husband, and not herself, is the Mayor.

Reverend Samuel can bring home babies and the wife does not verify the true origin of the children until she is on her death bed.<sup>171</sup> Despite the fact that she is the wife of the minister and her home is supposed to be exemplary, she has lived her life in fear. Fear that the adopted children might actually be those of her husband and their hired hand maid Nettie. In this she shows her subordination to her husband.

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<sup>171</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 158, 159, 168, 169, 170, 171

In Africa, the woman is presented as enhancing the economic status of the family. They are the workers who bring about the sustenance of the family. They are presented as a form of cheap labour. Men, like the chief, behave like Mr. \_\_\_\_\_;

“Even though they (the women) are unhappy and work like donkeys, they still think it is an honour to be the chief’s wife. He walks around all day holding his belly up and talking and drinking palm wine with the healer”<sup>172</sup>

They are married into polygamous marriages in which they are expected to work while their husband is the supervisor having the power of life and death over his women.<sup>173</sup> They are denied a European education. They believe that a girl is nothing by herself; only through her husband can she become something.<sup>174</sup> This elevated position that the African community has given to the husbands is frightfully dominating. The women are generally presented as weak and at the mercy of their men. Like Celie they are domestic workers who are weak and abused by their husbands.

Shug Avery, Sofia, Mary Agnes and Celie - towards the end of the text -, however, upset this when they manage their own affairs. Shug Avery is able to order Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ about. When Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ is smoking while Shug Avery lies in bed, Shug Avery is able to order Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ “I don’t want to smell no stinking blanket-blank pipe, you hear me, Albert?” It is the first time that the reader comes across the name Albert. With shock the reader learns that Albert is the name of Mr. \_\_\_\_\_. The reader learns that Shug Avery, Mr. \_\_\_\_\_’s girlfriend uses the name freely and to reprimand Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ while Celie barely uses the name and takes an effort to remember that Albert is the first name of her husband. It is Shug Avery who camps with Celie at Albert’s house to ensure that Celie is protected. Celie, too, is able to revolt and accompany Shug Avery away from Albert and his abuses. Sofia’s accomplishments are clear; despite all the set backs that she encounters, she is an independent woman. Consequently, Sofia and Shug Avery are perceived as deviants, rebels who go against the established social norms.

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<sup>172</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 145

<sup>173</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 153

<sup>174</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 144

Celie and Mary Agnes have conformed to the patriarchal established norms of their society and have had to endure a lot of suffering and abuse while Shug Avery, who has never conformed, lives a carefree and happy life.

Both Shug Avery and Celie are mothers who have not lived with their children. Shug Avery, on one hand, has chosen not to live with her children and has surrendered them to her own mother. This means that Shug Avery's children grow up with their grandmother. Celie, on the other hand, has been forced to live apart from her children. The situation of both women is not the normal expectation of a mother. Society expects a woman to conform to the image of an "adoring mother" who must sacrifice her life for the children. On this score, both women come out as deviants despite the different circumstances that compel them to live apart from their children whom their patriarchal community would have expected them to raise.

The men in the text spend most of their time trying to assert their perceived authority over the women. Fonso does this on Celie's mother and her children. Albert repeats the dominance over Celie, Nettie and his family. Harpo tries to do so with Sofia.

Fonso is confronted with rebellion and is eventually left by Celie who is married off and Nettie escapes first to live with Celie but runs away when Albert starts to pursue her, then secondly she gets a domestic job with the Samuels.

Albert is eventually challenged into changing his ways by Celie and Shug Avery and becomes respectful.

Harpo is literally beaten into submission by his wife, Sofia. And as might be expected in a patriarchal arrangement, this marriage does not last. It breaks up till Mary Agnes, nick named Squeak, decides to leave Harpo to Sofia.

#### 4.2.5 Sexual Relations

Most of the sexual relations that are highlighted in the text are those between a man and a woman. These sexual relations are mostly presented as abusive in which the woman participates merely to gratify the sexual cravings of the man. For other women like Celie, the experiences are akin to rape.

Celie's mother has had to plead with Fonso to spare her the agony of sex in her vegetable state. Fonso does not concede until he takes on Celie to perform the sexual functions that her mother is unable to perform due to severe illness.

Celie's sexual descriptions with men are descriptions of rape. She describes those with Fonso. Fonso tries to force himself on his wife, Celie's mother, who is very sick but then Celie's mother pleads with him;

“Naw, I ain't gonna. Can't you see I'm already half dead, an all of these children.”

Then when Celie's mother goes to visit her sister doctor, Fonso pounces on Celie;

“You gonna do what your mammy wouldn't. First he put his thing up against my hip and sort of wiggle it around. Then he grab hold my titties. Then he push his thing inside my pussy. When that hurt, I cry. He start to choke me, saying You better shut up and get used to it. But I don't git used to it.”<sup>175</sup>

Celie knows that the only way that Fonso and his untamed need for sex would not harm her mother is if she, Celie, allows him to rape her. And so Celie is forced to endure the sexual brutality from the man she knows as her father.

Celie's trauma is evident. The man she knows to be her father asks her, as per custom, to trim his hair. She complies but Celie notices that the man looks at her in a funny way and is a little nervous too. Then he grabs her and crams her up between his legs. Celie is only about fourteen years. The experience is hurting her. She is scared. “I never ever thought bout men having nothing down there so big. It scare me just to see it. And the way it poke itself and grow.”<sup>176</sup> After this horror,

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<sup>175</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 11

<sup>176</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 108

Fonso makes her complete the trimming of his hair. Celie feels the pain from the rape as she completes trimming the hair of the man who has just raped her. Blood drips down Celie's leg and messes up her stockings. The man does not care. He does not even look straight at Celie after this incident. Celie can only overcome such brutality by rebelling against the social structures that have compelled her to be subdued by the man.

Fonso tells Celie not to tell anybody but God about her rape. The notion of God here is cardinal. Fonso or Pa as Celie calls him, issues this threat to the fourteen years old Celie who believes literary in the myth of God's retribution. To Celie Fonso is a domestic replica of God. Yet Celie decides to write letters to God to express her woes because she is psychologically and physically shattered. By ordering Celie not to confide her ruinous sexual experiences to anyone but God, Fonso unconsciously identifies God as a patriarchal overload,<sup>177</sup> protector of men who become his henchmen, and an accomplice in black women's ruinous sexual experiences. Celie comes to view God as an absolute patriarch. Speaking in her black vernacular English, Celie describes God as big and old and tall and grey-bearded and white and a man.<sup>178</sup> Celie views God as reified, anthropomorphic and above all, racist and sexist. God is simply a male and that explains why Celie slavishly submits to the men in her life.

Celie has endured a barrage of rapes and brutality that have caused her to experience her body as fragmented and as being possessed by the men who have abused and raped her.<sup>179</sup> At fourteen, Celie has questions about her self image as a result of her abusive father's repeated rapes. She begins a letter to tell God that she is a good girl and immediately strikes out the word "I am" and revises her story

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<sup>177</sup> Journal of Third World Studies by Mainimo Wirba Ibrahim [http://finarticles.com/p.articles/mig\\_a3821](http://finarticles.com/p.articles/mig_a3821)

<sup>178</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 176

<sup>179</sup> Ross, Daniel W. "Celie in the Looking Glass: The Desire for Selfhood in *The Color Purple*" *Modern Fiction Studies* 34 (1988) 69-84

to say, "I have always been a god girl." This signifies that she no longer feels certain of her goodness or identity.<sup>180</sup> She has been silenced.

And she describes her first sexual encounter with Albert in her loveless marriage; "I lay there thinking about Nettie while he on top of me."<sup>181</sup> And when Celie has a chance to speak with Shug Avery, she describes her sexual experiences with Mr. \_\_\_\_\_. While Shug Avery enjoys her encounter with Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, Celie's is a nightmare. Shug Avery has been sleeping with Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ and enquires from Celie if she minds.

"She asked me, Tell me the truth, she say, do you mind if Albert sleep with me?

I think, I don't care who Albert sleep with ...

She say, I got what you call a passion for him ...

You like to sleep with him? I ast.

Yeah, Celie she say, I have to confess, I just love it. Don't you?

Naw, I say. Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ can tell you, I don't like it at all. What is it like? He git up on you, heist your nightgown round your waist, plunge in. Most times I pretend I ain't there. He never know the difference. Never ast me how I feel, nothing. Just do his business, get off, go to sleep.

She start to laugh. Do his business, she say. Do his business. Why, Miss Celie. You make it sound like going to the toilet on you.

That what I feel like, I say.

She stop laughing.

You never enjoy it at all? She say, you still a virgin.

What? I ast."<sup>182</sup>

She is surprised that she could be considered a virgin when she has had two children with Mr. \_\_\_\_\_.

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<sup>180</sup> Lacan's theory suggests that infants move from the narcissistic pre-mirror experience of fragmentation and lack of self into the mirror stage (also narcissistic) which is marked by the subject's (infant's) belief that she is whole and ideal when, for example, the infant sees her reflection in a mirror. The subject's image of wholeness is, of course, a misrecognition (meconnaissance), an anticipation of the stages yet to come. In the post mirror stage the child finds that she is not entirely self-sufficient and that objects she previously wished to fuse with (such as the mother) can, in fact, make themselves absent. Here the father and language enter and compensate for what the child lacks (Lacan's *Ecrits: A Selection* –Trans. Sheridan Alan. (New York; Norton, 1977) 1-7

<sup>181</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 21

<sup>182</sup> Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982; 79)

Celie's postulation is clear. Sex is a nightmare. She feels like a toilet where Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ does his business and thereafter falls off to sleep. He never asks her how she feels. "He climb on top of me and fuck and fuck, even when my head bandaged."<sup>183</sup> Celie, understandably, feels that nobody loves her. She is traumatised. Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, like Fonso, has used sex to his own advantage and to keep Celie under oppression.

Celie's sexual encounters with Fonso and Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ are very damaging to her self image. In her best moments Celie imagines herself as the beautiful, grinning Shug Avery and puts her arm around Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ as she supposes Shug Avery might do. More damaging to Celie's self image are particular times when Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ is beating her. Celie says that for her not to cry, she imagines herself wood. "I say to myself, Celie, you a tree."<sup>184</sup> Celie detaches herself from reality because of her intolerable circumstances.

The sex that Mary Agnes has with her uncle, the prison warder Bubber Hodges, is pure rape. Bubber Hodges does this to Mary Agnes because she is a woman and because she has black blood. And this rape is also a way of Bubber Hodges demonstrating his power over the woman with some black blood. It is also a way of keeping the woman in her subordinated place.

The men in The Color Purple are shown to regard women as a labour force and an object of sexual pleasure. This is seen in the transaction between Fonso and Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ in which Celie is traded. Fonso assures Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ that Celie is a good labourer and is sexually experienced but without obligations of her ever becoming pregnant. To motivate Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ more, a calf is offered. This transaction points to the fact that the men in this community have low regard for the woman. The selling points in the transaction over Celie are that she is good at her work, that she is not fresh and that sex with Celie cannot result into a pregnancy. Fonso says that Celie is

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<sup>183</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 109

<sup>184</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 23

spoiled twice. Bearing in mind that Mr. \_\_\_\_ already has big children of his own, his only interest in Celie is sex and someone to look after his children.

“She aint fresh tho, but I spect you know that. She spoiled.<sup>185</sup> Twice. But you don’t need a fresh woman no how. I got a fresh one in there myself and she is sick all the time. He spit, over the railing. The children git on her nerve, she not much of a cook. And she big already. ... She (Celie)<sup>186</sup> ugly. He say but she ain’t no stranger to hard work. And she clean. And God done fixed her. You can do everything just like you want to and she ain’t gonna make you feed it<sup>187</sup> or cloth it<sup>188</sup>. ... She’d come with her own linen. She can take that cow she raised down there back of the crib. ... she ugly. ... but she’ll make the better wife (than Nettie)<sup>189</sup> ... she can work like a man.”<sup>190</sup>

Celie is being marketed as a good cook, one to have sex with without the worry of a pregnancy, a hard worker despite being ugly and that she will go into her marriage to Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ with her own linen and her cow. Celie is being presented as one who is a perfect example of co-modification of the woman, in which the woman is presented as a commodity for sale.

Fonso is also presented as a sexual brute. When his new wife May Ellen gets sick he has to have sex with Celie to satisfy his untamed sex drive. This is the same Fonso who, when Celie’s mother gets ill, resorts to raping Celie.

Fonso has no regard for women. Motherhood to him means nothing. This explains his use of the term “spoiled twice” in reference to the fact that Celie has been pregnant twice. And because of this, he says, Celie is not “fresh.” Fonso is treating Celie as property whose master has become tired of and wants to dispose of it. To make certain of a deal Fonso offers Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ a cow in addition to Celie and thereby seals the deal.

The black women in Africa have to undergo circumcision. Basically this is an attempt to deprive them of any possible sexual pleasure. In these circumstances,

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<sup>185</sup> To mean that Celie has had two pregnancies.

<sup>186</sup> My editing for clarity

<sup>187</sup> “It” refers to a child. Fonso is explaining to Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ that Celie cannot become pregnant.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid

<sup>189</sup> To mean that Celie has had two pregnancies.

<sup>190</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 17, 18

the existence of the woman at the sexual level is seen as that of providing the man with sexual pleasure. The woman is herself not seen as one who should also enjoy her sexual encounters.

The descriptions of sexual relations that gratify the feelings of the woman are presented as perverted. Celie can only hug Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ during sex when she imagines that this is the same Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ that the beautiful Shug Avery enjoys having sex with. Sofia is contented basically because she is in charge of her relationships. Shug Avery's relationships with men are described as being full of excitement and fun. These relationships are not permanent. They are also not socially endorsed. Her relationship with Albert is seen as perverted because Albert is married, first to Annie Julia and then afterwards to Celie. The community does not endorse the relationship because Shug Avery is seen as a prostitute. This is also opposed by Albert's prejudiced father, because Shug Avery is seen as a blues singer and a woman of loose morals. Albert's brother only comes to see Shug Avery in order to inspect the commodity that his brother has acquired, to see its quality. Such relationships are presented as not worth having. If the women are to be free and happy in their relationships then they are better off rebelling and being labelled as women of loose morals. Rebellion is presented as the only feasible alternative. This is what some women resort to do.

The sexual relationships which satisfy a woman are those between women themselves such as those between Shug Avery and Celie, Olivia and Tashi. Celie confesses that the first time she saw Shug Avery's full long black body with its black plum nipples she thought that she had turned into a man. She realises that she has sisterly feelings towards Sofia but that Shug Avery made her feel like she was a man. Celie has never felt this way in her encounters with men before. Her relationships with men made her feel used and abused.

Celie's description of what she saw of Shug Avery's nude body is purely sexual:

“She say, well take a good look. Even if I was a bag of bones now. She have the nerve to put one hand on her naked hip and bat her eyes at me. Then she suck her teef and roll her eyes at the ceiling while I wash her. I wash her body, it feel like I’m praying. My hands tremble and my breath short.”<sup>191</sup>

Shug Avery realises the attraction and encourages Celie to look on. At last Celie gets a positive reaction from the woman she has admired since she saw her in a picture. Shug Avery tells Celie to stop calling her using the formal term of ma’am.

Celie’s passion for Shug Avery grows in intensity:

“She wearing a long white gown and her thin black hand stretching out of it to hold the white cigarette looks just right. Something bout it, maybe a little tender veins I see and the big ones I try not to, make me sacred. I feel like something pushing me forward. If I don’t watch out I’ll have hold her hand, tasting her fingers in my mouth.”<sup>192</sup>

Celie is so obsessed by Shug Avery that she cannot let go;

“Can I sit here and eat with you?”<sup>193</sup>

She finally asks. Her success with Shug Avery even surprises Albert who wonders how Celie managed.

In Africa, Olivia and Tashi are also enjoying a special love relationship as Nettie suspects.

While the women in Africa are married off to polygamous marriages, the women in America have to endure the conduct of their husbands having extra marital affairs. Celie has to contend with Shug Avery and Sofia with Mary Agnes. The women, too, seem to have the latitude of changing lovers with no serious consequence. Shug Avery is a perfect example hence her nick name of Shug Avery because she enjoyed sex very much. Sex is not just important to Shug Avery but she finds it sweet, like sugar, it spiced up her life. This is the sex that the men in Celie’s life have given a bad name to by abusing her. Sofia, too, is able to have a sixth child fathered by a

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<sup>191</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 53

<sup>192</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 55

<sup>193</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 55

different man other than her husband, Harpo. Mary Agnes gets involved with another man leaving Harpo to Sofia.

Shug Avery is also seen as a deviant, a home breaker because of her relationship with Mr. \_\_\_\_\_. She is despised by Mr. \_\_\_\_\_'s two sisters. In this situation, the solidarity of women is absent because Mr. \_\_\_\_\_'s two sisters hold values they have grown up with, values which negate the position of the woman. They frown upon the illicit relationship between Shug Avery and their brother.

An important aspect of sexual relations in The Color Purple is the sex education or sexual awareness that Shug Avery imparts to Celie. Shug Avery is shown to have a good understanding of sexual matters, at least she has better knowledge and understanding of sexuality than Celie. When she embarks on the sex education of Celie, she starts from the basics. Celie immediately shows signs of self awareness for the first time. Shug Avery helps to explore first Celie's physical sexuality. Celie, who all along has been told that she is ugly, has never tried to look at what it is that is between her legs that all the men in her life have craved for. As will be looked at in detail later in chapter five, Celie is amazed first at the hair and then she wonders if what she is looking at is really hers.

This reminds one of Toni Morrison's characters in Beloved, Sethe,<sup>194</sup> who urges her listeners to take a physical examination of themselves. Sethe's listeners have always been told that they are ugly. They have been denied a sense of identity as a result. They have always been told that they are inferior to the white man. Sethe's message is revolutionary in the sense that it enables her listeners appreciate themselves and gain an identity for themselves.

Celie's instructed self examination follows a similar pattern. This is followed by an intensive introduction to sexuality in which Celie discovers the button which is one

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<sup>194</sup> Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (New York; Penguin, 1987)

of the keys to sexual satisfaction. Celie begins to look at herself as an individual when she identifies her sexuality as her own.

#### 4.2.6 Religion

Religion in The Color Purple is tinted with racism, sexism and hypocrisy. These factors come to light in the dialogue between Celie and Shug Avery, in the letters from Nettie and also in the experiences of some of the characters.

Celie's oppression is deeply embedded in religion. Celie, asked by Shug Avery, describes God as man and white: "He big and old and tall and graybearded and white."<sup>195</sup> Celie has come to believe that this God never listens to "poor colored women." She accuses God of having given her "a lynched daddy, a crazy mama, a lowdown dog of a step pa and a sister" she will probably never see again.<sup>196</sup> Celie's experience with God has been devastating so far. Fonso, after raping Celie, tells her to tell no one but God. To Celie, it is like Fonso and God have connived in her oppression. The implication of this is that for Celie to be free of her oppression she has got to rebel against this traditional and patriarchal concept of God for some unorthodox concept.

Shug Avery makes the point that God must be bigger than the gender or race identity. She points out that God cannot be a man. Her argument is that instead of spending much time doing works to please God, individuals need to celebrate God. She argues that people need to enjoy everything that God has created and that even the feelings and emotions need to be celebrated because they were created by God. God, to Shug Avery, is a Being she comfortably refers to as "It". Shug Avery teaches Celie a religion of admiration and Celie is quick to learn. Admiring the color purple is equated with what Celie calls "making love to God," an act she performs with the aid of a reefer.<sup>197</sup> This concept of God is rebellious and unorthodox.

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<sup>195</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 176

<sup>196</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 175

<sup>197</sup> A marijuana cigarette

Nettie's view, shown in her letters, is even more radical as she simply stands firm on the fact that Jesus, the son of God, had kinky hair. To her this means that he was not white. By noticing that black people have got kinky hair, Nettie indorses Jesus as being black.

At fourteen years the raped and abused Celie is compelled to confide only in God of all her troubles and tribulations. Her assumed father who has raped and abused her compels Celie to confide in God only because the knowledge of what is happening to her would kill her mother whose health is drastically ailing. The man she knows to be her father tells her not to tell "nobody but God."<sup>198</sup> He tells her that "It would kill your mammy"<sup>199</sup> if she came to know about the rape. And since a girl of fourteen has been told not to confide in her mother and she has lost contact with her only sister, and she has no known relative, Celie can only confide in God. At this point God or religion acts as a confidant to Celie, a place of solace in which Celie takes refuge. The problem here is not God but how Fonso has used the knowledge of God to almost permanently silence a young girl who has been abused at his (Fonso's) hands.

Celie does not name most of her male characters in her early letters. Therefore the reader finds Celie writing about Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ whom she later identifies as Albert. It is as if Celie is making a statement that men have no individual identities. That men are the same and act in the same way towards women. To Celie, most men are the same: brutes not worth knowing by name.

Celie gives religion as part of the reason she does not fight back when she is abused, especially by the man she has always known as her father. She says that the Bible has said that one needs to honour their father and mother. And that this life is temporal but that heaven lasts for ever; "This life soon be over, I say. Heaven last all ways."<sup>200</sup> Celie is religious and at the moment finds sustenance in it. While

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<sup>198</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 11

<sup>199</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 11

<sup>200</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 47

Fonso is using religion to hide his sin, even when he knows about heaven and hell, Celie is forced to endure the abuse in order to enter heaven. Celie does not ask herself whether Fonso is interested in heaven or whether God does not want her to expose evil and deal with it. She is so oppressed and silenced that she does not see the manipulation and deception that Fonso is doing. She does not see that Fonso is hiding behind religion.

Religion in The Color Purple is portrayed as opportunistic. When Shug Avery is in labour and experiencing an excruciating delivery, the preacher and some women from the church think that it is the right time to talk about repentance. The religious people are taking advantage of the intense labour pains to compel Shug Avery to repent. Shug Avery later sees through this deception and comments: "I was too big a fool to repent."<sup>201</sup> This action of the church people is not only opportunistic but also hypocritical. They take advantage of and exploit people in their hour of need.

There is also a way in which religion in The Color Purple is portrayed as irrelevant and impotent in the lives of the people. Nettie asks Reverend Samuel to visit the oppressed Celie and check on how Celie is doing; "But he says he can't risk putting himself between man and wife, especially when he don't know them."<sup>202</sup>

Religion has yet another face in The Color Purple. The way that the people of religion treat the situation of Celie and the sick Shug Avery is hypocritical. Shug Avery, the blues singer and mistress of Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ is very sick and nobody in the town wants to take in the "Queen Honeybee." Her mother does not want her back and her father has called her a tramp. The church people, especially the women, gossip about her without trying to use their Christian religious teaching to reach out to Shug Avery and try to get her help. They are unaware that their pride is yet another type of sin. They are content in pointing out what they think is the major sin.

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<sup>201</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 115

<sup>202</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 121

The preacher misuses his pulpit to denounce Shug Avery who is not even in the church. The preacher, in his sermon talks about a strumpet<sup>203</sup> in short skirts, smoking cigarettes, drinking gin, singing for money and taking other women's men. The preacher, disregarding his environment, goes on to talk about a "slut", a "hussy", a "heifer" and a "street cleaner" in his denunciation of Shug Avery. He is most insensitive in his criticism that he annoys even Celie who should be the aggrieved party because the so-called "slut" takes her husband. Celie observes that somebody needs to stand up to defend Shug Avery. Even the brutal Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ is moved to sympathise with Shug Avery. He observes; "Nobody fight for Shug, he say. And a little water comes to his eyes."<sup>204</sup> Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ organises a wagon and brings into his matrimonial home the despised Shug Avery whom the Church has condemned as strumpet.

While the preacher is busy attacking Shug Avery, who is not in church, the other guilty party, Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, is in the congregation and yet the preacher makes no mention of the wrongs that Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ has committed. In fact the preacher's words make Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ look like the victim and not the perpetrator of heinous crimes of abuse and infidelity. The preacher, by implying that Shug Avery has taken another woman's husband, makes it look like Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ had no say in the matter and was completely innocent. It is a world in which a man can do no wrong.

This is exactly like the patriarchal world painted in the Bible in which a woman is said to have been caught committing adultery. The woman is picked upon for stoning to death while the man is interestingly missing and not even mentioned.<sup>205</sup> The blemish is simply put on the woman. Mary, the mother of Jesus, was equally a candidate for public disgrace because she had conceived outside wedlock and for the fact that the pregnancy was not for the man she was engaged to, Joseph. Joseph is presented as agonising and trying to find a way to save Mary from public

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<sup>203</sup> An offensive term for a prostitute or a woman regarded as too sexually active.

<sup>204</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 530

<sup>205</sup> The Holy Bible: the book of *John* Chapter 8:3-11

humiliation.<sup>206</sup> Like in the other cases, the question of the man responsible for the pregnancy does not become an issue for Joseph.

An interesting observation about this church is that while the people are aware that Celie has been living in oppression, they do nothing about it. They also leave the manual work of cleaning the church to Celie while they just watch while chatting away with the preacher. To these holy church people Celie is no better than a slave.

The missionaries among the Olinka people are also next to a disaster. They are interested in saving the people from sin and want to change the people's way of life. They despise the people's practices as evil while not having a full understanding of why the people maintain their practices. One of these practices is that of the roofleaf. The white missionaries have regarded this as an idol which needs to be destroyed and yet do not understand that this roofleaf has medicinal value and is used as a covering for the people's houses as roofs. This episode reflects the shallowness of the missionaries' understanding of the concept of God.

Nettie and Samuel do realise that the missionaries are irrelevant to the lives of the Olinka and so try to be relevant. They take up the issue of the displacement of the Olinka people from their land with their missionary headquarters in London. Their Bishop, a youngish man wearing spectacles and thumbing through a stack of Samuel's yearly reports does not concern himself with the problem of the Olinka people. He is only concerned about appearances. He asks how much time has passed since Corrine's death. He is worried about what the "natives" will think of the marriage between Samuel and Nettie. Samuel and Nettie leave London without a word on the Olinka problems. The headquarters are not interested in this important issue that affects the people. They are only interested in petty issues of public image as opposed to matters of truth, life and death for the Olinka people.

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<sup>206</sup> The Holy Bible: The book of *Matthew* chapter 1:18-23

This reflects the impotence and irrelevance of the religion of the missionaries which Celie has also believed in.

This is the same God whom Shug Avery and Celie discuss as having been used to keep blacks under oppression and women under perpetual subordination.

#### **4.2.7 Intra Gender Relations**

A variety of women are presented in The Color Purple who face similar circumstances and are joined together by their love. Without exception, these women love and respect each other, the men in their lives - no matter how abusive these men are - and the children that they have to care for.

Celie's mentally deranged mother is ill but is concerned enough for Celie to express her dislike of Celie's condition. She has no idea that Celie's pregnancy has been caused by the man in her life whom Celie has always known to be her father. And Celie cannot tell her mother about the truth of her pregnancy, which has been as a result of rape by her mother's second husband, because she fears and has been told by her abuser that such truth would kill her mother.

Celie, apart from allowing herself to be repeatedly raped to protect her ill mother, has to take care of her younger brothers and sisters, especially Nettie. As a result of two pregnancies and two deliveries, Celie is no longer appealing to Fonso and because she has not been allowed to breast feed her baby, she is seen as unclean by Fonso who now tries to turn his attention to Celie's younger sister, Nettie. Celie offers herself to Fonso in order to protect Nettie from the impending rape at the hands of Fonso.

Celie also offers herself to be married off to Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ in order to protect Nettie from a marriage that she is certain would scar her life.

When Celie is given to Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ in a bargain, she discovers that she has to care for a large number of children, some of them, like Harpo, already big. Celie cares

for these children despite the continued rape and abuse she suffers at the hands of her husband and the beating she gets from Harpo.

On her first night with Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, Celie puts her arm around him just because she is thinking about Mr. \_\_\_\_\_'s mistress, Shug Avery. Celie's appreciation is not because she is enjoying the sex with Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ but she relishes the thought that she, who has been told that she is ugly, is sharing a man with the exotic Shug Avery whom she regards as being very beautiful. Celie is bonding with a lady she has not yet met but has only seen in a picture.

Apart from having visited their brother Albert to inspect their new sister-in-law, Kate and Carrie advise Celie to fight back against the constant abuse from their brother, Albert. Kate says; "You got to fight them, Celie, she say. I can't do it for you. You got to fight them for yourself."<sup>207</sup> By giving Celie this advice, the critical sisters are showing concern for and comradeship with Celie and all the women. However, at this point Celie is so broken, so fragmented that she cannot fight. She has always been oppressed and has never learnt to fight. She has no sense of the self. At this point in time Celie cannot imagine any other form of life style. She has seen Nettie fight and run away but does not see what good there is in that; "I think bout Nettie, dead. She fight, she run away. What good it do? I don't fight, I stay where I'm told. But I'm alive."<sup>208</sup> Kate cares enough about Celie that she compels Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ to buy some clothes for Celie. Kate's advice to Celie that she must fight is important because in a world where women are supposed to be docile, the injunction to "fight" is a rebellious one. Yet it is the only way for a woman to attain selfhood.

When Nettie tells Celie to fight and not let them run "over you," Celie is resigned to her fate. Nettie prods Celie further: "You got to fight. You got to fight," but Celie's response is: "But I don't know how to fight. All I know how to do is stay alive."<sup>209</sup> At

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<sup>207</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 29

<sup>208</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 29

<sup>209</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 25, 26

the moment Celie cannot fight. All she knows is to endure and to stay alive. Nettie is calling on Celie to rise and fight to live. Celie may be slow to learn this lesson but when she does learn it, not even Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ is able to stop her.

When Mr. \_\_\_\_\_'s attempts to court Nettie fail he dictates that Nettie, who has run away from Fonso's unwelcome sexual advances seeks refuge with Celie, must leave his house. Celie, the wife, has no voice and no say in the matter. She is completely under the dominion of the man in her life. Nettie understands Celie's predicament as opposed to her being bitter at having been evicted by Mr. \_\_\_\_\_. Both sisters are more concerned about the other's plight than they are of their own plight. Nettie feels that leaving Celie alone with Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ and a bunch of his naughty children is like seeing Celie being buried, buried in a life of abuse and hardship. Celie sees her life as being more than buried, it's worse than that, she reasons. "If I was buried, I wouldn't have to work."<sup>210</sup> Her only pillar is God. She says, "long as I can spell G-o-d I got somebody along."<sup>211</sup>

Celie offers her support and sisterly solidarity to Corrine, the wife of Reverend Samuel, after a shop clerk treats her rudely. She offers Corrine a seat in the wagon and is careful to keep the woman's pride and sense of the self intact. She compliments Corrine on her selection of the fabric from the shop.

Celie is again faced with having to care for her husband's sick mistress, Shug Avery. This is most unusual but the power of the women to bond together overcomes all obstacles.

A set back to women's solidarity is temporarily experienced when Celie encourages the now married Harpo to beat his wife, Sofia, if he wants her to be compliant. This betrayal is not done out of deliberate ill will towards Sofia or a deliberate act to betray another woman but that this is the only type of normal life of a woman that Celie has known and experienced as a girl, mother and wife. That

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<sup>210</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 26

<sup>211</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 26

as a woman she has had to be abused and beaten up by the men in her life, that as a woman and wife it is normal to be beaten by a husband. However, this condition of betrayal is temporal as Sofia forces a confrontation with Celie at which the confusion is cleared up. The confrontation leads to a deeper and enduring friendship and sisterhood of the two women. The quilt that they make together has a strong message. The quilt made from different weak, useless pieces of cloth sewn together produces a new, strong and useful cloth. This suggests that even the black vulnerable women, from diverse backgrounds, weak and oppressed, can become strong and “overcome” when they, like the pieces of cloth in the quilt, come together.

When Sofia later punches the town’s white Mayor and is imprisoned, it is the women in her life, Celie, Shug Avery, Sofia’s sisters and Mary Agnes (Squeak) who take the initiative of coming up with a plan to have Sofia released from prison. The bond that the women form becomes very important as this is the bond that helps Mary Agnes. Mary Agnes is able to share her rape experiences with the women and this act functions like her own therapy to selfhood.

Meanwhile Nettie has also been helping another family. She is employed by a missionary family of Reverend Samuel and his wife Corrine. In this family, which has adopted Celie’s children, Nettie, who only suspects this fact, has an opportunity to help another woman to look after her sister’s children. So, Celie’s daughter, Olivia, and Celie’s son, Adam, come to be raised under the watchful eye of their aunt, Nettie.

As an act of sisterly gratitude, Shug Avery, when she learns that Albert is cruel to Celie when she is not around, decides to stay longer with Celie in order to ensure that Celie is protected from abuse. In the course of this Shug Avery helps Celie discover the letters from Nettie that Albert has been hiding all along. She helps Celie read and understand these letters. In the letters, Celie comes to learn that not only is her sister, Nettie, alive but also that her own children are alive and well in Africa.

Nettie's letters also give a glimpse of the lives of black women in Africa. They show the bond of love and sisterhood that can develop among women in Africa especially among multiple wives married to the same man. The letters show that the problem of sexism cuts across continents.

Celie finally confronts the man she has always regarded as her father and later on confronts her husband Albert. In both confrontations, Shug Avery is instrumental and supportive of Celie. Celie moves to Memphis to live with Shug Avery and whilst there starts and develops a business of her own of making pants. Even in Memphis, the spirit of sisterly love and bonding is present. In her business Celie employs two women, the twins Jerene and Darlene, to make her "Folkspants, unlimited." Celie uses Shug Avery's money to start her business. The first pair of pants that she makes are for Shug Avery.

Later when Shug Avery takes on a new male lover by the name of Germaine, Celie returns to her home in the plantations to visit Albert and the two develop their relationship which grows into one of respectful companionship.

Nettie marries Reverend Samuel whose wife has died and adopts her sister's children, Olivia and Adam.

When Fonso dies, Celie and Nettie inherit their father's home. This gives the women financial security and freedom.

## 5. CHAPTER FIVE: The Self and the Community

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### 5.1 Meridian

Meridian unravels aesthetic social concerns in the character Meridian. Meridian is a young woman coming of age and on her journey from guilt, loneliness and self-doubt, to self-acceptance, empowerment and love. Meridian is set on a path to greater self-realisation and endures the hardships of firmly established elements of racism and sexism and irrevocably establishes her identity amid the chaos of social upheaval, sexual alienation, and people who are not always approving or supportive of either the woman or her cause. Meridian rises from a position of spiritual and physical despair to a new being who is in charge of her capacities and inner strength.

Meridian goes through different stages of growth. This growth is in the form of resistance. She goes through the emotional, physical and psychological stages of resistance as she rises through the period of the civil rights movement.

Meridian first projects her resistance to the established patriarchal community when, as a young girl of thirteen, she rejects religion despite her devout mother's urgings.<sup>212</sup> She decides to live with her mother's disapproval than conform to a chokingly narrow constructed patriarchal Christian faith. This shows her determination to be an individual in her own right. She tries to retain her own identity in a community which is hostile especially to a woman's identity.

At the age of thirteen, Meridian, unwilling to accept Jesus into her life, encounters the wrath of her mother who withdraws her love from her. The religious belief of Meridian's mother focuses attention on God alone and neglects the other human beings whom God created. The ultimate in this belief is to please God even if doing so unfairly hurts other people. The focus of such individuals is God's forgiveness.

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<sup>212</sup> Alice Walker (1986) 28,29, 30

Like Gabriel<sup>213</sup> who neglected his own numerous sins to punish others for their one sin in the past. His claim when challenged of this is that he is only answerable to God and that this God has already forgiven him. Meridian's fraught relationship with her mother casts a shadow over much of her life. Meridian struggles to overcome this and other obstacles in her search for the sense of the self, self-awareness and self-acceptance.

Her mother's emotional distance, disapproving nature, and moral superiority fill Meridian with a sense of guilt and sadness. This feeling continues to haunt Meridian well into adulthood. Meridian longs for guidance and a sense of belonging. She is unsure of the existence of God and her own relationship with the spiritual word. She finds that traditional paths and explanations do not satisfy or comfort her.

While at school, Meridian fails to complete a speech which she has always taken for granted and recited constantly. She is not able to complete the speech because she feels that the speech does not reflect what she believes in. She feels that there is no truth in the words that she speaks. "Meridian was explaining to her mother that for the first time she really listened to what she was saying, knew she didn't believe it, and was so distracted by this revelation that she could not make the rest of her speech."<sup>214</sup> While her mother urges her to pray, Miss Winters supports her stance. While Meridian does not get her mother's support, she has another woman to support her.

Meridian further asserts herself as a nonconformist when she boldly gives up her child and her role as a mother to pursue a college education. Contrary to what a conformist would feel, Meridian's feelings are unique; "When she gave him away she did so with a light heart. She did not look back, believing she had saved a small person's life."<sup>215</sup> Meridian reasons that giving her son away is the best thing for

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<sup>213</sup> James Baldwin, *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, (New York; Dell Publishing Co., 1978)

<sup>214</sup> Alice Walker (1986) 121

<sup>215</sup> Alice Walker(1986) 91

both the child and herself contrary to community's expectations. This is not an easy decision to make for Meridian as she has the disapproval of her mother.

Meridian is forced to live with her mother's disapproval. Like an act of penance, Meridian decides to dedicate her life to the civil rights campaign. She tries to give the Wild Child, whom the community calls Wile Chile,<sup>216</sup> a chance to integrate into the larger community then and later, following the Wild Child's sudden death, Meridian tries to give the Wild Child a proper funeral. She gets involved with the voter education movement in which she does not affirm to the destruction of human life in the name of a revolution. All these activities that Meridian involves herself in are without the approval of the Saxon College authorities. In these acts Meridian is living up to her identity as a nonconformist. In these activities for the good of the broader community Meridian finds satisfaction. She has discovered something that is truth to her. She has taken it upon herself to make her own decisions and take responsibility for her actions and shape her own destiny.

Meridian is strong enough in her quest for the sense of the self to overcome the loss of her husband, child, her lover, Truman Held, who marries Lynne the white woman and her friend Anne-Marion who is bent on convincing Meridian to be willing to kill for the sake of the revolution. Meridian proves that she has prowess to negotiate her way through life. Her community, family and friends have proved not to be reliable. Increasingly, Meridian has got to learn to depend on herself more and more. She exists as an individual, aiming for her freedom and ability to make her own choices. The Civil Rights Movement becomes, for her, a unique vocation for which she is ready to die. This is evidenced when she is seen facing a military tank in order to fight for the children to see the mummy. She leads her community to confront the white racist community with the corpse of a drowned boy in protest against segregation. She is passionate about her actions and acts from her own convictions to help the various communities she lives in.

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<sup>216</sup> Alice Walker (1986) 35

Meridian has chosen to live in the south like a servant and a saint among the people she lives with despite struggling with her own identity. She takes time to think about her views and beliefs from her own perspective. Meridian takes interest in community matters. She realises that the black people are not allowed to swim in the public swimming pool and the Mayor and other white authorities have refused to build them one of their own. She cannot contain the fact that several black children drown in the floods while swimming in ditches that served as makeshift pools. Meridian decides to do something about this plight of the people; "It was Meridian who had led them to the mayor's office, bearing in her arms the bloated figure of the five-year old boy who had been stuck in the sewer for two days before he was racked out with a grappling hook."<sup>217</sup> This act produces results as the ponds are drained of the water. She gets her results just like she does on the issue of the mummy in the circus wagon, the children were able to unmask the lie, the deceit that the whites were trying to play on the black people. The mummy was made of plastic and the children are glad that they did not have to wait till Thursday when they would have had to pay to see the fake mummy.

Meridian shows her continued growth when she is able to face the two people who have caused her pain in her life; Lynne and Truman. At the time that these two people pass through a crisis following the death of their daughter Camara, Meridian mediates between these two and manages to remain friends with both of them notwithstanding the circumstances prevailing. She takes responsibility for her actions and is committed in her decision to serve. Meridian is at the service of Truman and Lynne:

"Dashing in and out of subways, cooking meals, listening to monologues thickened with grief, being pulled into bed- by Lynne, who held her like a child afraid of the dark- and by Truman, who almost drowned his body with her own, stuffing her flesh into his mouth as if he literally starved for her. It was then that her feeling for Truman returned, but it was not sexual. It was love that purged all thought of blame from her memory. It was forgiveness."<sup>218</sup>

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<sup>217</sup> Alice Walker (1986) 191

<sup>218</sup> Alice Walker (1986) 172 173

Through reaching out to the two people who have hurt her, Meridian is able to forgive and in turn free herself from the bondage that has held her all along. This is reminiscent of the scene in which Miss Winters plays the mother figure to Meridian in Saxon College when Meridian gets sick. She forgives Meridian as though on behalf of her biological mother who has thus far not forgiven Meridian. Miss Winters comforts Meridian, first after Meridian fails to recite a speech and later when she is very ill at Saxon College. In these moments, women are seen giving each other support in challenging times. By stepping into the shoes of Meridian's mother, Miss Winters helps Meridian attain a forgiveness that she needs to spur her towards personal forgiveness and growth.

The act of forgiveness enables Meridian to understand her outer world even better. She realises that her country is owned by the rich and that the rich must be relieved of this ownership before "freedom" means anything to her community. Meridian enters a modern church and reflects on the question of the morality of killing for justice. Meridian gets filled with so much rage that she feels that the rich and the racist of the world should stand in fear of her because, though apparently weak and penniless, a little crazy and without power, she is yet of a resolute and relative fearless character which, sufficient in its calm acceptance of its own purpose, could bring the mightiest of the country to their knees.<sup>219</sup>

Meridian turns to the Civil Rights movement which is strong during this time. The movement campaigns for the rights of the people of color. It also educates people on the importance of their participating in voting. In the process the members of the civil rights movement are beaten and arrested by those that oppose them especially the police and white racists.

She makes sacrifices for the movement but her dedication is in question as she cannot commit herself to kill for the movement. Meridian, as a result, feels more and more ostracised from the movement until she is compelled to work and live

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<sup>219</sup> Alice Walker (1986) 2001

among the mostly poor and impoverished rural communities of the South. Meridian lives among these people and helps out in all sorts of ways; from washing dishes to gardening. The communities accept her for who she is and in turn sustain her by giving her provisions, from daily food to a cow.

Meridian's selfless service, suffering and perseverance are like opportunities offered for her atonement and open doors for Meridian to attain self acceptance. When Meridian is well again, she rises out of her sick bed and goes out into the future with a lot of confidence and self assurance. She finally is able to forgive herself and learns to love and accept herself for who she is.

Meridian is selfless in her service to her community. She works very hard but her bravery and determination are especially prominent. She challenges a tank pointing at her. The result of this is the emergence of a calm, sustaining and growing self awareness. Whereas at the start of the novel Meridian is mostly a broken and damaged individual, mourning about the various loses that she experiences, in the end she emerges as a whole individual. Her commitment to community service has helped her overcome the love that her mother has deprived her. The struggle has given her the much needed wisdom that she needs to survive and regain her lost identity.

She refuses the flattery of men. When Truman offers her a ride in his new car, Meridian turns him down explaining that she prefers to walk. While Truman sees this as a form of the old fashioned protest, Meridian is aware that she is no longer going to be co-modified by any man and that she will stand on her own two feet and not allow anyone to define a life for her.

Before, Meridian has tried to base her identity on other people, like her mother, but has failed. She tries to base it on the Civil Rights movement but again fails. She even tries to base it on her college institution but this disappoints her as well. She

ultimately realises that she has got to rely on herself<sup>220</sup> for her self definition and realisation of her sense of the self. Meridian now understands that the respect she owed her life has to continue, against whatever obstacles, to live it, and not give up any particle of it without a fight to the death, preferably not her own. She realises that this existence extended beyond herself to those around her. Meridian makes up her mind that, as a result of this extended existence, she would be able to kill before she allowed anyone to kill any member in her extended existence.

This does not come out as a contradiction on the part of Meridian. She clarifies her stance by reasoning that, to boast about this new capacity to kill - which she does not, after all, admire - would be to destroy the understanding she has acquired with it; that even the contemplation of murder required incredible delicacy as it required incredible spiritual work, and that the historical circumstances must be right. She is of the view that the setting, the environment and reasons must be clear. To Meridian, it is only in a church, surrounded by the righteous guidance of the people's memories, that she can even approach the concept of retaliatory murder. Meridian believes that it is only among the pious that this idea can both comfort and uplift.

Meridian is now able to reach out and claim her place in her space: to walk behind the revolutionaries - those who know that they must spill blood in order to help the poor and the blacks - to sing for them when they stop to wash off the blood and find that their throats are too choked with the smell of murdered flesh to sing.<sup>221</sup> This realisation demonstrates that Meridian has found her sense of identity and that she has found and claimed a role in her community. She has made a choice of what her position and role in society is. Her community work and activism become her way of life. Teaching, conducting voter education and protesting on behalf of her communities become her major activities. With the passage of time she grows in self confidence but becomes poorer materially, owning less and less.

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<sup>220</sup> Alice Walker (1986) 32

<sup>221</sup> Alice Walker (1986) 201

Meridian is full of confidence and vigorously goes on to face the challenge of voter registration and is able to face the complexities that confront her clients and offer help beyond the voter sensitisation exercise. Truman and Meridian are together as they continue with the lobbying for people to register as voters. They become practical in meeting the people at their point of need, helping with the domestic work and providing solutions to family disputes as in the case of the Treasure sisters, Margaret and Lucille.<sup>222</sup> Meridian has made her own choice and is responsible for it. Her life is dedicated to service of the local communities.

When confronted with the situation of a child who is said to have killed her child, Meridian's mind goes back to her son. This forces Meridian into her sleeping bag weeping underneath Truman's trembling arm. Her heart is roused to compassion for her son. Her heart, however, refuses to beat faster. It refuses to warm up for her son but for the girl child who killed her child. Meridian's heart has been moved to life but not to emotions. She is demonstrating that she has found her identity in her environment and attained a selfhood. She now has a strong and stable heart which she calls "a fucking heart of stone."<sup>223</sup> Meridian is now able to warm up to life as expressed in her poem:

"I want to put an end to guilt  
I want to put an end to shame  
Whatever you have done my sister  
(my brother)  
Know I wish to forgive you  
Love you  
It is not the crystal stone  
Of our innocence  
That circles us  
Not the tooth of our purity  
That bites bloody our hearts."<sup>224</sup>

Truman, in the true tradition of Alice Walker of not neglecting the men, feels some warmth in a moment of regeneration. Meridian sleeps in his arms that night.

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<sup>222</sup> Margaret, a black woman of sixty-nine, gets in a relationship with a man at a time that she reaches menopause which she mistakenly takes as a sign of pregnancy. A visit to the Doctor on the advice of Meridian easily clears up the matter. Alice Walker (1986) 206, 210

<sup>223</sup> Alice Walker (1986) 213

<sup>224</sup> Alice Walker (1986) 213

Truman, feeling maternal over Meridian, wipes Meridian's forehead with a cloth soaked in cold water more like an act of baptism. Meridian recognises that this water does vanish into the sand and that she and Truman are cast out alone to heal and recreate themselves. For Meridian, this self recreation is the asserting of who she is, the acknowledgement of her selfhood.

Truman's quest to claim Meridian's love once again is challenged by Meridian. She loves Truman but not as before. She has set Truman free to be whoever and whatever he wants to be. However, Truman is not free to think that Meridian is a fool. Meridian does not allow anyone, even Truman to dominate her.

Meridian, now recovered and strong enough, gets ready to move on. She has nothing to pack as she owns nothing. Her inner growth with her newly found sense of identity is evident even on her physical self. Her hair has grown again. She has returned to the world cleansed of sickness. This new Meridian has grown out of the old. This new part of her is sure and ready even eager for the world. Meridian has allowed ideas, no matter where they came from, to penetrate her deeply and she gets to affirm that her value is in her individuality and not in being in the company of other people. She has divested herself of dependence on the old notions of what a good woman ought to be.

As Meridian departs, Truman feels the room begin to turn and he falls to the floor. A moment later, dizzy, he gets into Meridian's sleeping bag shakily. Truman literally fits into the walk that Meridian has just completed. He fits into Meridian's sleeping bag like in a womb or more appropriately a tomb from which he is supposed to be born again, to resurrect, like Meridian, into a fully grown human being with a proper sense of the self. He, too, Like Albert<sup>225</sup>, is to perform his penance and is yet to discover his identity and claim a place for himself in his space.

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<sup>225</sup> Alice Walker (1986)

## 5.2 *The Color Purple*

When the novel starts, we are introduced to Celie who writes to God narrating the horrors of her life. Celie leads us into the story of her life in her letters. She shows us that her life begins as a virtual slave who has been a victim of racism and sexism. She has been a victim of men and has borne the burden of traditional sex roles and many abuses and social injustices. Like the mother in Langston Hughes poem<sup>226</sup>, Celie does not give up. At first she teaches herself to endure, to survive, to stay alive. She imagines herself to be wood. Bending but not breaking. At this point Celie has no sense of identity and is not her individual self.

Celie's journey towards her attainment of the self identity proves to be a long one. Her sense of self worth and identity grows as Celie comes to understand her body, her past and the truth about her life. The point is that as individuals come to know, to understand themselves and their surroundings and get a better understanding about life's realities, they become more liberated and more confident about themselves. This gives them an identity of who they are, where they come from and where they are. Like the Invisible Man<sup>227</sup> says, if you do not know where you are, then you probably do not know who you are. The problem of Celie's identity is also a question of place. An individual's place or space in the universe affects how the individual will perceive his or her identity. By space the word takes on more meaning than merely the physical place of residence. The physical location is important but more important is the social space or place that an individual occupies in society. An individual may accept a place given to him by society or may reach out to take a place for himself or herself in that society. This is also the case with regard to Celie.

Self knowledge also implies education about life. This education comes from life's experience, the community as in the practised norms of society and through formal education.

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<sup>226</sup> Langston Hughes, *Selected Poems of Langston Hughes* (New York; Vintage Books, 1959)187

<sup>227</sup> Ralph Ellison (1947)

Celie learns a lot more things with age. As she gets more experience from her life, she gets to learn the prevailing rules of society, rules of conduct and of survival. Then she has all the people around her encouraging her and urging her on. Another form of education comes from the formal education as represented by Miss Beasley. Nettie, too, implores Celie to learn, to learn to read and write, to gain more knowledge.

Celie has the support of her fellow women who continually prod her to fight. These women also prove to be a dependable pillar of support for Celie. Even as they urge Celie to fight for herself, they are by her side providing Celie with the much needed moral, material, spiritual and financial support. They form a solid rock on which Celie can stand as she embarks on her long walk to rebellion and eventual freedom.

Celie's marriage to Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ enables her to explore the outer world. The trip that Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ takes Celie on to town is equally important. This is the first time that Celie goes into town. This enables Celie to locate herself. She has gone to town and she understands now that she has lived on a plantation. This distinction enables Celie to see the differences, varieties and possibilities that the outer world can offer. She notices the differences in the number of people around her and notices their dressing. She understands that life has differences and that people make choices. As Celie complements Corrine, Reverend Samuel's wife, over her choice of clothes, she is admitting that life has choices and that these choices may be good or bad. This realisation is important because confinement of a woman is a patriarchal notion that keeps the woman in servitude. As Celie breaks through this confinement she embarks on her journey to selfhood.

When Celie meets her baby daughter Olivia with Samuel's wife, Corrine, she begins to listen more to herself. She instinctively knows that baby Olivia is her baby; "I think she mine. My heart say she mine."<sup>228</sup> Life is not all about reason or logic. There is intuition, too. This intuitive assertiveness helps Celie to listen to herself

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<sup>228</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 22

just like other women in her life have often compelled her to fight for herself. This teaches Celie to think about herself and to learn to respect what she feels about herself. Celie begins to become aware of her individuality and personality.

All the prodding that Celie has been getting, from her women friends and from her sister, to fight for herself, begin to bear fruit in a most interesting way. After advising Harpo to beat Sofia, Celie begins to reflect on what she has done. Having already gained the skill to listen to herself, Celie begins to hear her inner voice; "A little voice say, Something you done wrong. Somebody spirit you sin against."<sup>229</sup> And Celie wastes no time in trusting the judgement of the pronouncement of her inner voice. She is strong enough to name the person that she has sinned against "Sofia. I sin against Sofia spirit."<sup>230</sup> Celie has begun to see objectively about what is wrong and what is right.

When Sofia comes marching up the path to Mr. \_\_\_\_\_'s house, Celie has already realised her "sin." Sofia helps Celie put into words exactly what her sin is; "Just want you to know I looked to you for help."<sup>231</sup> Sofia's point, which she makes clearer later on, is that as women she expected Celie to stand by her side in the face of male oppression. That Celie should have advised Harpo against beating her up as opposed to advising him to be violent to Sofia. And Sofia spells out exactly how Celie has committed her sin, "You told Harpo to beat me."<sup>232</sup> Sofia is accusing Celie of having encouraged a man to abuse her fellow woman. And as a result of the abomination that Celie has committed, Sofia returns all the things that Celie has given her; the curtains and the thread and pays Celie a dollar for having used her (Celie's) things.

This proves too much for Celie and she protests at which Sofia asks the inevitable question. She asks Celie why she encouraged a man to beat her. "What you say it

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<sup>229</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 45

<sup>230</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 45

<sup>231</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 45

<sup>232</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 45

for?”<sup>233</sup> It is Celie’s honest answer that changes Sofia’s anger to sadness. “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.”<sup>234</sup> Celie has finally faced the ghost that has been tormenting her all the years of her life. Sofia, however, does not understand her and she has to ask what it is that she does that Celie does not do. Celie spells out her greatest problem: “Fight.” Celie has always endured by manipulating her emotions, by telling herself that she is wood. Now she realises that it is not enough to just live, to just survive and she opens up to another human being, a woman, Sofia. All along she has confided only in God but for the first time she flourishes in the company of another woman. This encounter proves to trigger the re-education of Celie. Sofia tells Celie;

“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 the family of men.”<sup>235</sup>

Similarly, a woman is not safe in a world run and dominated by men. Sofia is in a sense re-educating Celie. The gist of her statement is that a girl child is not safe in a family of men and as a result no woman is safe in the world of men. The implication of her statement is what she has said before, that women have got to look after each other, that women should stand together in the face of male oppression, that women must support each other, help each other and defend each other from the aggression of men. Sofia goes on to teach Celie the importance of this and gives her a picture of how far she is willing to go in order to defend her freedom and independence: “She lets out her breath. I loves Harpo, she say. God knows I do. But I’ll kill him dead before I let him beat me. ... I used to hunt game with bow and arrow, she say.”<sup>236</sup> Her point is clear, however much she may love a man, she will not allow that man and indeed, any other man, to abuse her. She would kill that man first before allowing him to abuse her. This is an important lesson for Celie. Sofia goes on to tell Celie about her family: “All the girls are big and strong like me. Boys big and strong too, but all the girls stick together.” By telling Celie that all the

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<sup>233</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 46

<sup>234</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 46

<sup>235</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 46

<sup>236</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 46

girls in her family stick together, Sofia is merely repeating the fact that all women must stick together in order to survive.

Another lesson that Sofia teaches Celie is about anger and the ability for self expression. Celie's situation is complicated by her religious beliefs. She believes in God and Fonso has taught her that the only being she can safely confide in is God. Celie has just broken one aspect of this by confiding in Sofia about her weakness of not fighting back for herself. Now Sofia asks Celie what she does when she is angry. Celie's answer is that when she is mad or angry she gets sick and feels like throwing up, that she just feels terrible. Then after that she feels nothing. This causes Sofia to frown.

Another problem concerns her beliefs. She acknowledges that at times she has gotten angry with her mother but then her mother was ill and she could not indefinitely be angry with her. Regarding the man she always knew as her father, Celie always remembers the Biblical teaching that she has been taught which has required her to honour her father and her mother no matter what the circumstances or provocation or abuse. During the moments when she is provoked or offended by her father, Celie talks to the Old Maker, God. And when the offending party is her husband, Celie is more at a loss. She just shrugs her shoulders. She has been taught by religion to endure as this life on earth is temporal. She looks forward to a time when this life on earth will be over and she will die and go to heaven, after all "heaven lasts for ever" she says. The implication of this belief is that if one endures the suffering on this earth then that person will enjoy life in the eternity of heaven. The hope is that the oppressor is going to be punished in hell, a place of suffering and whose fire of sulphur and brimstone is very fierce and burns with a blue flame. Those who will have been the victims of oppression will live to enjoy a life of bliss, praising God every minute mixing even with wild creatures like lions. This is supposed to give solace to the oppressed. It is this behaviour and belief that Sofia challenges. She bursts out at Celie; "You ought

to bash Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ head open, she say. Think about heaven later."<sup>237</sup> A well delivered lesson by Sofia but at the moment, it looks like it will take Celie more lessons and probing for her to implement what she learns. The lesson ended, the two women reconcile and start to make a quilt together. Their bond solidifies.

Celie's path to self identity continues to develop because for once someone does something very special for her. The abused and isolated Celie has successfully nursed Shug Avery back to health. Shug Avery has been able to get Celie attend her singing sessions in Harpo's juke joint. Despite Mr. \_\_\_\_\_'s protestations that wives should not go to night clubs, Shug Avery gets her way. After Celie has sung a song in honour of Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, she also does one that she has been humming during her recovery. The song is publicly dedicated to Celie. Shug Avery gives the song the title; *Miss Celie's Song*. This is the "first time that anyone has made something and named it after me," Celie observes. Celie's heart comes to life. Celie has emerged from the plantation where there is no radio or record player. It is the first time that she has come to a night club.

Shug Avery's dedication to and appreciation of Celie makes Celie realise that she is of value to herself and to Shug Avery. The song makes her feel special. This truth is incredible to Celie and she cannot avoid but hum along as Shug Avery sings the song. She, for the first time since Nettie left, feels special and loved. Celie is for once happy. Shug Avery makes her dedication song public. Celie, who has been told that she is ugly, is thanked from the stage for all to hear by her fellow woman.

Shug Avery does not stop at this point. Celie has broken her silence and is now talking with Shug Avery and adds yet another name to persons she opens up to, Sofia and now Shug Avery. Celie confides in Shug Avery that Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ beats her whenever Shug Avery is out. Celie reveals she is beaten for no apparent reason other than that she is what she is. She is being beaten for being who she is. She is not Shug Avery and she is not Annie Julia. And for this Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ beats her. Shug

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<sup>237</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 47

Avery declares; "I won't leave, she say, until I know Albert won't even think about beating you." Shug Avery is sticking with Celie. The lesson that Sofia gave to Celie is being repeated: ladies must stick together. This spirit of sisterhood blossoms and even becomes more and more intimate as the two women continue to bond in their relationship. The two women embrace and Shug Avery kisses Celie on the fleshy part of the shoulder.

Shug Avery, soon, delivers yet another important lesson to Celie. As the two women discuss matters of their sexuality, Shug Avery discovers that although Celie has been repeatedly raped, she has never appreciated sex or love making. To Shug Avery, this means that Celie is still a virgin because she has never experienced any meaningful love making. Shug Avery is implying that until Celie experiences some meaningful love making, she will still be a virgin. This concept of virginity turns into a private symbol when we realise that Celie does not know herself, her body and has no identity or self image of her own. And so in all respects Celie is an abused virgin, a raped virgin. She can be referred to as an abused virgin because she has been raped but has never discovered the joy of love making. She has known nothing but pain in her life.

Shug Avery takes Celie on an important exploration of her body. Shug Avery's lesson leads to the growth of Celie as a woman as she discovers her physical being and her other emotions that have been abused and suppressed.

When Celie confesses to Shug Avery that she has never enjoyed sex, Shug Avery gives Celie a short but detailed sex education:

"Listen, she say, right down there in your pussy is a little button that gits real hot when you do you know what with somebody. It git hotter and then it melt. That the good part. But other parts good too, she say. Lot of sucking go on, here and there, she say. Lot of finger and tongue work.

Button? Finger and tongue? My face hot enough to melt itself.

She say, Here, take this mirror and go look at yourself down there, I bet you never seen it, have you?

Naw

And I bet you never seen Albert down there either.

I felt him, I say.

I stand there with the mirror.  
She say, What, too shame even to go off and look at yourself?  
And you look so cute too, she say, laughing. All dressed up for Harpo's,  
smelling good and everything, but scared to look at your own pussy.  
You come with me while I look, I say.  
And us run off to my room like two little prankish girls.  
You guard the door, I say.  
She giggle. Okay, she say. Nobody coming. Coast clear.  
I lie back on the bed and haul up my dress. Yank down my bloomers. Stick  
the looking glass tween my legs. Ugh. All that hair. Then my pussy lips be  
black. Then inside look like a wet rose. It a lot prettier than you thought,  
ain't it? She say from the door.  
It mine, I say. Where the button?  
Right up near the top, she say. The part that stick out a little.  
I look at her and touch it with my finger. A little shiver go through me.  
Nothing much. But just enough to tell me this the right button to mash.  
Maybe.  
She say, while you looking, look at your titties too. I haul up my dress and  
look at my titties. Think about my babies sucking them. Remember the little  
shiver I felt then too. Sometimes a big shiver. Best part about having the  
babies was feeding 'em."<sup>238</sup>

Shug Avery is guiding Celie towards her self identity and towards self love. It is only when individuals have learnt to identify themselves as individuals, when they have learnt to appreciate themselves and their bodies that they finally come to love themselves. It is only when people love their being that they can appreciate and love other people. Shug Avery accepts Celie's invitation to accompany her on her journey to discovery. "You come with me while I look, I say." Shug Avery, once again, responds positively like she did to Celie's care. Shug Avery is a sure and dependable companion. Celie delegates Shug Avery to guard the door as Celie takes the journey to have a look at who she is. The use of the mirror is very important. Celie is having a look at her image in the mirror. Celie has never before looked critically at herself. She has looked into a mirror before. At the other times she has looked into the mirror it has been for the sake of others, in order for her to see if she looks presentable. This time around she looks into the mirror for a different reason, to see and to know how her image looks like. She does this for herself.

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<sup>238</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 79, 80

Shug Avery acts like Celie's Midwife. She is at the door to ensure that the "delivery" is done safely and without interruption or obstruction.

Celie's "birth pains" are obvious; "Ugh," she gasps. "All that hair." Celie is exploring the interior of her being. Like a journey into the bush, the undeveloped area, the remote psych of her being, her sub consciousness, to examine who she really is. "Then my lips be black," she observes. Celie has gained the power of observation of how her image looks like.

Celie's exploratory skills are getting deeper and sharper; "Then inside look like a wet rose." Celie begins to make associations. She associates her inside with the wet rose, a symbol of freshness, youthfulness and beauty. This image that Celie has seen in the mirror agrees with Shug Avery's observation that Celie is beautiful and is still a virgin. Celie is so in love with what she sees that she has to seek confirmation if it is indeed hers: "It mine." The claim seems more of a celebration. But then anxiety sets in, "Where is the button?" In the midst of all the hair, Shug Avery guides her still: "Right up near the top, she say." Celie is still unsure and first looks at Shug Avery before gaining enough confidence to get to the top and touch the button with her finger. Like a newly born baby learning her first walking steps, Celie continues with her exploration. And Celie gets her immediate reward. A little shiver goes through her body. Nothing much but just enough to tell Celie that it is the right button to "mash."

Shug Avery encourages Celie to go further and explore her "titties". As Celie hauls up her dress to look at her "titties" she remembers her lost babies and remembers the pleasure of having them suckle at her breasts. This association of her "titties" to the babies gives the symbol of life. The breast gives life to the newly born baby.

The breasts give sustenance to life<sup>239</sup>. Celie is the newly born virgin who is yet to start to grow from her midwife turned mother figure, Shug Avery.

Shug Avery's arrival has marked Celie's first opportunity to look, both literally and figuratively, at herself. Just like Shug Avery replaces the photograph that Celie carries, Shug Avery's mirroring helps Celie to replace the void in her troublesome past. Celie is able, through this mirroring act, to take possession of her body and encourages her to seek selfhood through spoken language. Once Celie is able to recognise and appreciate her body as complete and belonging to herself, she is able to express love verbally for herself and others. Her apparent desire for selfhood is initiated in this crucial mirror scene in which Shug Avery helps initiate Celie's desire for selfhood. The scene unfolds as an anatomy lesson for Celie under Shug Avery's direction. With Shug Avery's encouragement, Celie's self-reclamation begins as she sees her own genitals for the first time.

Celie's immediate response abnegates her previous annihilation and ignorance of her body; "It mine, I say." Previously, Celie has cared little about herself or her sexual feelings, and even referred to sex with Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ as nothing more than him doing his business. Now Celie recognises her genitals as one enjoyable part of a complete self; "I look at her and touch it with my finger. A little shiver go through me ... just enough to tell me this the right button." Celie experiences an epiphany-like moment that leads to a fuller, more coherent sense of self. In this moment the presence of a literal mirror enables the protagonist Celie to move from an experience of fragmentation to a vision of a more unified state of self-possession. Celie's response is like that of a child in Lacan's mirror stage.<sup>240</sup> Celie has moved from a pre-mirror experience of passivity and fragmentation to a joy of fusion with a Gestalt of human form. Celie now recognises and claims the fragmented parts of her body, taking pleasure in that reclamation.

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<sup>239</sup> The Image is taken from *Rose of Sharon* in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (Middlesex; Penguin, 1992) 619. *Rose of Sharon* gives her breast to a man dying of hunger in order to save the man's life.

<sup>240</sup> Daniel Rose <http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/meridian/themes.html>

Celie's clitoris which has largely remained undiscovered awakens her. Shug and Celie, by resorting to the clitoris for sexual satisfaction, have regressed to a stage which Freud describes as "infantile." They have also challenged the patriarchal imposed notion that only heterosexual relationships are normal. They also challenge the notion that mature vaginal orgasm is the only normal way for a woman to experience orgasm. This society has imposed on its women psychological clitoridectomy like the clitoridectomy done on Tashi in Africa.

Celie gives credit to her midwife; "I don't care if you sleep with him I say." But this is with some sacrifice, for as Shug Avery goes and beds Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, Celie pulls her quilt over her head and finger her little button and "titties" and cry.

Celie's crying, among many other things, implies an awakening. From projecting herself as wood without feelings, Celie is now human and can feel, consequently her crying. The self examination, exploration and discovery have produced results. Celie is conscious of her surroundings and aware of what is happening around her and is giving an emotional response.

Celie later learns that Sofia has had a child with another man other than Harpo. Sofia gives Celie a lesson, she says; "Life don't stop just cause you leave home, Miss Celie."<sup>241</sup> Celie remembers that hers stopped when she left her mother's home. She realises that her life stopped further with Mr. \_\_\_\_\_. What she also recognises, however, is the fact that her life has just started because of Shug Avery. And Celie notes her own admiration of Shug Avery;

"All the men got they eyes glued to Shug's bosom. I got my eyes glued there too. I feel my nipples harden under my dress. My little button sort of perk up too. Shug, I say to her mind, Girl, you looks like a real good time, the Good Lord knows you do."<sup>242</sup>

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<sup>241</sup> Alice Walker (198); 82

<sup>242</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 82

Celie's emotions are getting stronger and stronger. Eventually, she asks Shug Avery to stop sleeping with Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ and Shug Avery grants the request. The two women begin sleeping together, enjoying their romance.

Upon Celie's return to the plantation, she witnesses the conversation between Harpo and Sofia. Harpo projects the patriarchal notion that a mother of five children cannot hung out in a juke joint at night. Sofia challenges this view and tells Harpo that a woman needs a little fun once in a while.

The women are asserting themselves more and more. Sofia, too, beats up the Mayor in the presence of her prize fighter boyfriend who is just looking on. Sofia does not allow the boyfriend to join in because she knows that she has broken a racist law by beating the Mayor. The result of this action is a prison sentence. Sofia wants her boyfriend to stay clear of the fight because she wants him to take care of the Children. Sofia is arrested and imprisoned. In prison Sofia is broken in spirit and it takes the solidarity of the women to get her released. Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ and Sofia's boyfriend, the prize fighter join Celie, Shug Avery, Odessa and two more of Sofia's sisters to plan the release of Sofia. The ladies come up with a plan that Sofia's boyfriend feels sounds like Uncle Tomming.<sup>243</sup> In this planning, the women take an active role and actually assign Mary Agnes to execute the plan. It is in the execution of this plan that Mary Agnes is raped. She returns from executing the plan with a limp, her dress ripped, her hat missing and with one heel of her shoe off the shoe.

Mary Agnes shares her horrible experiences with her fellow women who have urged her to share. They challenge her to share with them if not with God. It is at this moment that Mary Agnes takes up Celie's advice to make Harpo, her boyfriend, call her by her real name of Mary Agnes and not by her nick name of Squeak. In the face of adversity the women show strength to rise to the occasion and assert their presence.

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<sup>243</sup> The term comes from Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The term became a highly offensive term for a black man who is thought to be too solicitous of or subservient to white people.

The interaction that Celie is having with her fellow women is proving to be very educative for her. She is being exposed to her fellow women who openly challenge the existing patriarchal status quo. Celie is being embraced in a larger family of the community. She sees joint effort at work and the set-backs that come. She sees the sisterhood of the women at work as they provide therapeutic healing to Mary Agnes by listening to her story. While Celie is observing, getting involved and even advising other women like Mary Agnes to stand up for themselves, we are yet to see Celie fight for herself. Having discovered her identity, Celie has seen others fight but she is yet to grow and fight.

The bonding of the women folk is shown to be across race. Eleanor Jane, daughter of Miss Millie, stands up for Sofia each time she is victimised. Eleanor Jane proves to be faithful to Sofia long after Sofia becomes a free woman. She grows up to work for Sofia.

Celie's mother figure, Shug Avery, goes away but returns later with a husband, Grady. Celie has an instant dislike for Grady. Celie and Shug Avery are now two married women. While Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ and Grady spend the whole Christmas drinking beer, Celie and Shug Avery share the house work. No longer is Celie at the service of Shug Avery. They cook, talk and clean the house together. The two women talk more and more. Shug Avery discloses that once Celie told her that Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ beats her and never works, her feelings for him changed. Shug Avery discloses that had Celie been her wife, she would have covered her up with kisses instead of kicks and would have worked hard for Celie. Upon learning that Celie still does not enjoy sex, Shug Avery declares Celie still a virgin.

Shug Avery, in declaring Celie a virgin, is suggesting a rebellious way of thinking: virgins lose out on life. She is suggesting that the traditional patriarchal value attached to virginity only blindfolds women and prevents them from living and enjoying their lives. Shug Avery's view in this case labels virginity as a male value which negates the status of the woman. Shug Avery is celebrating the loss of virginity. Shug Avery does not shun the tag of "Shug." To the contrary, she

celebrates it as much as she freely uses the term “fuck” to the shock of the reader. She uses the name in her adverts for her shows. The two terms are socially shunned because they are offensive terms. But then this is in a language which feminists say is male constructed and biased in favour of the patriarchal society.

Sexual morality, The Color Purple suggests, is a male constructed value which only benefits the man. Fonso has repeatedly raped Celie while being married to her mother. Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ is having a public steamy extra-marital relationship while in marriage with Annie Julia and has not stopped while being in marriage with Celie. Yet, Fonso calls Celie “spoilt twice” because she has had sex out of wedlock and has had two children. And Annie Julia is killed by a man. The attitude and behaviour of the men towards the women is oppressive and restrictive.

Shug Avery is very much aware of the bias of society. She has lived it and has taken control of her relationships. She knows that its time Celie lived. Shug Avery, the mother figure, takes over the show. Like a mother interested in the growth of her daughter, Shug Avery asks if she can sleep together with Celie. Celie agrees and in bed, they start to talk. Soon, Shug Avery introduces her next lesson to Celie; love making. Shug Avery does not use this socially respectable but restrictive phrase “making love.” She chooses a word which is free from morality, “fuck.” Celie, who has associated this word with rape and brutality, finds the word nasty. But Shug Avery is literally shocking Celie from her comfort zone.

She leads Celie into her past in a form of counselling. Celie remembers the horrors of her past and is overcome by them and breaks down into tears. This time around, she has someone who cares for her with her. She needs not go through this trauma alone. Shug Avery nurses her; “Oh, Miss Celie, she say. And put her arms around me.”<sup>244</sup> Signs of Celie’s healing and growth are clear. As Shug Avery comforts her, Celie’s concentration turns to Shug Avery’s black and smooth arms which she

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<sup>244</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 108

observes as glowing in the light of the lamp. Shug Avery assures Celie that she loves her. Shug Avery hauls off her cloths and kisses Celie on her mouth.

“Um, she say, like she surprised. I kiss her back, say, um, too. Us kiss and kiss till we can hardly kiss no more. Then us torch each other. ... Then I feels like something real soft and wet on my breast, feel like one of my lost babies mouth. Way after while, I act like a little lost baby too.”<sup>245</sup>

Shug Avery has delivered a lesson she started a long time ago. Celie has come a long way to begin feeling good about herself. She has finally bonded with someone. It is a moment of ecstasy for Celie. Shug Avery has broken Celie’s virginity. Celie’s growth has continued, now that her mother figure has successfully gotten her on her path to walking, to growth. Alice Walker has deliberately used the forbidden to break free from the bonds of a patriarchal community to liberate an oppressed woman. Walker’s message is clear; to attain self identity, a woman would have to break some of society’s rigid norms which oppress her. The two women are “fucking” each other. The society is mostly patriarchal and so are its norms and rules. These are the norms and rules which oppress the woman. Breaking these norms and rules proves to be the key to the attainment of the self identity of a woman. In this state of a rebel, a woman will find fullness, happiness and an identity. It is no wonder that the sexual rebellion that Shug Avery and Celie commit leaves Celie acting like “a little lost baby.”

The physical bonding between Shug Avery and Celie becomes regular. Celie describes how they sleep. Shug Avery has her back on Celie who has her arms round Shug Avery’s waist. “It warm and cushion and I feel Shug’s big tits sorta flop over my arms like suds. It feel like heaven is what it feel like ...”<sup>246</sup> Celie feels like heaven. She no longer has to persevere and endure abuse, rape, pain and suffering in order to feel heaven when she dies like her religion has taught her. She is alive and has experienced heaven.

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<sup>245</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 109

<sup>246</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 110

The women stick together to ensure that Mary Agnes gets her singing career underway. The protestations of Harpo are quickly overcome through reasoning. Celie still bites her tongue in her new image. She, out of habit, refers to Mary Agnes as Squeak but is quick to correct herself. This self-correction shows awareness that a woman needs respect and dignity. Unwelcome nicknames rob people of their real identity.

The women also turn other tables around. Shug Avery suggests that dressed right, Mary Agnes' singing would bring in more customers and money; "Mary Agnes, listening to you sing, folks git to think bout a good screw."<sup>247</sup> When this shocks Mary Agnes, Shug Avery asks what is too shameful about putting singing and dancing and fucking together. She laughs at this and assures Mary Agnes that the Niggers are going to listen and respect her. The women are taking paths that the patriarchal society will not permit a woman to do. They are exercising their freedom to assert themselves.

Celie has come far. She is bonding with her fellow women and is slowly gaining self-confidence. Yet she is not fully positioned in her community. She has no independence and her past is still unclear. She has so many unanswered questions. Her past is unclear and while she is aware of her present physical and emotional location, she has no notion of the complete truth about herself.

Celie's *Pandora's*<sup>248</sup> *Box*<sup>249</sup> is brought to the fore soon after. Celie is holding a letter in her hands from her long lost love, her sister, Nettie. Contact with Nettie's letter brings forth multitudes of pieces of information that Celie has been yearning for. These pieces of information prove to be explosive as they spur forth Celie's energies to assert herself and give space to her self-identity. The pieces of

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<sup>247</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 111

<sup>248</sup> This refers to a woman in Greek mythology: in Greek mythology, the first woman, who was sent by the gods with a jar full of evils in order to avenge Prometheus's theft of fire. She opened the jar out of curiosity, thus releasing the evils into the world.

<sup>249</sup> Object in Greek mythology: in Greek mythology, the jar, later referred to as a box, from which Pandora allowed all the world's evils to escape. A set of evils: the source of a great collection of evils not to be faced unless an unwise action is taken.

information from the letters help situate Celie more in her community and further help to unearth truths that enable Celie to move forward and fight for herself.

Celie, after a very long time, gets to know that her sister Nettie is alive. She learns that Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ has been more than cruel to her as he has been hiding her letters from Nettie. Celie gets to learn that her children, Olivia and Adam are alive. Celie learns that her sister and her children are in Africa, that they have been raised by a missionary family of Corrine and her husband, Reverend Samuel, among the Olinka people of Africa. She learns that her children had been given away by Fonso who, all along, she thought was her father. Celie is shocked but relieved to learn that the man she always thought was her father and had repeatedly raped her is actually her step father.<sup>250</sup>

This shakes Celie to the roots. All she can think about is to kill Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ for keeping Nettie's letters hidden from her. Shug Avery proves, yet again, to be Celie's mother figure. She sympathises with Celie and prevents her from killing Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ and helps her retrieve more letters from Nettie that Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ has hidden away from Celie.

In consoling Celie, Shug Avery reveals some details of her life;

"One thing my mama hated me for was how much I love to fuck, she say. She never love to do nothing had anything to do with touching nobody, she say. I try to kiss her, she turn her mouth away. Say, cut that out Lillie, she say. Lillie Shug's real name. She just so sweet they call her Shug."<sup>251</sup>

In this talk, Shug Avery reveals a lot of important pieces of information; her mother hated her because she loved to "fuck" to touch and was very sweet. She uses the term which is not easily acceptable among "decent" folk "fuck." Her mother thought touching the body was not a decent thing to do. This is the same touching which is essential to ensuring that the woman experiences the ecstasy in the sexual act. Shug Avery's mother reflects the patriarchal view which does not expect

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<sup>250</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 160, 161, 162

<sup>251</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 116

women to enjoy sex. Shug Avery's mother also, for the first time, tells us her real name, Lillie. In this, Shug Avery is presented as a deviant character, a rebel in her community. She is a rebel in her conduct, her speech and her identity. She loves to "fuck," she uses the word "fuck" freely and she retains an identity of "Shug" as her name. This is a name few would retain in a patriarchal society. It now becomes clear why the preacher cannot name Shug Avery in his denunciation of the Queen Honeybee from the pulpit. It would have implied to the preacher that Shug Avery and her life style were sweet.

When Shug Avery had her third child out of wedlock with Albert, she was turned out of her parents' home. Shug Avery went to live with her mother's wild sister who her mother said resembled Shug Avery. She, like Shug Avery, drunk, fought, and loved "to death". She worked in a roadhouse as a cook. She would "feed fifty men" and "screw fifty-five."<sup>252</sup> Shug Avery, herself confesses that she used to "fuck" in the open so much that they gave fucking a bad name.

Shug Avery confesses that she treated Mr. \_\_\_\_\_'s first wife, Annie Julia, badly. Annie Julia went to school with Shug Avery. Shug Avery also confesses that she treated Celie like a servant because she had gotten married to Mr. \_\_\_\_\_. Shug Avery tells Celie that this bad treatment of Celie was all in vain because she never wanted Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ for a husband. This type of confession helps develop confidence among the women. They can afford to be candid with one another.

Shug Avery is in a sense putting Celie's pain in a broader context: that all women suffer some pain of one kind or another and that this pain originates from both men and women. Shug Avery is trying to make Celie realise that errors do not occur because one is male. That anyone can err. Later Shug Avery will teach Celie that despite the wrong things that Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ has done to Celie, he is still a human being.

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<sup>252</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 116

Shug Avery's argument is enhanced by another from Nettie. Nettie, in her letters, tells Celie that not all black men in the world are mean like Fonso or Albert. She also tells Celie that black women need not be beaten down like their mother was. Nettie educates Celie that life can be different, that life can be better.

The letters from Nettie have one other strong message for Celie, fight: "You got to fight."<sup>253</sup> Nettie tells her own story of how she had to fight Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ when he followed her after he had chased her from his home.

Nettie writes to Celie on the importance of the need to learn and to know. At this point, the reader hopes that Celie will come to "know" a lot more from the letters from Nettie. It is also hoped that the "knowing" will put Celie on track to being a fully grown being.

It does not take long before Nettie starts sharing what she knows with Celie. The knowledge that Celie gets proves to be liberating. Celie, all along, has confided in God. Even when she has not been able to talk to Him, she has written to Him. It is this concept of God that Nettie starts to re-educate Celie on. For Celie, God is male, white, elderly and all powerful. This image of God, apart from sustaining Celie as her confidant, has been an image of oppression. Celie has, all her life been oppressed by the male. All black people have been under white oppression. And all power, authority and economic advantage have been dominated by the male. In having God as her confidant Celie has always been under the watchful eye of the oppressive male. It is this image that Nettie starts to destroy much to the benefit of Celie.

Nettie writes to Celie and tells her that each time one reads the Bible, one needs to pay attention to the word. She argues that it is the pictures that have been done to represent biblical figures that fool a person. Nettie illustrates her point by referring to the fact that the Bible makes reference to Egypt and Ethiopia. She points out

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<sup>253</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 119

that Egypt is in Africa and that the Biblical reference to Ethiopia referred to the whole of the African continent whose people are the people of color. Nettie argues that this is different from the pictures which illustrate the Biblical lands and peoples as being exclusively white. Nettie goes on to illustrate to Celie that even the God figurehead<sup>254</sup> has some color in its ranks. She argues; "That's why the Bible says that Jesus Christ had hair like lamb's wool. Lamb's wool is not straight, Celie. Its even curly."<sup>255</sup> By attacking the Bible, Nettie attacks one of the very foundations of patriarchal communities.

Race, sex and class divisions are prevalent even at the mission society in New York, as Nettie reveals. At the society house all the pictures hanging on the walls are pictures of white men. The pictures that the missionary societies of England and America have given Reverend Samuel's team are all in the image of the white men; pictures of Christ, the Apostles, Mary, Livingstone, Stanley to mention but a few.

There are no pictures of white women, black men and black women. The white woman in Africa believes that black people she calls natives are an entirely different species from what she calls Europeans. "She says an African daisy and an English daisy are both flowers, but totally of different kinds."<sup>256</sup> These realities among the missionary people prove that racism, sexism and class divisions are engraved on the minds of the missionaries. Celie is now supposed to know that the injustices that she has suffered are suffered by many more people across the whole world. The challenge for Celie is clear. Does she sit back and cry that this is how things have always been or must she join the army of many women fighting injustice. This fight will include the rejection of Christianity as presented by the missionaries.

As Celie learns more from Nettie's letters, so does her anger against Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ grow. Celie is even more determined to kill Mr. \_\_\_\_\_. Shug Avery tries to impart

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<sup>254</sup> The FATHER, the SON and the HOLY SPIRIT

<sup>255</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 126

<sup>256</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 127

the law of God against killing on Celie but Celie tells her that she is not Christ. Then Shug Avery has to remind her that Nettie will not want to meet her in prison when she returns from Africa. Shug Avery adds that life would not be good if all she remained with was Grady. Celie only has one choice left; "Make Albert let me sleep with you from now on, while you here," she says. Celie has now started making demands and giving commands. She has come a long way. From the fourteen year abused girl to an elderly lady who now is able to make demands.

However, Celie's anger is still great. She now sleeps like sisters with Shug Avery; "Much as I still want to be with her, much as I love to look, my titties stay soft, my little button never rise. Now I know I'm dead."<sup>257</sup> It takes Shug Avery to assure her that it is normal to once in a while be angry, but that does not mean that one is dead; "Naw, just being mad, grief, wanting to kill somebody will make you feel this way. Nothing to worry about. Titties gonna perk up, button gonna rise again"<sup>258</sup> Shug Avery has got to find some way of channelling Celie's anger as it is proving to be negative.

Shug Avery's diversion to have Celie sewing pants has been a success. Both Shug Avery and Celie are sported in new blue flower pants that match and big floppy Easter hats that match too. The rebellion of the women has extended to the clothes that they wear.

Shug Avery suggests yet another radical action. She is leading Celie into more rebellion. It is the dressing that she attacks. "Lets make you some pants,"<sup>259</sup> she suggests. Celie is at a loss. She does not see why a woman would want pants for. "What I need pants for? I say. I ain't no man."<sup>260</sup> In addition Celie feels that Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ will not be pleased to see his wife in pants. Shug Avery's reasoning is pragmatic; "why not? You do all the work around here. It's scandalous, the way you look out there plowing in a dress. How you keep from falling over it or getting the

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<sup>257</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 136

<sup>258</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 136

<sup>259</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 136

<sup>260</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 136

plow caught in it is beyond me.”<sup>261</sup> Shug Avery is saying that Celie needs pants for practical purposes. Shug Avery is suggesting a rebellion against the patriarchal dress code that has prescribed pants for men and dresses for women. Celie would be more comfortable in her job if she used pants. Then she lets out another cat out of the bag; “I used to put on Albert’s pants when we was courting. And he one time put on my dress.”<sup>262</sup> Shug Avery is exposing the hypocrisy of men. They project patriarchal values and yet enjoy what the patriarchal community considers perverted. Shug Avery tells Celie that a lady in pants is to Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ what a red flag is to a bull in a bull fight. A lady in pants flares up his sexual desire. Finally, Shug Avery is able to channel Celie’s anger into sewing pants with a needle.

The letter from Nettie which revealed to Celie that the man Celie has always thought was her father is in fact not her father but her step father causes a major change in Celie and Shug Avery. Celie learns that her father was a successful business man owning land, a store and a smithy. Because his business was doing very well, the racist whites murdered him. His murder was instigated by racism as the whites could not stand a successful black man in their midst. Fonso takes advantage of Celie’s moaning mother; marries her and takes control of her asserts. Fonso uses sex and motherhood to ensure that Celie’s mother does not regain her mental faculties by ensuring that she is ever pregnant. The information in Nettie’s letter is devastating. The two women, Cellie aand Shug Avery, can no longer stomach the level of betrayal and evil that Nettie’s letters revel. “That’s it, say Shug. Pack your stuff. You coming back to Tennessee with me.”<sup>263</sup> Truth has finally been known by Celie and makes her feel dazed. The truth has set Celie free. *Knowing*<sup>264</sup> has set her free. The bondage of ignorance is in the past. She is free to completely rebel. She can at long last assert herself.

In the past Celie has felt that she had no where to run to but to God in heaven. Now, Celie has a physical place to run to. She can run to Shug Avery’s place. In this

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<sup>261</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 136

<sup>262</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 137

<sup>263</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 163

<sup>264</sup> My emphasis

case, Shug Avery's place is like a place of refuge for Celie. While God helped Celie endure as she waited to die and go to heaven, Shug Avery's company provides her with instant relief and she can start living her heavenly life here on earth.

In the past Celie has written only to God. Then in a confrontation, she opens up to Sofia. With the growth of a sense of the self, Celie opens up to Shug Avery and has enjoyed the fellowship of other women and members of her larger community. At the moment, Celie stops addressing her letters to God and starts addressing them to Nettie.

The new Celie is now ready to face her oppressive past by meeting in person the man she thought was her father. The two women, Celie and Shug Avery drive to see Fonso. Fonso is in the company of yet another young woman other than May Ellen. Fonso says that May Ellen got too old for him and yet when he married her, May Ellen was almost Celie's age. Fonso now has a new wife, Daisy. Daisy's parents work for Fonso and live on the land. Celie tells Fonso that Nettie has written to her and told her that he, Fonso, is not their father. Fonso's response is short; "Well, he say. So now you know."<sup>265</sup> And goes on to tell Celie that her father was lynched by white men who were jealous of his accomplishments. Fonso's reasoning on the death of Celie's father is most crude;

"The key to all of 'em is money. The trouble with our people is as soon as they got out of slavery they didn't want to give the white man nothing else but the fact is, you got to give 'em something. Either your money, your land, your woman or your ass. So what I did was just right off offer to give 'em money. Before I planted a seed, I made sure this one and that one knowed one seed out of three was planted for him<sup>266</sup>. Before I ground a grain of wheat, the same thing. And when I opened up your daddy's old store in town, I bought me my own white boy to run it. And what make it so good, he say, I bought him with whitefolks' money."<sup>267</sup>

Fonso's reasoning is as corrupt as he himself is. He suggests that corruption is the only way forward for the African even after slavery. He is also being insensitive to

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<sup>265</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 166, 167

<sup>266</sup> Emphasis as it appears in the text (1982) 167

<sup>267</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 167

Celie, in any case, he has always been cruel to her and to the women in general. To make the matters worse, Celie has come with a fellow woman. However, Celie's concern is different. She wants to know where her real daddy is buried. Celie is told that her daddy was buried next to her mother's but she learns that lynched people never got a grave marker. Celie goes with Nettie to look for her father's grave but does not find it. Celie is tracing her origins in her continued growth. The truth about her origins will give her a proper identity, especially that her parents were descent folks, a far cry to what she has always been led to believe.

Celie is getting back to the graves of her parents to pay her respects as if to acknowledge that her new strength originates from her parents. She has learnt that her parents were dignified and successful people unlike Fonso. The grave thus acts like humus upon which she now has got to start growing from.

Meanwhile, Celie has stopped writing to God and Shug Avery goes back to try and demystify the image of God that has for so long kept Celie in bondage. Celie wonders why Shug Avery does not seem bothered by the thought of God, Heaven and Hell. She wonders why Shug Avery does not make an effort in the normal way to please God and aspire for heaven considering her life style.

Shug Avery tells Celie that just because she does not harass "it" like some people do did not mean that she is not religious. Celie wonders what good thing God has ever done for her despite her loyalty to him. Shug Avery tells her that God has given her life, good health and a good woman who loves her very much. Celie is bitter with God whom she considers to be a man:

"Yeah, I say, and he given me a lynched daddy, a crazy mama, a lowdown dog of a step pa and a sister I probably won't see again. Anyhow, I say, the God I been praying and writing to is a man. And act like all the other mens I know. Trifling, forgetful and lowdown."<sup>268</sup>

Celie is now able to identify her oppressor but extends this to include God. To her God is a man and like all men he never listens to women especially black women.

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<sup>268</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 175

Shug Avery warns Celie that God might hear her blaspheme but Celie has had enough:

“Let ‘im hear me, I say. If he ever listened to poor colored women the world would be a different place, I can tell you. ... All my life I never care what people thought bout nothing I did, I say. But deep in my heart I car about God. What he going to think. And come to find out, he don’t think. Just sit up there glorying in being deaf, I reckon. But it ain’t easy, trying to do without God. Even if you know he ain’t there, trying to do without him is a strain.”<sup>269</sup>

Celie has associated God to men who have never listened to her all her life and have abused her repeatedly. For Celie’s complete liberation men and God must then assume a subordinate position.

Celie thinks that sinners have actually more good times because they are not all the time trying to worrying about God. Shug Avery tells Celie that sinners worry about God too but that once they feel loved by God, they try the best they can to please God by being what they are. This is strange to Celie. She does not understand how God can love an individual like Shug Avery and yet that individual does nothing for God; does not go to church, sing in the choir, feed the preacher and the like. Shug Avery makes the point that if God loves individuals like her, she needs not labour doing all the religious stuff unless the individual wants to. She argues that there are plenty of other things that she can do that she suspects God likes. She suspects that God likes it when people are having a good time; lying back and just admire “stuff,” and being happy. Shug Avery tells Celie that people do not go to church to find God but that rather, they go to church to share God. At this point Celie comments that other people do not go to church to share God because they do not have him with them and that such individuals were the ones like those that watched her suffer without lifting a finger to help her while she was struggling with a big pregnancy, Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ and the children.

Shug Avery asks Celie to describe what her God looks like. Celie describes her God as being big, tall, grey bearded and a white man. She pictures him in white robes

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<sup>269</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 175, 176

and going about in bare feet. She never at any time thinks that God could be black. Shug Avery confesses that even for her that was her exact image of her God in the past. This same old white man is the one Shug Avery used to see each time she closed her eyes to pray. Shug Avery concludes by saying that if individuals go to church to find God, they are bound to find the same old white man. Shug Avery explains that this white God is found in the Bible for the whites. This is all strange for Celie who exclaims that it is God who wrote the Bible and that the white man had nothing to do with it. Shug Avery then challenges this aspect of Celie's conviction. She questions Celie why God is pictured as a white man and why everything good in the Bible is associated with the white man while the black person is said to constantly be cursed in the Bible.

It is at this point that Celie makes a confession that she has never thought about why things are portrayed that way. Then she remembers that Nettie, in one of her letters had said that somewhere in the Bible it is written that Jesus had hair like lamb's wool. Shug Avery laughs at the idea and comments that if such a Jesus visited the churches they were discussing, he would have to have them conked<sup>270</sup> before anybody paid him attention. She also makes a point that the last thing that a black person wants is to think about is that God has kinky hair. Shug Avery concludes her lesson:

"Ain't no way to read the bible and not think God is white, she say. Then she sigh. When I found out I thought God was white and a man, I lost interest. You mad cause he don't seem to listen to your prayers. Humph! Do the mayor listen to anything colored say? Ask Sofia, she say.

But I don't have to ask Sofia. I know white people never listen to colored, period. If they do, they only listen long enough to be able to tell you what to do.

Here's the thing, say Shug. The thing I believe. God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God. But only them that search for it inside find it. And sometimes it just manifest itself even if you are not looking, or don't know what you are looking for. Trouble do it for most folks, I think. Sorrow, lord. Feeling like shit."<sup>271</sup>

Celie is understandably confused. She asks; "It?" And Shug Avery answers:

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<sup>270</sup> A blow, especially on the head

<sup>271</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 177

"Yeah, It. God ain't a he or a she, but a It.  
What it look like? I ast  
Don't know look like nothing, she say. It ain't a picture show. It ain't  
something you can look at apart from anything else, including yourself. I  
believe God is everything that is or ever was or ever will be. And when you  
can feel that, and be happy to feel that, you've found it."<sup>272</sup>

Shug Avery is still to make another point. She suggests that when individuals find God, they cannot miss it; feels like the sexual feeling. Celie is again shocked. Shug Avery assures her that God loves the sexual feeling and that God created the feelings and enjoys it when his creation enjoys them a lot more:

"You can just relax, go with everything that's going, and praise God by liking what you like

God don't think it dirty? I ast.

Naw, she say. God made it. Listen God loves everything you love-and a mess of stuff you don't. But more than anything else, God loves admiration.

You saying that God vain? I ast.

Naw, she say. Not vain, just wanting to share a good thing. **I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it.**<sup>273</sup>

What it do when it pissed off? I ast

Oh it make something else. People think pleasing God is all God care about. But any fool living in the world can see it always trying to please us back."<sup>274</sup>

The lesson is clear, God, as portrayed by the patriarchal world makes man an extension of God in oppressing women. This has alienated the women from God who see him as oppressive. Shug Avery is saying that the real God is different; loving and fun loving and always trying to please his creation. Shug Avery's message is clear; do not feel bad if you feel that you have not pleased God. It does not matter, for God is always trying to please us. Shug Avery is not trashing God in her talk. She is portraying him or "It"- in Shug Avery's description- in a different light. This is total revolt. Shug Avery is saying that there is no need to try to please God or His extension, men. She revolts against the male construction of God. It is by rebelling against this monster of oppression that women find their proper place in this patriarchal world.

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<sup>272</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 178

<sup>273</sup> My emphasis

<sup>274</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 179

The task for the women is to try and chase the image of the old white man out of their heads especially as they pray. Realising this Celie's eyes are opening and she is able to see the deception she has been forced to believe. She feels like she has been a fool. She reflects:

"You got to git man off your eyeball, before you can see anything at all. Man corrupt everything, say Shug. He on your box of grits, in your head, and all over the radio. He try to make you think he everywhere, you think he God. But he ain't. Whenever you trying to pray, and a man plop himself on the other end of it, tell him to git lost, say Shug. Conjure up flowers, wind, water, a big rock."<sup>275</sup>

Religion, which was the foundation of Celie's oppression, is broken. Ever since Fonso started to abuse her as a child and told her to confide only in God, Celie has been under the yolk of oppression. As a child and a teen age the image of an oppressive God was engraved on her mind. Now in adulthood, Celie's image of God has under gone reconstruction. The more Celie substitutes the patriarchal image of God as male with little scrubs of bushes in the yard, the more the image of Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ diminishes. This has had a terrific effect on Celie. Celie is more likely to internalise all the new lessons that she has learnt and fit them in her scheme of things before embarking on her next path of action.

The notion that is projected is that for one to get rid of the patriarchal anti-feminism, one must get rid of the patriarchal image of God, that one must cease being religious in the Christian sense. Walker projects a vision in which women can attain self-fulfilment within the patriarchal order by changing the basic system of logic which governs the patriarchal orthodoxy.

Shug Avery is helping Celie reconstruct the image of her God. "God" is stripped of its racist, colonial, capitalist and phallogocentric connotations and turned into a sublime feeling of nature, a deep reciprocal communion between women and

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<sup>275</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 179

nature. This is an essentially re-visionary notion of God rendering Him everything natural; birds, trees, rocks as Celie shows in one of her letters.

Stripped of His identity as a Man and rendered natural that is, resourceful and invigorating, God becomes non-sexist, unoppressive and unrepressive.<sup>276</sup>

The whole point being made is that female self-fulfilment cannot be divorced from sexual, psychological and economic self-fulfilment. For the woman to attain this kind of sense of the self, she has no option but to rebel against the dominant patriarchal establishment, including his religion.

For Celie, it is again Shug Avery who initiates the rebellion. She informs Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, Harpo, Sofia and everyone at the table where they are all having a meal that she has decided to leave and that Celie is coming along with her to Memphis. Mr. \_\_\_\_\_'s response is predictable; "Over my dead body"<sup>277</sup> he says. Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ is extremely shocked. "I thought that you were finally happy, he say. What wrong now?"<sup>278</sup> It is now Celie's time to stand up for herself. Celie must tell her oppressor what she feels is wrong; "You a lowdown dog is what's wrong, I say. It's time to leave you and enter into the creation. And your dead body just the welcome mat I need." Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ cannot believe what is happening; "say what, he ast shock." All around the table mouths hung open. Celie tells Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ that she is aware that he has deliberately separated her from Nettie, the only person in the world that loved her. Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ can only sputter. Celie goes on to tell Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ that Nettie will soon be coming back home and that when she does, the two sisters will whip Mr. \_\_\_\_\_'s ass. The passive oppressed woman now is able to issue threats. Sofia is so surprised to hear Celie speak up for herself that she is still for a full ten minutes.

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<sup>276</sup> [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_qa\\_3821](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa_3821)

<sup>277</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 181

<sup>278</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 181

Celie informs Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ that her children are also coming home with Nettie from Africa where they were having a descent upbringing unlike the fools that Mr. \_\_\_\_\_'s children turned out to be. Harpo's protestations at this are silenced by Celie; "You was all rotten children, I say. You made my life a hell on earth. And your daddy here ain't dead horse's shit."<sup>279</sup> Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ reaches over to slap Celie. Celie jabs her case knife in his hand. Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ is beside himself. "You bitch, he say. What will people say, you running off to Memphis like you don't have a house to look after?"<sup>280</sup> Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ is invoking the patriarchal norms of his community which demand that the woman takes care of her own home. Celie rebels against this patriarchal arrangement. And Shug Avery verbalises the rationale behind Celie's rebellion; "Why would any woman give a shit what people think is a mystery to me."<sup>281</sup> In the traditional patriarchal community, women are supposed to mind. Shug Avery wonders why the woman must mind; it is only when the women stop minding that they can be free.

The women laugh at Shug Avery's reasoning provoking Harpo's reaction. He looks at Mary Agnes and orders her to shut up; "It bad luck for women to laugh at men."<sup>282</sup> Harpo, too, tries to use the old patriarchal myth to oppress Mary Agnes. Mary Agnes turns this belief around right back in the face of the men; "I already had my bad luck, she say. I had enough to keep me laughing the rest of my life."<sup>283</sup> Sofia's temper is also rising. The women are all up in arms in rebellion. To try and assert his authority, Harpo makes reference to Motherhood. He reminds Sofia that they have six children together. Sofia corrects him that they have only had five children together and that the sixth child is not Harpo's. Harpo is speechless. He orders the child in question to fetch him some water to drink but the girl does not obey him till he says "please." This is the ultimate exemplification of freedom. A girl child refuses to perform a chore ordered by her father unless he politely asks.

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<sup>279</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 182

<sup>280</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 182

<sup>281</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 182

<sup>282</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 182

<sup>283</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 182

Just like Celie believes that she cannot do without God, Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ believes that she cannot do without him. Like in the Olinka community, Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ sees Celie, on her own, as nothing. Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ is a typical oppressor who believes that a slave is happy to be one. Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, in desperation, plays the last card at his disposal; the economic card. He tells Celie that she will not get a penny of his money; "Not one thin dime," he emphasises. But then he forgets that Celie has been a virtue slave. And a slave's only wish is freedom. Celie aptly answers Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ back; "Did I ever ast you for money?"<sup>284</sup> And she puts Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ in the correct perspective of things; "I never ast you for nothing. Not even for your sorry hand in marriage."<sup>285</sup> It is the slave master who is losing out. The slave has nothing to lose by being free.

And Celie is not the only one on this long walk to rebellion. Mary Agnes, too, has joined the march. She says:

"Me, she say. I'm going North.  
You going What? Say Harpo. He so surprise. He began to sputter, sputter,  
just like his daddy. Sound like I don't know what.  
I want to sing, say Squeak.  
Sing! Say Harpo.  
Yeah, say Squeak. Sing. I ain't sung in public since Jolentha was born. Her  
name Jolentha. They call her Suzie Q.  
You ain't had to sing in public since Jolentha was born. Everything you need  
I done provide for.  
I need to sing, say Squeak.  
Listen Squeak, say Harpo. You can't go to Memphis. That's all there is to it.  
Mary Agnes, say Squeak.  
Squeak, Mary Agnes, what difference do it make?  
It make a lot, say Squeak. When I was Mary Agnes I could sing in public."<sup>286</sup>

Harpo, like his father, is shocked that his woman whom he considered docile has revolted. Harpo does not understand why his mistress wants to sing when he provides her with everything. To him, a woman has no identity away from her husband and no needs apart the basics for survival. And like Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, a woman, worse still someone's wife, can not sing in public. Mary Agnes is determined to regain the personal identity that she has lost through motherhood and the birth of

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<sup>284</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 183

<sup>285</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 183

<sup>286</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 183

Jolentha. With the loss of her identity of Mary Agnes came the nick name of Squeak. Mary Agnes rejects this false identity. She insists that her name is Mary Agnes. While Harpo does not see the relevance of this name identity issue, Mary Agnes is aware of the significance of this. She asserts that when she was Mary Agnes, she could sing in public. She has realised that she had lost her individuality to Squeak and now time has come for her to reclaim her identity of Mary Agnes. A woman needs a career, whether it is to sing or to make pants like Celie, women must have a career for them to be free.

Harpo gets to, again, use the trap of motherhood to lay a hold on Mary Agnes. Sofia, however, comes to the rescue; "Go on sing, say Sofia, I'll look after this one till you come back."<sup>287</sup> Sofia is releasing Mary Agnes of the responsibility of motherhood which has always destroyed the career of women. And Mary Agnes asks Sofia to take care of Harpo too. This reduces Harpo to a child who needs the care of a mother figure, Sofia. In these offers the women are seen sticking together. Practically all the women in this scene are seen sticking up for one other. The communities of women are seen to be strong when they bond together like the quilt. They overcome. Miss Eleanor crosses the colour bar to rely on the sisterhood of her fellow women even when these are black women.

As Shug Avery, Grady, Celie and Mary Agnes get on their way, Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ shouts heaps of insults at Celie. He tells Celie that she cannot stand up for herself, that she is ugly and skinny and shaped funny. Disregarding the fact that Celie has just told him off, Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ tells Celie that she cannot open her mouth to other people. He tells her that all she is good for is to be Shug Avery's maid. He accuses her of being a bad house keeper. All this is, of course, a question of sour grapes. Celie trades the curses back. She tells Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ that he is cursed and that everything that he will touch will crumble, that everything that he dreams about will fail. Shug Avery has to intervene for the traded curses and insults to stop.

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<sup>287</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 185

Celie has matured enough to fight and to face reality in the face with a sense of focus;

“I’m pore, I’m black, I may be ugly and can’t cook, a voice say to everything listening. But I’m here.”<sup>288</sup>

And Shug Avery responds;

“Amen, amen.”<sup>289</sup>

In Memphis, Celie is exposed to yet another world, a new world. This is a new and better world in which the women are free to dream and plan. Some of their talk is male in nature. They talk about the house that Shug Avery is planning to build. *Celie offers to be doing Shug Avery’s laundry but Shug Avery will have none of it.* Then the idea of making pants sets in. Celie starts the project using Shug Avery’s money. The first pants made are for Shug Avery then the band members and later their own people back home. Celie is happy. She now feels a sense of worth. In her next letter to Nettie, Celie is able to sign her letter. Apart from signing the letter, Celie gives an address.

“Your Sister, Celie  
Folkspants, Unlimited.  
Sugar Avery Drive  
Memphis, Tennessee.”<sup>290</sup>

Celie signs her name. Celie has started a pants making project called Folkspants, Unlimited. In this project, she has employed two other women, the twins Jerene and Darlene. She has an address she can confidently lay a claim on. This is evidence that Celie’s sense of worth and identity is maturing very well. She is not treated like a maid or slave. She is free. She is able to situate herself in the community. She has been able to carve a portion, a space for herself in her community in which she

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<sup>288</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 187

<sup>289</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 187

<sup>290</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 192

regains her visibility. This is what awaits the rebellious and finally free woman; an economic independence. Celie has an individual identity. Being free means happiness, love, work, resources to spend on the good things of life, friends and time for leisure. Celie has all these. She is able to declare:

“I am so happy. I got love, I got work, I got money, friends and time. And you (Nettie) alive and home soon. With our children.”<sup>291</sup>

Celie is justifiably happy. She has got the essentials of selfhood; happiness, love, work, money, friends, time, Nettie and her two children.

Darlene’s attempt to change Celie’s manner of speaking does not succeed as Shug Avery does not see the reason why Celie should change who she is. “She can talk in sign language for all I care.”<sup>292</sup> This is confirmation that Celie is accepted for who she is.

Returning home for a visit, Celie feels different. She has on some dark blue pants and a white silk shirt that looks righteous. Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ sitting on the porch does not even recognise her.

Celie avoids her home and heads to Sofia’s and Harpo’s home where the couple is engaged in a debate about gender roles. Harpo is against Sofia and her sisters’ decision to be pallbearers during her mother’s funeral. Harpo’s view is that women cannot be pallbearers. For Harpo, such a job is for men. He argues that women are weak and accuses Sofia of trying to take over male responsibilities. Sofia does not see any contradiction; “the woman dead, I can cry and take it easy and lift the coffin too.”<sup>293</sup> This conversation that Celie listens into is equally rebellious. The women are determined to have their say. Harpo has found out the state of the

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<sup>291</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 193

<sup>292</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 194

<sup>293</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 195

women from Sofia's mother before she passed on and while Sofia was in prison. The women believe that their ways are as good as anybody else's.<sup>294</sup>

The reunion is great. Harpo and Sofia are both overjoyed to see Celie. Celie pays her condolences on Sofia's loss of the mother.

Celie shares her experiences with the couple. She reveals that she smokes reefer. She says that she smokes it when she wants to make love and especially when she wants to talk to God. Celie feels that of late she and God make love just fine whether she smokes reefer or not. And she exclaims; "Girl, I'm bless, ... God know what I mean." Celie is happy and in love with God. She has already learnt that God created all feelings and that he loves them. So she believes God appreciates love making because he "created" it.

Shug Avery and Celie have created a distinction between mere "sex" and "love making." Despite Celie being raped earlier on, Shug Avery still described her as a virgin. Fonso and Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ used to have sex with Celie but Shug Avery labels her a virgin. It is only when she has a relationship with Shug Avery that she loses her virginity. Prominence is put on how one is appreciated and made to feel worth while and loved. This distinguishes love making from sex. The shocked reader always has to keep this fact in mind in order to appreciate Celie's sentiments. God has cultivated Celie's heart. Celie has a new heart. Celie is born again.

Sex is portrayed negatively. It is associated with violence, rape and death while fuck is associated with love, tenderness and compassion. Fonso or as we learn latter Alphonso, Celie's step father, dies while having sex with his much younger wife, Daisy.

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<sup>294</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 196

Celie is now actively involved in dialogue with other human beings. She is becoming part of her community. She is being integrated in community life as she attends the funeral of Sofia's mother.

Meeting Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ is inevitable. Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ has changed and is now very clean and his hair is brushed. He is also a hard worker. Celie feels that Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ is scared of her. Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ has become considerate of others and is sympathetic of Sofia. He engages Celie in a descent conversation. He is no longer abusive.

His story is simple. After Celie left him, he literary crumbled. His world collapsed. He shut himself in the house long enough that it stunk. According to Sofia, Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ started living the life of a pig.

It took Harpo to rescue him. Harpo shifted and spent many nights with his father, Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ washed him, and comforted him in his arms. Harpo was so caring that Sofia started to feel for him again. Harpo made Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ send Celie all the other letters from Nettie.

The women value the attributes of life here. They value warmth, love, togetherness, consideration, kindness cleanliness and hard work. They support life supporting values which enable humanity to survive. The women know that meanness kills.<sup>295</sup> They have rebelled in order to regain these values of life that the men denied them.

Celie's fortunes take an upswing. Daisy, Fonso's young wife, telephones Celie in the middle of the night to tell her that her step father, Fonso, is dead. He died while having sex. Celie is told that her real daddy, and not Fonso, owned the land, the house and the store. These assets were left to Celie's Mother. When Celie's mother died, these assets passed on to Celie and Nettie. The greedy Fonso never told the

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<sup>295</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 201

girls of this fact. His interest in controlling the properties is the only logical conclusion why Fonso never told the girls. Celie's history is being revealed and this puts Celie in her correct historical context.

Celie, accompanied by Shug Avery, drives to go and see the properties. Their house has been replaced by a bigger and more elegant one. Daisy takes all the furniture with her leaving the house, the land and the store for Celie and her sister Nettie. While Fonso opts not to tell the two sisters of their inheritance, Daisy does so without hesitation. Once again, the women, regardless of their circumstances are seen sticking together and being sincere with one another. Daisy decides to tell the truth where Fonso decided to lie.

Celie now has company, friends, land, a big house and a store. Her Folkpants, unlimited will now be sold in the store. Celie has experienced economic independence. She is also free from the patriarchal God. This is good for Celie. It is hoped that these fortunes will enable Celie grow further.

However, the first event that occurs to Celie after acquiring her inheritance is a break up. Shug Avery has taken on a much younger man, Germaine, for a lover. Celie has never appreciated love from any man. All the men in her life have abused her. Up to this point, Celie has not reconciled with Mr. \_\_\_\_\_. Her mother figure, Shug Avery, has decided that Celie is now strong enough to move on and learn more lessons of life. But she assures the reluctant and hurt Celie that this is her last fling. Shug Avery says that she is getting old and needs a last fling as she likes her love making with men and soon no man will look at her because she is getting old. She tells Celie that it would be foolish to take men seriously but confesses that men can be lots of fun.

Celie has just been left in the cold in the matters of romantic love. She stays with Sofia and Harpo and Henrietta, Sofia's daughter. Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ has developed a habit

of visiting Henrietta. He still leaves in the same little house. He now has a hobby of collecting shells. It was in the viewing of one of these shells which was said to be unique that Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ finally has Celie go to his little house. Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ behaves like a man who has been regenerated. He is sensitive to Celie and enquires if there is anything special that she likes. Celie's says that she loves birds. The discussion is respectful and considerate. Eventually, Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ admits that he has noticed that everybody in the family is just about wearing pants that Celie has made. He enquires if Celie has turned her skill of making pants into a business. Celie responds in the affirmative. Celie tells Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ that Shug Avery helped her make the first pair of pants right in Mr. \_\_\_\_\_'s house in order to prevent her from killing him. And this revelation is followed by a release of emotions on the part of Celie, she cries.

Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ speculates that Celie does not like him because he is a man. Celie's response reveals the prejudices that she has developed over time; "Take off they pants, I say, and men look like frogs to me. No matter how you kiss 'em, as far as I'm concern, frogs is what they stay."<sup>296</sup> Celie hates men so much that even the thought of anybody getting pregnant makes her want to cry. She has been mistreated and abused all her life. She has not yet reached the balance that Shug Avery has reached. To Celie, all men are the same, abusive and selfish.

The transformation in Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, however, looks real. He is interested in Celie as a human being as opposed to being interested in what she can do for him. He is also interested in knowing what Celie likes. The two are getting to know each other at a personal level now despite the fact that they had lived together for many years.

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<sup>296</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 224

Shug Avery's absence is heavily felt by Celie. She is forced to re look at herself, at her image in the mirror. Celie gets back to the time Celie led her into self exploration:

"I stand looking at my naked self in the looking glass. What would she love? I ast myself. My hair is short and kinky because I don't straighten it anymore. Once Shug say she love it no need to. My nose just a nose. My lips just lips. My body just any woman's body going through the changes of age. Nothing special here for nobody to love. No honey colored curly hair, no cuteness. Nothing young and fresh. My heart must be young and fresh though, it feel like it blooming blood."<sup>297</sup>

Celie re-examines her self image and thinks that Shug Avery does not love her because there is something wrong with her image. Standing before a full mirror, Celie decides that there is "Nothing special here for nobody to love."<sup>298</sup> The scene provides the test that proves that Celie's psychic growth has continued unchecked, that she will not regress in crisis. Here it seems that Celie has successfully moved through the mirror stage and is now able to function within the post mirror stage of symbolic language, which is language that she can use to represent any perceived lacks.

According to Lucan, the need for symbolic language in post mirror stage points to the fact that all individuals remain split. This split image allows an individual to believe in his or her wholeness, but this is simply an illusion one might carry for life. As Ross Daniel argues, however, such misrecognition serves an affirmative purpose for Celie. This time around, the whole self that Celie finds in the mirror is healthier than her previous notion of herself as fragmented and belonging to others. When her worker, Darlene, tries to persuade her to speak standard English in order to avoid sounding "dumb," Celie refuses, concluding, "look like to me only a fool would want you to talk in a way that feel peculiar to your mind."<sup>299</sup> Rather than allowing others to own her individual parts of her, such as her sexuality or her

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<sup>297</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 229

<sup>298</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 229

<sup>299</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 229

language, Celie now owns and enjoys her total self. She has a full grown sense of the self. "My heart must be young and fresh though, it feel like it blooming blood."

This time around, Celie does not write to God or any one. She has an internal dialogue with herself. She learns from her reflection that when those she leaned on are not available, she has got to look closely around her to see who is available as a friend or even as a lover. Celie does just this and discovers that Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ seems to be the only one that understands her feelings.

Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ still cannot believe that Celie has got children. He asks Celie where she got the children from. Celie tells him that her children were fathered by her stepfather. Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ is shocked to learn that Fonso was the one that had "damaged" Celie twice.

Celie observes that Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ is trying hard to make something out of himself. She also notices that when they talk, Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ really listens and he confesses that he is a changed man; "I'm satisfied this the first time I ever lived on Earth as a natural man. I feel like a new experience."<sup>300</sup> When other men trouble Celie by pursuing her at Harpo's, Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ becomes very protective and comes to Celie's rescue: "This lady my wife. The man vanishes out the door."<sup>301</sup> Trust is developing between Celie and M. \_\_\_\_\_. Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ is becoming more and more humane.

Both Celie and Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ get to talk about their one lover, Shug Avery. Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ loves Shug Avery because she acts more manly than most men, she is upright and honest. She speaks her mind and she fights for herself. Shug Avery is bound to live the life she wants regardless of the circumstances. Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ believes that Shug Avery's attributes are male. Celie challenges this as she points out that Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ himself and his son Harpo are not like Shug Avery even though

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<sup>300</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 230

<sup>301</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 230

they are male. Celie's view is that Shug Avery's behaviour is womanly because she has also seen another woman, Sofia, behave like Shug Avery. The conclusion is that the conducts of both Shug Avery and Sofia are neither male nor female and that they are definitely not like Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ and Celie. Shug Avery and Sofia behave like liberated people who want to be what they are. Celie and Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ have been describing the image of liberated beings which the two of them are not. They both love liberated individuals. Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ is trapped in his perceived male role while Celie has been a prisoner of what men like Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ have considered their domain, an imprisoned domain. It is only when Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ realises this fact that he, too, like Celie, gets liberated. Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ confesses that he has been beating Celie because she was not Shug Avery. In other words, Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ loves liberated women. Nettie demonstrated this independence just like Shug Avery has and now Celie. This could be another reason Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ warms up to Celie in her liberated state.

Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ remembers his first wife and reasons that she was broken up by ill-treatment from him because she never told anybody about her troubles. She never told anybody because she did not have anyone to tell. Her family abandoned her the moment that she got married to Mr. \_\_\_\_\_. Celie, on the other hand, had some one to tell. First Celie confided in God then Nettie, then Sofia then Shug Avery before her circle of confidants widened further. Shug Avery also took up Celie's fight to Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, "Albert, you have been mistreating somebody I love. So far as you are concern, I'm gone."<sup>302</sup> And Shug Avery meant her words. This helped Celie's conditions to improve at the hands of Mr. \_\_\_\_\_. Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ started to get worried each time Celie and Shug Avery were doing each other's hair. This confession testifies to the power of women once they bond together, they can change their circumstances.

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<sup>302</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 237

Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ acknowledges to Celie that before, he used to be a fool.<sup>303</sup> He also confesses that he feels sorry for Celie that Shug Avery left her. He remembers how he felt when Shug Avery left him too. As the two lonely souls stand under the stars, they realise that they have got at least themselves for company:

“Then the old devil put his arms around me and just stood there on the porch with me quiet. Way after while I bent my stiff neck onto his shoulder. Here is us is, I thought, two old fools left over from love, keeping each other company under the stars.”

The reconciliation between the two is well under way. They continue to dialogue. At other times, Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ asks Celie about her children. Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ also learns that Celie’s pants can be worn by both men and women. He learns that in Africa men wear robs which look like dresses, that the African men wear what is comfortable and not necessarily what society dictates. She tells Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ that the men in Africa also love to sew. When Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ is surprised Celie challenges him; “They (African men)<sup>304</sup> are not as backward as mens here.”<sup>305</sup> Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ is challenged into conceding that he too used to try to sew but then his community used to laugh at him and thus he got discouraged.

Celie helps Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ liberate himself further. Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ admits that it takes long for men to notice anything. He cites his own example to illustrate his point. “Took me long enough to notice that you such good company,”<sup>306</sup> Finally, Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ acknowledges Celie for who she is and is able to interact with her in a respectful way. They have now become friends and companions. It has been a long walk to rebellion and freedom. It has been a long walk to liberty for Celie, a long walk to selfhood. Both have rebelled against the patriarchal male establishment. Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ is seen sewing pants on the porch with Celie.

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<sup>303</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 238

<sup>304</sup> My editing for clarity

<sup>305</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 238

<sup>306</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 241

Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ has been able to transform and grow because he has taken time to ask himself questions about his humanity. He has asked himself why people need love, why some people are black while others are white, why there are divisions of women and men. And he has asked himself another difficult question, why are we where we are.

Just when she is content and believes that she can live life without Shug Avery, and just when Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ asks Celie with sincerity to marry him again and Celie says "No" because, to her, men still look like frogs and she still does not like frogs, Shug Avery writes to Celie that she will be coming home. Celie has grown enough to accept reality whether Shug Avery comes or not. She is now a mature lady. Either way, Celie will be happy. Her happiness now does not depend on other people.

Shug Avery does come home. She has deposited her last fling lover, Germaine, into a college. They have ended their relationship. Shug Avery puts her head on Celie's breast and lets out a long breath.

News filters through that the ship on which Nettie and the children were has sunk and that no one has survived. Shug Avery makes inquiries for Celie but too much is going on at sea during the war that it is not possible to get accurate information. One thing is clear. The women despite seemingly going their different ways always come to each other's aid in times of crisis.

The last letter in The Color Purple starts on a very bright note. Celie's letter is addressed to God, Stars, trees, sky, peoples, everything and again to God. Nettie, Adam and Olivia are back. They are accompanied by Reverend Samuel. It is an important family reunion. Nettie is described as a little dumpy woman with Gray hair in plaits across on top of her head. The actual meeting of the two women is presented from Celie's point of view:

“Then us both start to moan and cry. Us totter toward one nother like us use to do when us was babies. Then us feel so weak when us touch, us knock each other down. But what us care? Us sit and lay there on the porch inside each other’s arms.”<sup>307</sup>

Then Celie thinks about how her children and Tashi perceive the two old women:

“And I see they think me and Nettie and Shug and Albert and Samuel and Harpo and Sofia and Jack and Odessa real old and don’t know much what going on. But I don’t think us feel old at all. And us so happy. Matter of fact, I think this the youngest us ever felt. Amen.”<sup>308</sup>

The women are now young at heart. Their hearts have been touched by the moment. Celie has finally been reconciled and reintegrated into her community as an equal member. Her growth is complete and she realises just how much youthful she feels despite her age. Celie now has the love, companionship, compassion and independence. The sisters now have got a home, land and a store in which they have employed Sofia to be clerk. They are reunited and are absolutely independent of anyone. Celie has a complete sense of identity.

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<sup>307</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 250

<sup>308</sup> Alice Walker (1982) 251

## 6. CONCLUSION

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Even though Meridian was published earlier than The Color Purple, it reflects events which happen after the events reflected in The Color Purple. In terms of events it is Meridian which follows The Color Purple.

The Color Purple presents the story of the awakening of a woman, Celie, in the face of male oppression. Celie, once denied of an identity emerges as a strong woman who has a place and an identity in her community.

Celie goes through a number of stages in her long walk to rebellion and eventual selfhood. Celie is constantly sensitised by both men and women to fight for herself. Celie is told by Nettie of the importance of knowledge. She tells Celie of the need to know and pay attention to the word. The need for education is also emphasised by their teacher in the earlier parts of the novel. The withholding of education from women is seen as a means of suppressing women to ensure that they are perpetually under subjugation.

Celie undergoes an inner self-examination which leads to her self-discovery that sends a shiver through her body. This triggers Celie's growth to selfhood.

Celie goes through a period of pairing or bonding. She first pairs up with Shug Avery then with other women in her community. It is in work that women get to know and care about each other. Celie gets the support of her community.

Celie has lived a life of abuse. Her place in society was that of a slave and an abused woman. She has been under the thumb of the men in her life and Celie, with the help of the women in her life has had to break the patriarchal norms of her environment for her to be free and attain her sense of the self.

Celie has on going sensitisation- especially from Shug Avery. Celie gets emotional, community and material support especially from Shug Avery. This leads to Celie revolting in order to attain her self identity. Celie becomes independent, both from her abusive husband and from the economic enslavement.

Celie achieves forgiveness and reconciliation. Celie is finally re-integrated into her own environment, community, home and family. The Color Purple, then, is a story about growth, endurance, loyalty, solidarity, and joy--all nurtured by the strength of love. The rebellion in The Color Purple makes a point that individuals in society need each other but that to do so, individuals must recognise and respect each other.

Meridian, too, reflects the life of a young woman, Meridian, who emerges from a life dominated by the male gender and racism. She finds her way to freedom having gone through a lot of challenges.

Meridian has had a problem because she has not had the approval of her mother. The civil rights movement has not been able to give her comfort as her failure to commit herself to kill for the movement makes her an out cast among them. Marriage and friendship do not give her the sense of the self that she so much longs for. She has had a difficult time with her friends who have either abandoned her or rejected her because she cannot kill for the revolution.

Miss Winters supports Meridian through her difficult moments and offers her the forgiveness that her mother has denied her.

She eventually has to meet some of the people who have tormented her like her former lover Truman and Lynne. The parties come to terms with themselves.

Meridian learns to rely on herself and in a penance-like gesture dedicates her life to a voter registration exercise in the South. In meridian, there is complete disjuncture

of relationships. Meridian has attained her liberty but this makes her going back to her community unattainable.

Both Celie and Meridian have had to face their past before they can finally release themselves in their path for self realisation. Meridian goes down to the South while Celie has had to come back to the plantation and face Mr. \_\_\_\_\_. She also has had to drive to her parents home to confront Fonso.

The women in both Meridian and The Color Purple are constantly admonished to seek things that are more substantial than furs and cars. They are advised to work hard and be independent of men. The oppressed people are encouraged to stop complaining and do something about their plight by confronting their oppressors. Meridian has had to offer the Mayor the dead child and has faced the military tank. Celie has had to confront Albert and Fonso.

Patriarchal values are denounced as serving the interests of the men at the expense of the women. Society, as presented, is shown to inherently have been structured to benefit the men. The community beliefs and value systems are all shown to have been corrupted by a male-centric perspective.

Rebellion against certain established oppressive structures of society is offered as a way out of oppression. The challenge offered by the two novels is that this rebellion is not just for the sake of rebellion but that it must be supported by the notion of what is right and what is truth. It is only when the old traditional patriarchal oppressive values have been challenged that freedom can be attained by the oppressed, especially women.

While Celie finds a lot of support in her community especially from the women around her, Meridian has to depend on herself. She goes to the South and lives a life of a hermit; dedicating her life to the service of her community.

Despite the fact that sexual exploitation of women is prominent in both texts, Meridian and Celie react differently to sex. Sex, for Celie, has awakened in her the sense of who she is and has helped her in her quest for the self. For Meridian, sex has had the opposite effect. Meridian has had to endure sex and eventually she gives up sex in order to free herself and attain a sense of the self. Like the preacher in the Baptist church had admonished his congregation, Meridian has stopped looking for a man or a husband, she is doing something useful with her life, a life dedicated to service.<sup>309</sup>

Meridian and The Color Purple expose the wrongs of a particular brand of religion which is bent on the oppression of the weak, the poor and the women. This is presented as a patriarchal constructed religion. This religion neglects Celie in suffering and repels Meridian. The other type of religion is one which is shown to be practical and looks after the interests of the oppressed people. This is the sort of religion that encourages people to vote.

The novels present the view that there is a connection between western cultural imperialism and Christianity. Christianity and patriarchy are presented as oppressive social structures that promote the servitude of the weak, women and the poor.

At the end of The Color Purple, Celie has got love, work, land, money, friends and time while Meridian in Meridian ends up alone. Both women, however, attain a sense of the self.

Opponents are not neglected in the texts. Meridian helps Truman and Lynne despite the pain they have caused her. She helps them in their hour of need. Even after the death of Lynne, Meridian allows the company of Truman and the two of them go on a trail of voter recruitment. Truman is told in no uncertain terms to respect Meridian and not think that she is a fool. Celie, too, faces Fonso. Unfortunately for Fonso, he dies at his vice before the reader has the opportunity

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<sup>309</sup> Alice Walker (1986) 195

to see if he is capable of repentance. Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ joins the new community of partnership and respect. He gives up his false claim of his phallic power and, like Truman, adopts some of the caring attributes often associated with the feminine.

The importance of education and the need to know is emphasised by both novels. Meridian abandons her child in pursuance of an education. Celie and Nettie grow through an elaborate process of letter writing. Education and a need to know are presented as important aspects in the process of liberation and development of the sense of the self.

Monogamy and heterosexuality are presented as male constructs which only benefit the men at the expense of the women. The women are presented as having been forced into this male construct by the community.

Women are presented as being less inclined to cruelty unless pushed far by circumstances. The women are also presented as being more reliable than the men.

Sexual violence is portrayed in both novels as being about power politics. This is presented as the reason for the male violence against women. The men are presented as being obsessed with power. However, when the women stick together, the men step aside. The men are shown not to be able to withstand women when they stand together for a common course.

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