

**THE BLACK AMERICAN TWIN AFFLICTION: RACISM AND SEXISM
IN ALICE WALKER'S SELECTED WORKS**

MA (LITERATURE) THESIS

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Declaration

I the undersigned hereby declare that this thesis is my own original work which has not been submitted to any other institution for similar purposes. Where other people's work has been used acknowledgements have been made.

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Signature

Date:

Certificate of Approval

The undersigned certify that this thesis represents the student's own work and effort and has been submitted with our approval.

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Dedication

To my mum, dad and Mr. & Mrs. Yabwalo for the joint sacrifices to have me educated. May the Good Lord continue to bless you! Mum and aunt, if all mothers were like you this world would have been a better world to live.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the African America racial and sexual polarization as portrayed in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, *Meridian*, *Possessing the Secret of Joy* and selected stories from *In Love and Trouble: Stories about Black Women* and *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down*. The study argues that both racism and sexism spring from the *self's* cupidity to treat the *other* differently. The study takes a historic journey through which the black American has travelled. During the Civil Rights Movement women actively participated in the fight against segregation. The study explores how Alice Walker satirizes women's involvement in the Civil Rights Movement through her female characters. In the selected works, Alice Walker uses female characters to bring her point on the twin affliction of the black American. Black American women suffer double domination and oppression; their dual status as women and blacks visibly appears in their relationships with whites and black figures respectively. The thesis further explores the relatedness of sexism and racism and exposes how both arise from the *Self-Other* antagonism. The study adopts three theoretical perspectives in its character analysis. Black feminism and psychoanalysis are the overriding literary theories the paper uses because the study centres on black women's experience in a racist and sexist environment. Women's experience in a predominately male controlled society psychologically traumatizes and distorts their self's perception in society. The two category stratification of women as a class calls for the adoption of Marxist theory in the character analysis of the selected works.

CHAPTER ONE

THE PAINFUL HISTORY OF THE UNSPEAKABLE INEQUALITY: THE BLACK AMERICAN EXPERIENCE - AN INTRODUCTION

But few would deny that we need, as a bare minimum, a strong expression to describe some horrendous acts of brutality and injustice that were clearly inspired by beliefs associated with the concept of race – the vilification, lynching, and segregation of African-Americans...

George M. Fredrickson

Introduction

This thesis explores the Black America/African America racial and sexual polarization as portrayed in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, *Meridian*, *Possessing the Secret of Joy* and selected stories from *In Love and Trouble: Stories about Black Women* and *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down*. In this study, cognizant of the fact that writers have been engaged in cultural debates on the rhetorical boundaries of the terms Black/African American, the worlds will be used interchangeably because they refer to the same people of African descent, whose ancestors are thought to be slaves. It is argued in this study, that both racism and sexism spring from the *Self's* tendency of treating the *Other* differently from the *Self*. The study argues that Alice Walker's fiction rewrites the dehumanizing aspects of racism and sexism; it is history fictionalized.

The study takes a historic journey, through which the Black American has travelled, from slavery, through the Civil Rights Movement to the contemporary America, in a quest to explore the intensity of the black American twin affliction. At each stage of the American history, black Americans have had different experiences because of their status as blacks and as women. Alice Walker, in her fiction, particularly through the use of female characters, fictionalizes the black American twin affliction, how black American women have suffered doubly because of their race and sex. The contention in this study is that racism and sexism spring from the same root, that is the desire to treat the *Other* differently.

In the selected works under study black American women suffer double domination and dehumanization; their dual status as women and blacks visibly appears in their relationships with whites and black figures respectively. The thesis argues, basing on Alice Walker's

portrayal of The study adopts three theoretical perspectives in its character analysis, namely psychoanalysis, black feminism and Marxism.

A Historical Background to the Experiences of Black Americans and their Literatures

The history of African-Americans begins with the arrival of twenty one slaves including three women at Jamestown in 1619 (2008: 19). The descendants of these men and women who arrived at Jamestown as indentured slaves are what we refer to as African-Americans and their experiences are recorded through memory and history, documented in various forms, film, novel, play or poetry. Pierre Nora “sees history as static and memory dynamic. He understands history loosely as “how our hopelessly forgetful modern societies, propelled by change, organize the past.” He defines memory as an actual phenomenon, “open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting.” (1994: 18) “Memory becomes a tool to regain and reconstruct not just the past but history itself.” Melvin Dixon in the essay, “The Black Writer’s Use of Memory” argues that in his reading of African-American literature he senses “a movement of cumulative racial significance, from the particular to the global, from, say Harlem¹, an urban district, to the South, a region of several states, and to Africa, a continent” (1994: 18). He further argues that “these sites have been used by many African-American writers not only to evoke a sense of place but, more importantly, to enlarge the frame of cultural reference for the depiction of black experiences by anchoring that experience in memory – a memory that ultimately rewrites history” (1994:20). Nora argues that “the quest for memory is the search for history” (1994:19).

Although in American slavery ended many generations ago, in December 1865, Whitney M Young Jr. argues that the black American status has not changed much because “Even today black people perform the gruelling stoop labor on the farm, the pick-axe labouring work in the cities. They do the house work and laundry, and fill a host of other insecure, ill-paid jobs white people won’t touch” (1972:20). Fiction has become one of the Black Americans’ sites of memory; through fiction they recall their history and experiences and help others understand the predicament of the black race. According to Piera Nora, “sites of memory are

¹ Harlem is a district in America which had the greatest number of black Americans in the 1960s, it was also called a black ghetto because so many things happened in this neighbourhood associated with racism.

not common in all cultures and are exclusively a phenomenon of our modern time. Sites of memory replace a 'real' and 'true' living memory which was with us for millennia but now has ceased to exist...They exist to help us recall the past – which is perhaps necessary in order to make living in the modern world meaningful” (1976:1).

During slavery, and even in the latter years after slavery, the black race was not recognized as human by whites. First Black American writers had to prove their humanity to whites through writing of a text. Henry Louis Gates Jr. in *The Signifying Monkey* observes that “What was at stake for the earliest black authors was nothing less than the implicit testimony to their humanity, a common humanity which they sought to demonstrate through the very writing of a text of an ex-slave’s life” (1988:171). Black authors published books as if their collective fate depended on how their texts would be received by their white counterparts. This had a huge effect on black consciousness in the ways blacks perceived themselves and their world; the situation forced blacks to see themselves as “the deformed other” (1996: 30).

Frederick Douglass and Olaudah Equiano were among the first Black Americans to write their experiences in the slavery and post-slavery America. Their narratives are significant reference points for the Black American experiences in the slavery and post-slavery times. Contemporary African American authors, like Alice Walker, bank on these slave narratives as their source of inspiration. Slavery experience is an indispensable aspect of the American history; consequently, aspects of slavery experiences keep on featuring in contemporary African American literatures. In some cases fiction becomes the rewriting of history.

The abolition of slavery did not diminish the racial segregation which existed between blacks and whites; once slavery was abolished racism assumed more subtle forms. Henry Louis Gates Jr. argues that “Just as the ex-slaves wrote to end slavery, so too did free black authors write to redress the myriad forms that the fluid mask of racism assumed...”(1988:171). A search for voice became a matter of grave concern among the black literati, right up to the Black Arts Movement. “Black authors wrote almost exclusively about their social and political conditions as black people living in a society in which race was, at best, problematical” (1988:172) because the black person had been written down as something less than human. Thomas Hamilton in *The Anglo-African Magazine* argues that “black people, in order to assert and maintain their rank as men among men, must speak for themselves; no outside tongue, however gifted with eloquence, can tell their story. Blacks must speak for

themselves...” (1988:173). The mushrooming of African American literature had been a result of African-Americans’ desire to tell their stories and experiences and consequently prove their humanity to whites. Most of African-American fictions were a representation of their social, political and cultural conditions. Writers like, Richard Wright, Zora Neale Hurston, and Toni Morrison fictionalized issues which affected their lives and the lives of their contemporaries. Their literary works portrayed issues of oppression, discrimination, segregation and dehumanization of the black race. Alice Walker, too, has created memorable African American characters like Celie and Meridian who struggle to live their lives as full individuals and members of the African American community. Most often they have to overcome the brutality of racial and economic oppression and sexism.

Much as Black Americans suffered oppression in different forms, like discrimination, lynching, segregation, racial oppression, just to mention a few at the white hands, African American women had a unique experience. They suffered doubly for being black and female in a racist and sexist society. It is the exposition of these racist and sexist tendencies in Alice Walker’s selected works which prompted the present study. In contemporary America, “Increased literacy among African-Americans has provided new opportunities for Black women to transform former institutional sites of domination [...] into institutional sites of resistance” and memory (1990:102). Zora Neal Hurston observes that with the freedom of expression and print, “now [black] women forget all those things they don’t want to remember, and remember everything they don’t want to forget. The dream is true...they act and do things accordingly” (1990:170). This freedom “offer [s] safe spaces that nurture the everyday and specialized thought of African-American women and where Black women intellectuals can absorb ideas and experiences for the task of rearticulating Black women’s experiences [and] infusing them with new meaning;” (1990:103) new meanings which potentially give them an essential standpoint in resisting systems of race, gender and class oppression. Alice Walker’s works give new perspectives in the understanding of the African American world, especially the world of black women in a racist and sexist America.

George M Fredrickson in *Racism: A short History* observes that “...racism remains a major international problem at the dawn of the twenty-first century” (2002:139). A century ago, W.E.B Dubois in his seminal work *The Souls of the Black Folk* asserted that “the problem of the twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line, - the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in ... America” (372). Peter Ekpe remarks that for the past three to four

centuries, Black Americans have been subjected to “unprecedented abuse[s] and discrimination at the hands of a well organised state system which for most of its history ... allowed race to be a basis of state policy. Until the mid-1960s, African Americans were alienated from the American state in a manner that was ingrained and pandemic” (1995:101). The belief that racial differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular race has a long history in America; it dates back to the slavery era when blacks were perceived and treated less than humans. Racism, like colonialism, impacts more on the psyches of the individuals. In Frantz Fanon’s words, in his book *The Wretched of the Earth*, racism “is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native’s brain of all form and content. [But] by a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it” (2001:169). Thus, even if a self-conscious belief that the Black American is inferior or unworthy is absent, racism in America still holds a considerable sway as Alice Walker shows through some of her black characters’ relationship with whites in the selected works. “Black is not a color of the skin”, writes Whitney M Young Jr. quoting actress Ellen Holly, in *Beyond Racism: Building an Open Society*, “It is a unique experience shared by [African] Americans, however varied they may be, that sets them apart from any other group and results in a certain kind of psychological adjustment that no other group has to make – namely the adjustment of learning how to survive, and perhaps even to flourish, in an atmosphere that is almost totally hostile” (1972:17).

Patricia Hill Collins observes that “Throughout the history of the United States, the interrelationship of white supremacy and male superiority has characterised the Black woman’s reality as a situation of struggle – a struggle to survive in two contradictory worlds, simultaneously, one white, privileged, and oppressive, the other black, exploited, and oppressed” (1990:30). Patricia Hill Collins further highlights that “In spite of differences created by historical era, age, social class, sexual orientation, or ethnicity, the legacy of struggle against racism and sexism is a common thread binding African-American women” (1990:22). The works of Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, Audre Lorde and Alice Walker all have a similar feature, the struggle for self-definition. Audre Lorde, as quoted by Patricia Collins, points out that ‘it is axiomatic that if we do not define ourselves for ourselves, we will be defined by others – for their use and to our detriment’” (1990:20). Patricia Hills says “One fundamental feature of this struggle for a self-defined standpoint involves tapping sources of everyday, unarticulated consciousness that have traditionally been denigrated in white and male-controlled institutions” (ibid).

Alice Walker's Biographical Sketch and Literary History

Born on 9th February, 1944 to Willie Lee Walker, a sharecropper, and Minnie Lou Grant Walker, Alice Walker grew up in rural Eatonn, Georgia. She attended segregated schools since she was born at a time when whites and blacks were legally segregated. While in Georgia, Alice Walker worked with the voter registration group of the Civil Rights Movement. Her experience as a voter register informed much of her thoughts on her subsequent novel, *Meridian*, which reflects the Civil Rights Movement experiences and women's active involvement in the movement.

Alice Walker belongs to the contemporary African American women writers along with Toni Morrison, June Jordan, and Audre Lorde just to mention a few. These are some of the prominent African American women writers of the 1970s. Her background informs much of what she writes. In *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* she writes: "Write I did, night and day, *something*, and it was not even a choice ... when I didn't write I thought of making bombs and throwing them. Of shooting racists. Of doing away – painlessly and nearly as possible ... with myself. Writing saved me from sin and *inconvenience* of violence" (1983:369). Writing, for Alice Walker, has not just been vocational but also therapeutic; through fiction she has been able to heal herself of psychological wounds which race and sex have inflicted on herself and her society.

From her biography, we learn that Alice Walker's works reflect the social, cultural and political issues which formed her society, and some characters are a self reflection of her own life. The parallelism between Alice Walker's personal life and fiction underscores the psychoanalytic claim that fictions are sites of individual's and collective memories. For instance, in her real life Alice Walker's marriage did not last long; she divorced her husband, Melvyn Leventhal, because she could not get along with him. In all the novels under discussion leading women characters do not have successful marriages. Through the behaviour of certain characters, Alice Walker reveals her intensely private, personal and painful experiences as a black woman, which is an indication of her courageous commitment to critical self-reflection.

With Alice Walker, “the female character has emerged from her cocoon, basking freely to a mixed reception of surprise and wonder. One wonders, where was she when her mates were sold away to domestic slavery; when they were given as child-brides to aged husbands of parental choice; when they were denied the opportunity of education? When after marriage they were victimized for inferiority and derided for fecundity of the wrong sex” (1989: 2).

Literature Review

A close analysis of the selected works by Alice Walker demonstrates how the harsh history of domination of blacks and women continues to shape their lives long after the official abolition of slavery. What Alice Walker portrays in these works is the history of the unspeakable inequalities and injustices that black Americans; women in particular, have experienced and continue to experience in the post-slavery America. Alice Walker’s works show that black Americans continue to be defined basis of sex and race. Alice Walker depicts experiences of a people who are socially marginalized because they are different from the white *Self* and are considered as the deformed *Other*.

The definition of blacks and women in America has more to do with racial and sexual positioning. Zora Neale Hurston, in “How It Feels to Be Colored Me,” says that her identity as a “colored” person came alive when she was thrown against a sharp white background. “It is that sharp, white background or “whiteness”, then, which mandates, in African-American or other sharply-polarized, racially-defined contexts, the tactical assertion of Blackness” (1994:6).

Paula Giddings in *When and Where I enter: The Impact of Race in America* asserts that “Black Women have a history of their own, one which reflects their distinct concerns, values, and the role they have played as both Afro-Americans and women. And their unique status has had an impact on both racial and feminist values...” (1985:6). This duality can be likened to what W.E.B Dubois referred to as “double consciousness” when he made the articulation about the African American’s position in a racist America that “One feels his two-ness – an American, a Negro, two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body” (1985:3). Racism, the practice of segregating others on the basis of colour, affected the American social stratifications; black Americans were relegated to the social margins.

From the literature reviewed it seems there has not been much attention given to the interrelatedness of racism and sexism, like how Alice Walker portrays them in the selected works. The present study probes into the psychological effects of racism and sexism by focussing on their interrelatedness, how they shape individuals' lives and consequently determine black Americans' social stratification. The study adopts deductive reasoning; it draws universal conclusions from particular phenomenon as portrayed by Alice Walker in the selected works. The critical focus of the study is on how Alice Walker presents racism and sexism as dehumanizing.

Valerie Russell argues that "The seeds which spawn the racist mentality also spawn the sexist mentality, though the results differ in both their historical manifestations and degree of oppression."² Another critic who concurs with Valerie Russell is Paula Giddings who argues that "The means of oppression among black Americans differed across race and sex lines, but the wellspring of that oppression was the same," (1985:6) that is the desire to dominate those different from oneself. For instance, being a woman is a position that is often defined in relation to the woman's role of serving men in the same manner as being black was a position defined in relation to the role of serving whites (1994:68).

Alice Walker puts experiences of black women into their historical context and helps readers to find rational meaning in them so that the forces that shape the black American lives are understood. However, Alice Walker's literary preoccupation is not only on issues of racism and sexism; she writes on diverse black American topical issues, concurring with Terry McMillan that "our work had gone through a series of metamorphoses. It wasn't that race was no longer important; it's just that in much of the work ... from the seventies to now, race wasn't always the focus. There has been an understanding that...our frame of reference is as African-Americans, so we write what our experiences mean to us, what concerns us as African-Americans" (1990:vi). This explains why Alice Walker's works deal with divergent issues such as racism, sexism, religion, African legacy, motherhood and love relationships. Nevertheless, Alice Walker's fiction draws inspiration from the American history – a history of the *Other-Self* bigotry intolerance, which dates back from the slavery era.

² Russel, Valerie, "Racism and Sexism, A Collective Struggle: A Minority Women's Point of View", Documents from the Women's Liberation Movement, an online Archival collection, special collection library, Duke University. <http://scriptorium.lib.duke.edu/wlm/raceses>. Retrieved on 20th July, 2009.

Andrews L William, Francis Smith Foster and Trudier Harris in *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature* observe that Alice Walker is one of the first African American women writers to explore the paralyzing effects of being a woman in a world that virtually ignores issues like black-on-black oppression (1997:750). Alice Walker, in her works, does not only expose white on black oppression, but she also portrays oppression by and among blacks themselves.

Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Nellie Y McKay in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* argue that “Many African American women writers, such as June Jordan, Audre Lorde, and Alice Walker, had been major actors in both the Civil Rights and Women’s Movements. In the early 1970s, they began to explore the racism in the women’s movement and the sexism in the black mentality” (2003:2916). Thus, some of the fiction they have written is the recollection of their memory and personal involvement in different political, cultural and social movements. Gates Jr. and McKay further argue that “It is important to note that African American writers of the 1970s and 1980s did not produce traditionally linear historical novels, rather, their novels, plays, poems, and essays remapped the past and sought in it that which would give meaning to the present” (2003:2013).

Andrews L William et al further observe that “Alice Walker’s writings expose the complexities of the ordinary black American life by presenting it within a context of duplicity and change. Within this context, Alice Walker peels back the hard cast cover of African American black women’s experiences to reveal the naked age of truth and hope” (1997:749). Alice Walker’s works, rather than idealizing black communities, as so many writings of the 1960s and the previous decades had attempted to do, articulate the complexities of African American culture and history and demonstrate how black communities have internalized racist stereotypes that radically affect their definitions and expectations of women and men (2003:2016).

In the selected works, female characters are victimized by males by virtue of being females, and blacks by whites by virtue of being blacks. It is as if race and sex, respectively, are measures of humanity. Alice Walker depicts black Americans as *still* being oppressed due to the patriarchal and racially prejudiced perceptions of white Americans. Her works echo the black American plight while acknowledging its roots from the harsh history of slavery. Andrew L Williams et al note that “Early-twentieth-century writers such as Alain Locke,

W.E.B Du Bois, Jessie Fauset, Nella Larsen, Ann Petry, and Dorothy West had looked carefully at class consciousness among African Americans; but as the century progressed, concerns about class were more and more eclipsed by sorrow and anger over racism” (2003:2018). Different critics have commented on racism and sexism in American society, but have not boldly stated that the two are interrelated in how they dehumanize the minority group. Albert Memmi, in *Dominated Man* defines racism as “the generalization and final assigning of values to real or imaginary differences, to the accuser’s benefit and at the victim’s expense, in order to justify the former’s own privileges or aggression” (1968:27). David T. Wellman further defines racism as “culturally sanctioned beliefs which, regardless of the intentions involved, defend the advantages whites have because of the subordinated position of the racial minorities” (1988:20). Paula S. Rothenberg in *Racism and Sexism: An Integrated Study* defines sexism and racism as “any attitude, action or institutional structure which subordinates a person or group because of their sex or race respectively” (1988:20 - 21).

Paula S. Rothenberg only defines racism and sexism; she does not go in details to explain how they relate with each other and how they affect individuals’ social stratification in the American setting. This study fills these gaps by analysing in details, how racism and sexism are dehumanizing, with particular focus on Alice Walker’s portrayal of white and black relationships and women and men relationships respectively. The study establishes that in both racism and sexism there is an element of subordination of the *Other* as different from the *Self*. This study, principally, analyzes the psychological impacts of racism and sexism on the subordinated individuals and their attempts to free themselves. The study concurs with Kate Cannon’s observation that “Throughout the history of the United States, the interrelationship of white supremacy and male superiority has characterised the Black women’s reality as a situation of struggle – a struggle to survive in two contradictory worlds, simultaneously, one white, privileged and oppressive, the other black, exploited and oppressed.

An analysis of the characters from the selected works by Alice Walker shows that there is a recurring antagonism between males and females and between blacks and whites. This study attempts to psychoanalyze how such exploitation affects individuals’ social standing.

Richard Barksdale in *Black Writers of American: A Comprehensive Anthology* argues that “no historian would ever be able to fully describe the black experience and no sociologist

would ever be able to interpret it adequately. One has to be part of the experience really to understand it.”(1972:847). Alice Walker, as an African American, writes from within; some of the things she writes are reflections of her own life as a Black woman in America.

Alice Walker’s fiction looks into the past, addresses the present and envisions the future for American race and sex relations. In her works she tries to dislodge American history from its racist and sexist moorings. She is a self-conscious creator of black counter-memory. Robert O’Meally says Alice Walker’s works restore black people’s history while at the same time enriching the American history (1994:46). Patricia Hill Collins in *The Black Feminist Thought* also argues that “The voice that Alice Walker seeks through these works is both individual and collective, personal and political, one of reflecting the intersection of her unique biography with the larger meaning of her historical times” (1990:103). Alice Walker “sees writing as a way to correct wrongs that she observes in the world, and has dedicated herself to delineating the unique dual oppression from which black women suffer: racism and sexism.”³

Alice Walker’s novels, collection of short stories, poetry, and essays are indeed impressive and compelling. Elaine Showalter, Lea Baechler, and A. Walton Litz in *Modern American Women Writers* contend that Alice Walker’s “characters, dramatic situations, and generic forms in her novels ... engage numerous narrative strategies: social realism, gothic realism, folk epistolary and mythical history (1991:511).” The present study shows that Alice Walker relates art to what she considers to be the all-important process of self-improvement. To improve the quality of one’s relationships with other people, and ultimately with all life on the planet, is Alice Walker’s fundamental human responsibility.

Alice Walker’s *Meridian*, although its primary focus is the legacy of black women in a sexist and racist America, also tests the limits of cross-racial relationships between whites and blacks. It depicts the multifaceted politics of gender and race, raising questions about the interaction of racism and sexism in shaping individual’s identity. Jone Johnson Lewis in the “Biography of Alice Walker” points out that Alice Walker’s poems, novels and short stories

³ See <http://www.enotes.com/contemporary-literary-criticism/walker-alice-vol-103>

deal with themes of rape, violence, isolation, troubled relationships, multi-generational perspectives, sexism and racism”⁴

Contribution of this Study to Alice Walker’s Studies

From the literature reviewed, it has been established that Alice Walker’s works have not been analysed with particular focus on racism and sexism as dehumanizing. The present study bridges that gap. In this regard, the study contributes new insights and perspectives on Alice Walker’s works. It can also be used as a basis for further research on Alice Walker’s work, since the present study has not been exhaustive of all the thematic areas in Alice Walker’s works.

Methodology of the Study

This is a qualitative research and it adopts character-based method of analysis, both cross-sectional – that is comparing and contrasting several characters –, and longitudinal, which involves a close following of characters in the novels and short stories. As a desk research, all the data which is used in the thesis is collected from the library through a close reading of the primary texts and other secondary texts on African-American literature. Due to the scarcity of published works on Alice Walker and other African American literature books, electronic journals and other internet materials which are relevant to the study have been accessed and made reference to where applicable.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of the paper is to analyze how Alice Walker, through her characters, portrays the Black American’s twin affliction. The study argues that Alice Walker’s fiction is a recollection of the Black American historical and social experiences which have their roots in slavery. The study argues that race and sex are determinants in the Black American social and class stratification; race and sex determine one’s place in the American society, as Alice Walker portrays. The thesis explores racial and sexual disparities in America as evidenced by the binary dichotomy of black and white relationships and men and women relationships

⁴ Lewis, Johnson, Jones, at http://www.womenshistory.about.com/od/alicewalker/a/alice_walker.htm accessed on 16th July, 2009.

respectively. The critical focus of the study is an examination of black American women's experiences in a sexist and racist society. It examines the dual status of an African American woman, as a black person and as a woman. The study, through a close analysis of the selected works, establishes that racism and sexism, which are dehumanizing, arise from the differentiation of the *Self* and the *Other*. The study argues that the discourses of gender/sex and race work in ideological ways that privilege certain groups and naturalize the inferiority of other groups, in this case women and blacks respectively. The study draws conclusions that gender and racial identity are social constructs, concurring with Paula Rothenberg who argues that "although we are born with certain physical characteristics [which define us as being male or female, white or black], we are not born with a particular gender or racial identity" (1988:350).

Theoretical Framework of the Study

In the character analysis, the study uses Psychoanalytic, Feminist and some aspect of Marxist theory. The choice of these theories has been informed by their interrelatedness and complementarity. However, the overriding theories are psychoanalysis and feminism, Marxist is implicitly applied when analyzing the power and class ideological perspectives which privilege the white *Self* or the male *Self* at the exploitation or oppression of the black *Other* or female *Other* respectively.

Psychoanalysis

Psychoanalytic theory, now broadly applied in different disciplines, ranging from social sciences, psychology and literature, "is a body of ideas developed by an Austrian physician Sigmund Freud and his followers, which is devoted to the study of human psychological functioning and behavior. It has three applications: 1) a method of investigation of the mind; 2) a systematized set of theories about human behavior; and 3) a method of treatment of psychological or emotional illness".⁵

In Freudian analysis of literary works, "the relationship between the author and the text is analogous to dreamers and their "text"" (2005:153). It is as if in writing the author rewrites

⁵ See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psychoanalysis> accessed on 19th October, 2008.

the unconscious self. A psychoanalytic approach to literary analysis explores the relationship between the personal and what Carl Jung calls the collective unconscious. Jung distinguishes the collective unconscious from the personal unconscious in that the personal unconscious is a personal reservoir of experiences unique to each individual, while the collective unconscious collects and organizes those personal experiences in a similar way with each member of a particular species or society (2005:153). This study subscribes to this theoretical thinking as it explores the experiences of a particular group of people, the Black Americans.

The discourse of psychoanalysis “has been normalized as a way of understanding the mind” (1996:87). According to Roger Webster “Psychoanalysis lays claim to discovering an area of activity which is hidden from us in our everyday lives but which contains a kind of determinant to reality, the *unconscious*: a region in which we hide or repress our deepest desires and fears that can only manifest itself through symbolic ways in dreaming, parapraxes or Freudian slips, or the lengthy process of psychoanalysis itself” (1996:87). There are quite a few different types of psychoanalysis. Some therapists work in a way that sticks very much to the ideas of Freud, while others tend to use ideas from other people who have followed in Freud's footsteps (e.g. Carl Jung, Melanie Klein). However, whichever type of analysis is used, they all conform to the same idea that the answer lies in the unconscious⁶. Among the many brands of psychoanalysis, the present study adopts Freudian feminist psychoanalysis which Elizabeth Wright has said is concerned with

the interaction of literature, culture and sexual identity, emphasizing the way that configurations of gender are located in history. The feminist psychoanalytic enquiry has perhaps the potential for becoming the most radical form of psychoanalytical criticism, since it is crucially concerned with the very construction of subjectivity (2005: 54).

In psychoanalysis to know something presupposes a unified consciousness which does the knowing, such a consciousness is like a focused lens without which nothing can be seen. In this study, psychoanalysis is deployed as the lens through which to look into Alice Walker's works, and consequently thoughts, by analyzing the how and why of her characters' actions.

Julia Kristeva is one of the psychoanalytic critics who have adopted feminist psychoanalysis. She draws her inspiration from the works of Mikhail Bakhtin and the Russian Formalists to propose the idea of “intertextuality.” She writes of “texts” as comprising “a permutation of texts, an intertextuality,” and of how “in the space of a given text, several utterances, taken

⁶ These ideas were extracted from <http://easyweb.easynet.co.uk/simplepsych/203.html> on 18 th May, 2009

from other texts, intersect and neutralize one another” (2005:161). This neutralization and intersection of texts take place in Alice Walker’s works. In *Meridian*, for instance, there is the intersection of texts with a broader set of “exterior texts,” texts which Julia Kristeva calls “texts of society and history” (ibid). *Meridian* is a rewriting of the historical facts of the Civil Rights Movement and women’s involvement in the movement. Intertextuality, which principally arises from the conscious and unconscious rewriting of texts, establishes the fact that a novel is a galaxy of texts each informing the other.⁷ Alice Walker’s literary works do not stand in isolation from the historical, social, cultural and political realms of which they are products.

Roger Webster notes that Freudianism, perhaps ironically, has much in common with Marxist concept of ideology. For instance, Frederick Jameson, a Marxist, sees ideology in literary texts as a form of “political unconscious.” Marxist and psychoanalytic theories give plausible explanations on how society is formed and how literature is produced and consumed. “Freudian theory attempts to provide universal models and explanations for the drives which underpin the way people behave,” and people’s behavior in society is largely responsible for the way they treat each other (1996: 88). That is why the study also applies Marxist theory in its character analysis.

Marxism

The study takes on board Marxist theory because “the concerns of Marxist critics generally have been primarily social rather than individual, exploring the sociology of the text as opposed to the psychology of the individual characters. When characters are examined... it is usually as a way of exploring the wider social and historical forces of which they are seen as products” (1996:68). As asserted by George Lukacs, a Marxist “whose work mainly concentrated on the nineteenth-century novel and the questions of realism, the novel must be assessed on its ability to reflect the historical and material conditions of society; these are the main criteria for assessing its realism” (ibid). This study applies Marxist theory because it is, in part, concerned with analyzing how Alice Walker’s characters mirror the Black American social and historic fabric. The study also applies Marxist theory because psychoanalysis in

⁷ The idea was taken from Michel Foucault’s expression that ‘the world is more than a galaxy of texts’

itself fails to see the individual as a whole, as a social individual. Ralph Fox in *The Novel and the People* observes that

Psychoanalysis, for all its brilliant and courageous probing into the secret depths of the personality, has never understood that the individual is only a part of the social whole, and that the laws of this whole, decomposed and refracted in the apparatus of the individual psyche like rays of light passing through a prism, change and control the nature of each individual.⁸

By combining Marxism and psychoanalysis the study takes an integrated approach of character analysis. “Marxism as a philosophy stresses the primacy of class over individuality in society...”,(1996:82) whereas psychoanalysis stresses the individual’s psychic operations. Thus Marxism and Psychoanalysis complement each other in the holistic analysis of Alice Walker’s selected works. Marxism and feminism share a common goal, the struggle for the liberation and emancipation of the oppressed. Marxists take up the cause of the marginalized in society, fighting against inequality, and all forms and manifestations of oppression, discrimination and injustices in the same manner as feminists do. Since this study is principally concerned with the issues of race and sex and how these affect the characters’ psychic operations and determine people’s class in society, the application of feminist theory is necessary.

Feminism

Man can think of himself without woman. She cannot think of herself without man. And she is simply what man decrees; thus she is called “the sex,” by which is meant that she appears essentially to the male as a sexual being. For him she is sex – absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute [the Self] – She is the Other. (Simone de Beauvoir 5)

The above quotation explains some of the major concerns of feminist critics. Although there are diverse approaches to feminism, they all strive to change the status quo of women. Feminism arises from the background that “woman has always been man’s dependent, if not his slave”, that “the two sexes [male and female] have never shared the world in equality” (1949: 10) in the same way as blacks and whites in America have never shared their social and political worlds in equality. Therefore, it is the quest for equality which has been the driving force for feminist and Marxist movements.

⁸ See Ralph Fox, *The Novel and the People*, (London, Lawrence & Wishart, 1979), p. 104, as quoted by Roger Webster in *Studying Literary Theory* p. 69

Simone de Beauvoir, a feminist from the West, argues that “Even when [a woman’s] rights are legally recognized in the abstract, long-standing custom prevents their full expression in the mores” (ibid). Through her characters, in the selected works, Alice Walker shows that “the duality of sexes and races, like any other duality gives rise to conflict,” (1949:11) the conflict between males and females, and between whites and blacks. It is this sexist and racist dual antagonism which this study analyses in Alice Walker’s selected works.

Much as Alice Walker’s writings can be described as feminist, it should be pointed out, from the onset, that her writings belong to the intellectual thought of black American women, which is commonly known as Black feminist thought as discussed by Patricia Hill Collins in her masterpiece *The Black Feminist Thought*. All African American women writers belong to this school of thought because: “All African-American women share the common experience of being Black women in a society that denigrates women of African descent. This commonality of experience suggests that certain characteristic themes are prominent in a Black women’s stand point” (1990:22). For example, one core theme that stands out in fiction by black American women is the legacy of struggle, the struggle against racism and sexism. This theme runs through the works of Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Audre Lorde, and many other African American women writers. However, African American women respond to the theme of struggle differently. Alice Walker, cognizant of the fact that black women experienced a different and more intense kind of oppression than did white women, coined the word “womanism” which best describes her feminist writings. She declares herself to be a womanist. Alice Walker uses the word “Womanism” to describe the perspective and experiences of “women of color”.⁹ “Womanism” has a close leaning to African feminism because African American women and African women share many things in common; the former are, historically, descendants of the latter. Alice Walker’s coinage of the word “womanism” gives equal importance to race and to sex in her works as a black American. A “womanist” is “a black feminist or feminist of color” who is “Committed to [the] survival and wholeness of [the] entire people, male and female.”¹⁰ In choosing the word “womanism” rather than “feminism”, Roberta Hendrickson argues that Alice Walker expresses her feeling of separation from white feminists who fail to consider race¹¹ in black women experiences.

⁹ Abstracted from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alice_Walker

¹⁰ Abstracted from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alice_Walker

¹¹ See Roberta M. Hendrickson in her essay “Remembering the Dream: Alice Walker, Meridian and the Civil Rights Movement” in http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2278/is_3_24/ai_62350903. p 2

Black Americans are products of the harsh history of the unspeakable inequality and injustice. All the kinds of oppression discussed herein arise from the mentality of treating the *Other* as a means to an end not an end in him/herself. The operative psychology at work in the selected works can be understood from the Marxist point of view that “It is not consciousness of men that determines their social being but, on the contrary, their social being determines their consciousness.”¹²

Organization of the Study

The study is organized around five chapters, all of which concern the relations between race, sex and identity. Each chapter focuses on a particular aspect of the black American experience while building on the preceding chapter. Chapter one, “The Painful History of the Unspeakable Inequality: the Black American Experience”, is basically an introduction. It highlights the main aim of the thesis and introduces the body of knowledge, and the theoretical perspectives on which the study rests. The second chapter “A Walking History: Alice Walker’s fiction as the Site of Memory” argues that Alice Walker’s works are a reflection of the American history, especially history of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. The focus in this chapter is on how Alice Walker satirizes the Civil Rights Movement in *Meridian* and other works. The chapter also discusses Alice Walker’s rewriting of the self by highlighting the view that Alice Walker’s fiction is a *self*-reflection and *other*-reflection. The central argument in this chapter is that fiction is the Alice Walker’s way of recouping her social and cultural experiences, a way she retells the racist experiences. Thus, fiction is not totally divorced from the author’s personal experiences, hence the adoption of psychoanalysis as a conceptualizing theory in this study. The third chapter, which is titled “Alice Walker’s Portrayal of Racism in Black Communities: A Legacy of Slavery”, consolidates the claim that racism did not end with the official abolition of slavery; it continued to manifest itself in different forms long after slavery. The fourth chapter, “The Black Women’s Experiences: Family Violence, Trauma and Grief”, explores the exploitation of black women in a sexist and racist society. The main argument in this chapter is that women are treated as the *Other* whereas men take the controlling role of the *Self*. The chapter argues that the two sexes exist in antagonism, males oppressing and dehumanizing females. The chapter further explores Alice Walker’s configuration of Black Women’s cultural consciousness, analysing traditional

¹² As cited in Erich Fromm, *Marx’s Concept of Man*, (New York: Frederick Ungar Pub. Co., 1961) p. 17

practices and rituals which denigrate the position of women in society and consequently endanger their lives.

The last chapter summarises the main issues discussed in the thesis and suggests the way forward for further studies on Alice Walker. Although this study covers a wide range of social and political issues in Alice Walker's writings, it does not claim to be comprehensive and exhaustive.

CHAPTER TWO

A WALKING HISTORY: ALICE WALKER'S FICTION AS THE SITE OF MEMORY

Introduction

Genevieve Fabre and Robert O'Meally in *History and Memory in African-American Culture* observe that the history of slavery forces Black Americans to find ways "to reconstruct an identity and preserve the memory of their lives and sufferings on the American continent, and to recall who they *were* before slavery" and who they *are* after the official abolition of slavery (1994:262). The legacy of slavery cannot be overlooked in any study of African-American literature; it is part of black American history. The very presence of black-Americans in America is largely due to slavery. We can only begin to understand and situate the black-American experience through recourse to the memory of slavery and its aftermath. Slave narratives and some historical novels exhibit how deeply embedded the problem of racism was and is in America.

This chapter presents Alice Walker's writings as the site of memory. The central argument of the chapter is that Alice Walker's writings are reflections from her memory of the events which unfolded in the black American history. Alice Walker's "writings portray the struggle of black people throughout history, and are praised for their insightful and riveting portraits of black life, in particular the experiences of black women in a sexist and racist society."¹³ The chapter argues that through fiction Alice Walker portrays the black American's experiences, as lived *then* and lived *now*, thus she juxtaposes history and fiction; they are discussed side by side, history informing her fiction.

Although black Americans were given full citizenship in America in 1866 they have continued to be dominated by whites. Some critics argue that "the white race is dominant and will keep their position, no matter how numerous the blacks may become" (1994: 93). The chapter discusses how Alice Walker depicts the black American experiences, by focusing on how she satirizes the Civil Rights Movement in her novel *Meridian*. It shall be established that Alice Walker creates and recreates fiction in response to ever-changing political and

¹³ <http://www.africanamericans.com/AliceWalker.htm>

social circumstances. In the novel *Meridian*, Alice Walker portrays the black American twin affliction of racism and sexism. She recreates history through memory. She rewrites history through fiction. Fictionally she probes into the psychological meaning of what it was to be a black American during the Civil Rights Movement, as we can see through the character of Meridian who is an epitome of blackness in the novel.

Fiction and Memory

Maurice Halbwachs in the essay “The Collective Memory” argues that “memories are not merely produced; they are constructed in all various cultural forms: music, dance, poetry, [novels] and historical scholarship” (1994: 52). Memory can be retrieved through oral as well as literary traditions, spoken epics as well as written texts. Therefore, “we not only have art so that we will not die of reality; we have narratives as an authoritative means of negotiating between retribution and forgiveness, between ignorance and knowledge, between lies and enlightenment” (ibid). Memory is a warehouse of people’s experiences and Alice Walker brings this out in *Meridian*. “Memory is the most reliable tool in regaining and re/constructing not just the past but history itself. It contributes greatly to the cultural recovery in cases of ‘decaying cultures’ or cultures without a straightforward cultural heritage” (Ibid) or cultural backcloth. Black Americans have no straightforward cultural heritage; they have to negotiate their heritage through the memory of their history. Most of these have been documented in various forms of art: songs, folktales, folklores, novels and poetry. These have been the main outlets for African American feelings and experiences. Frederick Douglass, in his narrative, testifies that the only way in which slaves were able to let out their grievances was through songs. “Songs told a tale of woe; they breathed the prayer and complaint of ‘souls of the black folk’ boiling over with bitterest anguish, every word was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from the chains and bondage of slavery” (1994:19).

Frederick Douglass, in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, sums up the black American long-standing dilemma, which led to the Civil Rights unrest in America. Black Americans did not feel belonging to the American nation. They would complain that

Aliens are we in our native land. The fundamental principles of the republic, to which the humblest whiteman, whether born here or elsewhere, may appeal with confidence, in the hope of awakening a favourable response are held to be inapplicable to us...the glorious teachings of the sun of God, are construed and applied against us. American humanity hates us,

scorns us, disowns us and denies us, in a thousand ways, our very personality. The outspread wing of American Christianity, apparently broad enough to give shelter to a perishing world refuses to cover us (1855: 18)

The Black Arts literature of the 1940s to 1960s strongly enacted and spoke against this inhumanity. Much of Black Arts literature protested against the white dehumanization of blacks. The victimization of the black race by the white race brought about the hostility between the two races. For the writers of The Black Arts Movement, anger in their literature became a normal thing. Addison Gayle Jr. states, “the black artist in American society who creates without interjecting a note of anger is creating not as a black man, but as an American. For anger in black art is as old as the first utterances by black men on American soil” (2000: 1870).

Henry Louis Gates Jr. says “While earlier writers, white and black, had condemned slavery as shameful, African American writers of the contemporary period, to which Alice Walker belongs focus on the slave era as a way of understanding the present. [...] Slavery is no longer seen as something that African Americans want to forget” (2000:2013). Through memory African Americans recall and satirize their history. For instance, *Meridian* satirizes the Civil Rights and Women’s Movements. Alice Walker’s writings, though contemporary, rearticulate how American history shapes the lives of black Americans. Catherine Clinton in her essay “With a Whip in His Hand: Rape, Memory and African-American Women” says “in every case of rape, whether the mark is invisible or permanent, life or death, a mark remains: the memory of a violation – force without consent...in all cases memory will replay the circumstances, allowing the rapists to prey again and again on the psyches of their victims...”(1994:205). It is this replaying of the memory of the black American experiences, particularly during the Civil Rights Movement that this chapter seeks to explore.

Alice Walker’s fiction is not just entertaining but also historical, informative and educative; memory plays a big role in its creation. In an interview with Amy Goodman, Alice Walker says that one of the reasons why she wrote a book like *Meridian* is that she “lived through that period of the Civil Rights Movement in the South, and a lot of the images were just that: images, but there was a lot happening behind the scenes.”¹⁴ Therefore, to understand

¹⁴ Goodman, Amy, “I am a Renegade, an Outlaw, a Pagan” – Author, Poet and Activist Alice Walker in her own words in an interview on 13 February, 2006 posted on <http://www.democracynow.org/show> retrieved on 18th August, 2008.

Meridian in its wholeness one needs to be conversant with the issues which characterized the Civil Rights Movement.

Meridian: A Satire and Memoir of the Civil Rights Movement

Alice Walker's *Meridian* replays the major black American experiences, which took place in the 1960s Civil Rights Movement. "The American Civil Rights Movement (1955–1968) refers to the reform movements in the United States which were aimed at abolishing racial discrimination against African Americans and restoring suffrage in the Southern states."¹⁵ In terms of setting of the novel, *Meridian* was set in the Southern state of America; the region which experienced racism the most. The protagonist, Meridian, is a black woman from a southern town of Chicokema. She is an ardent member of the civil rights movement, she wants what is best for black people; therefore she supports the revolution. However, she is not fully convinced whether she must kill for the revolution (31). To join the revolutionary group Meridian has to make a declaration of her willingness to die for the revolution. She is supposed to answer with a positive "Yes" the question "Will you kill for the revolution?" (*Meridian* 191). Although Meridian has witnessed extreme cases of violence against blacks, she does not think it is right to shed blood for the revolution. Meridian wants the change, she is advocating, to be gained through peaceful means. The requirement of killing for the revolution does not impress her at all; like Reverend Martin Luther King Jr., she is guided by the strong religious belief that murder is murder even if it is revolutionary (*Meridian* 28).

In *Meridian*, Alice Walker fictionalizes the history of the Civil Rights Movement. The novel is a satire of the Movement. Alice Walker mentions in *Meridian* that "1960 – 1970 was a decade marked by death and violence... Funerals became engraved on the black American brain, intensifying the ephemeral of life" (33). Many black freedom fighters such as Martin Luther King Jr. Malcolm X, Medgar Evers were assassinated. These leaders were assassinated because they were considered by whites as black dissidents who fought against unequal treatment of blacks by the white regime. Students and other people came together to protest against the unequal treatment of blacks on the basis of color and Meridian was an active member of these civil rights groups. Although Alice Walker presents these events in fiction, they are reminiscent of what actually happened in history of America during the Civil Rights Movement.

¹⁵ See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/African-American_Civil_Rights_Movement_\(1955%E2%80%931968\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/African-American_Civil_Rights_Movement_(1955%E2%80%931968))

Roberta M. Hendrickson in her essay “Remembering the Dream: Alice Walker, *Meridian* and the Civil Rights Movement” quotes Alice Walker saying that “If the Civil Rights Movement is ‘dead,’ and if it gave us nothing else, it gave us each other forever” (2008:1). In *Meridian*, Alice Walker shows that the Civil Rights Movement was a unifying factor for black Americans. The Movement reaffirmed black Americans’ connection to each other as a people and to their history of struggle against oppression and discrimination. This black American unification is satirized in *Meridian* through the characters of students who unite for the common goal; to fight against white segregation through demonstrations.

The main thematic issues in *Meridian* are racial segregation, disenfranchisement, exploitation, and violence against black Americans. In *Meridian*’s community blacks are racially segregated; “black people were never shown in the news [on TV] – unless of course they had shot their mothers or raped their bosses’ grandparent – and a black person or persons giving news conference was unheard of” (72). Blacks are only brought to the limelight when they have done something bad or are accused of something bad, according to the authorities nothing good comes from the black person. Through white to black relations in *Meridian*, Alice Walker satirizes how life was for the black persons in America in the 1960s. Alice Walker’s *Meridian* does not mince words on how whites and blacks related during the time leading to the Civil Rights Movements. Roberta Hendrickson appraises the novel in her remarks that

Meridian is a novel that affirms the Movement’s vision of freedom and nonviolence, affirms blackness and African American heritage in a racist society that failed to value and continued to destroy black lives, and focuses on black women and their participation in the Movement, refusing to make them less than [what] they had been. *Meridian* is what Walker would later call a “womanist” novel: it combines the black consciousness and feminist consciousness that grew out of the Civil Rights Movement (2008: 2).

Meridian’s active involvement in the civil rights groups demonstrates black women’s input in the fight for social justice. *Meridian*’s participation in the movement illustrates that during the Civil Rights Movement black women were determined to assert their equal rights including that of suffrage. *Meridian* believes that with franchise women would be empowered to lay claim to economic, social and political equality (*Meridian* 188).

Those who showed discontentment about the treatment of blacks by whites were brought to book, and some faced assassination like Martin Luther King Jr. Many black people during the Civil Rights Movement were arrested. The same horrendous scenes characterized by the killings of freedom fighters are portrayed in *Meridian*. Meridian and Truman Held were arrested and beaten for joining the demonstration against the town's segregated hospital facilities and the harsh treatment which black prisoners received in jail (83). Truman and Meridian join the demonstrators to have the earlier demonstrators released from jail but they end up being put in jail themselves.

In the racist America of the time "public facilities and government services such as education, [hospitals] were divided into separate and unequal 'white' and 'colored' domains by law."¹⁶ In *Meridian* Alice Walker calls to memory how blacks were segregated from social facilities such as schools, hospitals and swimming pools. For instance, the narrator in *Meridian* tells us that blacks were not allowed access to the public swimming pool by white authorities who after all owned swimming pools in their respective houses. Consequently, very few blacks knew how to swim (190).

There was total hatred and hostility between the two races. In *Meridian* Alice Walker rearticulates the hostility which existed between the white and black races. Mrs Hill, Meridian's mother, "is a well, a reservoir, an ocean of disgust towards whites". When she describes white men, it is with hatred. Meridian says, "She spoke of their faces as if they were faces of mouse, of oxen, of wet, slobbery walruses..." (*Meridian* 108). It is worse with Meridian's grandmother who only remembers that whites are frivolous, helpless creatures, lazy and without ingenuity. She says

She had never known a white woman she liked after the age of twelve. White women were useless except as baby machines which would continue to produce little white people who would grow up to oppress her. [She concludes that] without servants all of them would live in pigsties. (*Meridian* 108).

These sentiments from Meridian's grandmother epitomize how Alice Walker uses fiction to attack the inhumane treatment which whites received at the hands of whites. Meridian's grandmother hates whites as a race because they have continued to oppress her as a black person.

¹⁶see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/African-American_Civil_Rights_Movement_\(1955%E2%80%931968\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/African-American_Civil_Rights_Movement_(1955%E2%80%931968))

Meridian's grandmother, in distaste for whites, wonders if any black man would ever dream of kissing a white girl. She asks, "Who would want to? What were they good for?" (122}. For her, whites are good for nothing, the only thing they do is to abuse and exploit blacks. For instance, she sees white women as breeders of oppressors. From a psychoanalytic perspective, we can argue that Alice Walker, in *Meridian*, is negotiating with the black American history, during which blacks suffered under the dominant white regime. As women were perceived as breeders of slaves during slavery, here white women are satirically referred to as "baby machines... to produce little white people who would continue to oppress" blacks (120). This narration, in *Meridian*, is a recast of the ills of slavery as experienced by black women. The black American's women experiences during slavery were more complex than that of men. This explains why Alice Walker presents women as being more vocal in the call for civil rights than their male counterparts because their experience was more complex than for men. Alexander Crummell observes that "the lot of the black man on the plantation has been sad and desolate enough; but the fate of the black woman has been awful! Her entire existence from the day she landed, a naked victim of slave trade, has been degradation in its extremist forms."¹⁷ A recall to memory, of women's experiences during slavery at the white hands, makes Meridian's grandmother angry towards whites.

A family history of Meridian suggests that "her mother's great-great-grandmother had been a slave whose two children were sold away from her when they were toddlers" (122). This was characteristic of the slavery era when children were taken away from their mothers, and sometimes sold away. Frederick Douglass writes in his narrative that he was separated from his mother when he was young. The separation was to keep a social distance between children and their mothers. In *Meridian*, Alice Walker represents the kind of child separations, which was characteristic of the slavery era through the character of Meridian who separates with her child Rundi. Meridian separates with her child Rundi for academic reasons; she wants to go to school. When Meridian abandons her child Rundi for school, she is troubled by nightmares about the child. In her deep thoughts and memory, she recalls how, during slavery, mothers like her were denied the right to raise their children. Alice Walker continually situates her characters back to the history of blacks. Meridian is haunted by psychological guilt when she considers what motherhood meant for black women during

¹⁷ Alexander Crummell as cited in Emmanuel Ngwira's MA thesis "A Legacy of Slavery: The African American Family in Selected Novels by Toni Morrison, 2006. p.13.

slavery. In her reflection, “On some deeper level than she had anticipated or had even been aware of, she felt condemned, consigned to penitence for life:

the past pulled the present out of shape... she realized that if her mother had had children in the slavery era she would not, automatically, have been allowed to keep them, because they would not have belonged to her but to the white person who “owned” them all. Meridian knew that enslaved women had been made miserable by the sale of their children, that the daughters of these enslaved women had thought their greatest blessing from ‘Freedom’ was that it meant they could keep their own children. And what had Meridian Hill done with her precious child? She had given him away (*Meridian* 91).

Motherhood means a lot for the black American, and what Meridian has done, in abandoning her child, is a disgrace to the women fraternity. Patricia Hill argues that “the concept of motherhood is of central importance in the philosophy of both African and African-American women” (1990:118). Thoughts that Meridian has abandoned her motherly duty trouble her on campus, at Saxon College, in her first year. It is her own conscience speaking to her; “it was talking to her and it was full of hate” (*Meridian* 91). It can be argued that Meridian feels guilty for abandoning her child when mothers like her during slavery did not have a chance to raise their own children. Psychologically, she might be feeling that abandoning a child is a mockery of motherhood by a black woman who is supposed to treasure the experience her ancestors were denied by forces they had no control over.

Through the character of Meridian, Alice Walker sees motherhood as providing a base for self-actualization, status and a catalyst for social activism (1990:118). Meridian has to negotiate between her role as a mother and the call for education which would enlighten her. While at college, Meridian joins other women students in different demonstrations against all the social injustices against black people. Meridian’s involvement in the demonstrations at Saxon College not only illustrates the importance of education as a liberating force for black Americans, but also portrays the centrality of black women as political activists.¹⁸ Vicki L Crawford, Jacqueline Anne Rouse and Barbara Woods in *Women in the Civil Rights Movement* argue that women were trailblazers and torchbearers of the Movement; they argue that women played an essential role at every level of the Movement. Alice Walker, through the character of Meridian and her active involvement in the movement, testifies to this claim.

¹⁸ Ideas taken from Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* p. 148 but condensed to fit the context of this study.

Meridian, though written shortly after the Civil Rights Movement, is a novel that literally and metaphorically moves in and out of historical space and time. Much as it establishes the hostile space of the black Americans, it also takes the reader into the historical terrain through which black Americans have travelled. Maryemma Graham ably puts it that in *Meridian* Alice Walker “weaves multiple stories into one grand narrative, moving in and out of the past and present” (2004:191). She takes us into the historic journey of women’s experiences during slavery and how that has affected their self-perception and perception of motherhood in the post-slavery era.

Alice Walker’s Rewriting of the Self

Alice Walker’s texts under discussion illustrate that contemporary African-American writers are not only reactors to their socio-political milieu but also creators of their own life. Alice Walker’s novels mirror the harsh realities of the aftermath of slavery on the psyches of black-Americans. Another novel which expresses the black American experience is *The Color Purple*. Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* and *Meridian*, set primarily, though not exclusively, in the South, illustrate her commitment to reclaiming and valorising the rural South, specifically Georgia. This is most pronounced in *The Color Purple*. Some characters in the works under study are a true reflection of Alice Walker’s personal experiences. Such characters augment the assertion that Alice Walker’s fiction is a site of memory. In *The Color Purple* the character Nettie travels to Africa on a missionary journey. Nettie’s experience in Africa is like a retelling of her voyage to Africa. Alice Walker in her own life once travelled to Africa and came face to face with African people and their life styles.

Alice Walker continues to rewrite herself in the short story “The Abortion.” In the short story the protagonist struggles with the psychological and physical trauma of abortion. The protagonist is a reflection of Alice Walker herself. When Alice Walker was at college she underwent an abortion. Psychoanalytically, in Freudian terms, it can be asserted that Alice Walker’s “The Abortion” is her unconscious self speaking. The short story is about the experiences of a woman who undergoes abortion. The protagonist in the short story is troubled psychologically by pre- and post-abortion thoughts. Imani’s abortion, as that of Alice Walker herself, is a result of men’s lack of responsibility. This forced Imani, as it did Alice Walker, to reach the disturbing conclusion of aborting the pregnancy.

Alice Walker's characters show that she does not divorce herself from the history which shapes her life; a history which makes black Americans marginal in all human respects. Through memory she recalls her life and other black Americans' lives and retells it in fictitious form.

CHAPTER THREE

ALICE WALKER'S PORTRAYAL OF RACISM IN BLACK COMMUNITIES: A LEGACY OF SLAVERY

Introduction

According to Karl Marx, "Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered as given and transmitted from their past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living" (1852: 19). African Americans have a unique history; a history made not under circumstances chosen by themselves, but circumstances passed on from their ancestors. Most of the black Americans are descendants of slaves. Slavery is the underlying cause of the present African American's predicament.

John Herbers observes that "ever since black people were brought to the shores of America there has been, both within their own community and within the larger society, a debate about who they were, how they were to fit into the American culture and what would be their ultimate destiny" (1973:34). One of the central questions in the study of African American history has been "Why were Africans made slaves?" (2005:9). Historians, sociologists, anthropologists and even scientists have debated this question over the years. Several factors appear to have been responsible. To the whites, blacks from Africa seemed to be different from other people, thus their humanity was put into suspicion. Their very skin color set them apart. Blackness had long been associated in European culture, with the devil, immorality and dirt. Thus, Africans were considered primitive and inferior basing on their skin colour (1973: 34).

Since slavery, throughout the history of America, black Americans have been segregated by their white counterparts on the basis of color. For instance, Michael Weber says that "during the era of the Jim Crow in America "racism was the norm. Scientific opinion agreed that African-Americans were an inferior race", and that they were "an ignorant and debased and debauched race" (2005:23). In addition, discrimination, segregation and violence against blacks became part of the American life. This impartial treatment between blacks and whites

on the basis of colour originated from slavery. However, Paula Giddings says, “Even in a world where slavery no longer existed, Blacks faced a variety of obstacles” (1985:57). This assertion simply means that slavery was not the only cause for racism but that there were some underlying perceptions whites had of blacks basing on differentiation of the two races. W.E.B Dubois in *The Souls of the Black Folk* asserted, a century ago, that “the problem of the twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line, - the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea...” (1903:19). A century later, the problem of color remains distinctive in the American psyche; America remains divided along the color line as Alice Walker portrays in her works.

This chapter explores cross-sectional racial relationships in America as portrayed by Alice Walker through her characters in the selected texts. The central argument of this chapter is that there has never been social nor political equality between blacks and whites in America even long after the official abolition of slavery and at the dawn of the Emancipation. The chapter further argues that Alice Walker combines history with literature and puts it to the service of the present. The differentiation of whites and blacks did not diminish with the abolition of slavery but continued long after.

White and Black Antagonism

Alice Walker’s works provide a realist historical consciousness which Americans need “to forge a memory that might help solve or transcend the race problem rather than simply getting rid of it” (1994:49). As a contemporary writer, Alice Walker combines literature with history and puts it to the service of the present. In her works, fiction speaks history. For instance, in the short story “Everyday Use” the protagonist declares disinterest in the whites. The protagonist asks: “Who can even imagine me looking a strange white man in the eye? It seems to me I have talked to them always with one foot raised in flight, with my head turned in whichever way is farthest from them” (*In Love & Trouble* 49). In these few lines Alice Walker brings forth the fear that existed between blacks and whites. Blacks have feared whites because of their abusive attitude towards them and their relationship has been antagonistic. The short story “Everyday Use” illustrates that racism is the America’s unresolved past; it remains America’s central social problem. Dalton Harlon in *Racial Healing: Confronting the Fear Between Blacks and Whites* argues that “American sorry

racial history is like a deep and abiding wound. If left untreated, it will continue to ooze and fester” (1995:3). Reading Alice Walker from a more psychoanalytic perspective one gets a glimpse of how she uses fiction to rewrite the black American racist experiences.

In the same short story “Everyday Use,” Alice Walker also depicts a racial issue about naming, which has its legacy from slavery. Most ex-slaves like Frederick Douglass testify that their names were changed by the white masters and mistresses. During slavery white masters changed names of black slaves, and gave them their own names. In “Everyday Use” Dee, the black character, changes her name to Wangero Lee-wanika Kemanjo to resist using a name which reminds her of imperialist whites. She tells her friends that Dee is dead; this death is a psychic death. It cannot be a haste conclusion to deduce that Dee’s changing of name is a psychic escape from the imperial white domination and oppression. For Wangero herself says “I could not bear it any longer being named after the people who oppress me” (*In Love & Trouble* 54). Dee was named after her auntie Dicie who got the name from whites long beyond the Civil War in America (52). Wangero thinks that using the name Dee would bring hard feelings and bad memories about whites who tortured and brutalized her own people after they were displaced from their homeland Africa. The choice of the name Wangero Lee-wanika, ironically, epitomises her desire to be connected with Africa. Wangero Lee-wanika Kemanjo sounds like an East African name. Alice Walker must have heard this name when she visited Kenya.

Another issue, apart from exposing the racial disparities between blacks and whites, Alice Walker also underscores the fact that although black Americans had been uprooted from Africa and exposed to the agonies of the Middle Passage under slavery they did not wholly lose their identity. Henry Louis Gates argues that the Africans who survived the dreaded Middle Passage from the west coast of Africa to the new world did not sail alone. “Violently and radically abducted from their civilizations, these Africans carried within them to the western hemisphere aspects of their cultures that were meaningful, that could not be obliterated, and that they chose, by acts of will not to forget: their music, their myths, their expressive institutional structures, their metaphysical systems of order and their forms of performance” (2000: 3-4). One aspect of the African culture which the slaves carried with them from Africa is that of valuing names. A name means a lot; it carries the identity of the person. This point testifies why Dee changes her name to Wangero Lee-wanika Kemanjo. The way Wangero Lee-wanika’s handles the name issue shows that even if slavery is a by

gone story, its aftermath continues to impinge on the African American psyche. Wangero does not want to continue using the name Dee which was given by the people who once enslaved his ancestors.

Another text which discusses the black and white antagonism is *Meridian*. The novel exposes the rooted hatred between blacks and whites. It explores the hatred which is not only driven by personal differences between individuals but their racial backgrounds. To begin with, in *Meridian*, Lynne, a white girl, is guilty of her whiteness. "By being white Lynne was guilty of whiteness" (*Meridian* 133). One wonders, "Is it possible to be guilty of color?" Lynne says "Of course black people for years were 'guilty' of being black. Slavery was punishment for their 'crime'" (133). In this scenario Alice Walker takes fiction back in history; she alludes to the history of slavery and how whites and blacks related. In Lynne's words blackness is perceived as a sin and slavery is its punishment. On the other hand whiteness is associated with purity and beauty. This difference demonstrates how race has a profound influence on one's life prospects in America. Blacks are racially disadvantaged while whites are racially advantaged. Harlon Dalton observes that "Whites move to the head of the line simply by being born white" (1995: 7) whereas blacks are driven to live on the margins of society. Blacks, as portrayed in the novel, do not get the same recognition as whites by the mere fact of being black.

The black and white divide has, for a long time, affected harmonious co-existence between the two races. There has always been racial antagonism which has even led to failure in inter-marriages between the two races. In *Meridian* Alice Walker also portrays the failure of the character of Truman, a black person and Lynne a white girl. The two attempt interracial marriage but their marriage fails because of their different racial backgrounds. At the break up of their marriage, the two confront each other with racist remarks. For instance Lynne calls Truman a "vampire". She says "of course he is a vampire; sucks the blood of young white virgins to keep him vigorous" (*Meridian* 150). Lynne identified Truman with a vampire, because he is black. The animal imagery recalls the slavery era when blacks were denounced and degraded as beasts.

Alice Walker attempts to show the possibility of white and black relationships but such relationships are exploitative and parasitic in nature, as it was the case during slavery. For example, during slavery black women were exploited as objects of sexual gratification and

satisfaction by white slave owners; they were sexually abused by white men. White men were ‘vampires’ who sacked the blood of young black virgins. By portraying a black man sexually abusing a white woman, Alice Walker is writing back to the centre. Truman does not love Lynne although he marries her; she is essentially a sexual object to him. Truman boldly claims that if he had consciously decided to date a white girl, it *must* be essentially a matter of sex (*Meridian* 106). The “overweening sense of the I and consequent forgetting of the Thou” (1994: 47) result into this exploitation of the *other*. Truman sees himself as the I and consequently forgets the “thou” in the same manner that whites forgot the humanity in blacks during slavery. The relationship between Lynne and Truman demonstrates the inherent animosity between the two races. Alice Walker shows that between the white race and the black race there are a lot of stereotypical and racist perceptions toward each other. Issues which are supposed to be dealt with at individual and personal levels are linked to race. When Truman and Lynne pick a quarrel, Truman, instead of attacking Lynne as an individual, blames her for her race. He says, “You always needed a shrink,” and this is “symptomatic of your [white] race” (*Meridian* 149). Truman does not see Lynne as an individual person he sees her as a white being. This “generalized and final assigning of values to real or imaginary differences, to the accuser’s benefit and at his victim’s expense, in order to justify the former’s [own] privileges or aggression” is what Paula Rothenburg calls racism. Thus, according to this understanding Truman can as well be called a racist. The two hate each other because they belong to different races.

In *Meridian* Alice Walker further depicts white racism and how blacks are perceived by whites as less than human. In the novel, George Dexter, a black character whose mother is white, was born under hard circumstances. When the parents of George Dexter’s mother find out that she is pregnant by the black man who works for them, they shut her up in a cellar and threw away the key. They feed her pig bran and a little watery milk (*Meridian* 65). When George Dexter is born he is thrown out into the street with the rest of the trash. The white family thinks that they cannot raise *anything* less than white. He is raised by an old woman who later dies of ptomaine poisoning. The throwing away of George Dexter by his white grandparents clearly shows that the white society does not recognize humanity in blackness. Because George Dexter’s mother is carrying a non-white foetus, she is discriminated against by her white family.

The racist attitude towards blacks resulted into segregation of blacks. Blacks were segregated from other social amenities just because they were black. For instance, in the town of Chicokema segregation based color is the order of the day and members of the black community who think [that] equal rights for all should be extended to blacks as well are labelled as “outside agitators” by whites (*Meridian* 18). Meridian, a black girl, cannot go alone to small towns where blacks are not welcome on the sidewalks after dark. Some places in Chicokema community have signposts labelled “whites only.”

Furthermore, in *Meridian* blacks are not allowed access to government amenities. Areas which are supposed to be public are reserved for whites only. When laws are instituted to change the system, things do not really change. The white race continues to consider itself intrinsically superior to other races.

In history, some blacks American who were dissatisfied with racism revolted against white segregation of blacks. In *Meridian*, Alice Walker satirizes these black Americans who attempted to change the system. The fact that blacks were kept to the margins of the social and political stratum struck Meridian and others. It compelled them to join the civil rights movement and vigorously campaign for the blacks to register for votes. They thought a vote would give them a voice. Meridian wanted what was best for the black race, hence her involvement in the revolution (*Meridian* 30 – 31).

The novel *Meridian* depicts several elements of the black American struggles for freedom and equality in a racist society. The civil rights movement, of which Meridian is a member fights for equal treatment of blacks and whites. Alice Walker’s characters demonstrate that in the black American psyche the “past lies like a nightmare upon the present;” history continues to define them.

Meridian and other students at Saxon College feel that they have two enemies to fight: “Saxon, which wanted them to become something – ladies – that was already obsolete, and the larger, more deadly enemy, white racist society. It was not unusual for students to break down under the pressures caused by the two” (*Meridian* 95). White racist society was the deadly enemy Saxon students had to fight together with sexist tendencies. While at Saxon College, Meridian witnessed a lot of sexist and racist incidents: “She saw small black children, with short, flashing black legs, being chased by grown white men brandishing axe

handles. She saw old women dragged out of stores and beaten on the sidewalks, their humility of a life time doing them no good” (150). Meridian develops hatred for the whites because of their attitude towards blacks. Whites did “not seem quite real to her, the way they attempt to beat down everybody in their path and then know nothing about it. She sees them as hordes of elephants, crushing everything underfoot, stolid and heavy and yet – unlike the elephant – forgetting” (*Meridian* 112). Like animals, they have no feelings for those they torture.

Racial segregation is also explored through the character of Mrs Hill, a white character who believes that racial segregation is God given. According to this belief some whites and even blacks think that God planned that whites and blacks should be different and that whites should take control over blacks. For instance, Mrs Hill tells Meridian that “God separated sheep from goats and whites from blacks” (*Meridian* 122). For her racism is of God’s design. Mrs Hill’s attitude towards blacks demonstrate that blacks are a helpless disenfranchised class, which perpetually lives under the armpit of whites.

Another work which describes white and black antagonism is the short story “How Did I Get Away with Killing One of the Biggest Lawyers in the States? It Was Easy”. The short story explores black and white racial relations, which are characterized by dehumanization of the black race. In the short story the protagonist is raped by a white man with whom she later on falls in love. As it was the case during slavery rape incidents by white men went unreported, this particular case is not reported too. The protagonist says “...it was nothing for a girl or woman to be raped. I was raped myself, when I was twelve, and my mama never knew and I never told anybody. For what could they do?” (*You Can’t Keep A Good Woman Down* 23). Because of the racial disparities which between blacks and whites, which privileged the status of whites, reporting white rape cases meant nothing; for no legal action would be taken against white rapists. It is this history of racial differentiation which Alice Walker calls to memory in this story. . However, the story was different when it was a black man who raped a white woman; it was a criminal and punishable offence.

In the same short story Alice demonstrates how racism has characterized the American history. For instance, during slavery, black women were used as breeders and sexual objects by whites. Alice Walker recalls how exploitative the white race has been to the black race for centuries. In her remarks she makes evident the correlation of racism and sexism. Alice

Walker, in *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down* writes that "from the moment [black women] entered slavery, even in their own homelands, they were subjected to rape as the 'logical' convergence of sex and violence" (42). She continues to state that

For centuries the black woman has served as the primary pornographic "outlet" for white men in Europe and America. We need only think of black women used as breeders, raped for the pleasure and profit of their owners. We need only think of the licence the "masters" of slave women enjoyed. But, most telling of all, we need only study the old slave societies of the South to note the sadistic treatment – at the hands of white "gentlemen" – of "beautiful young quadroons and octoroons" who became increasingly (and were deliberately bred to become) indistinguishable from white women, and were the more highly priced as slave mistresses because of this (*You Can't Keep A Good Woman Down* 42).

In the short story "How Did I Get Away with Killing One of the Biggest Lawyers in the States? It Was Easy" the protagonist, a black girl, falls in love with a white man who is already married. The girl's mother is ignorant of this relationship. Nevertheless, as a black woman she cannot approve of it because of her hatred for whites. However, one day the mother gets to know of the relationship; she sees her daughter getting out of the white man's car. She hates her daughter's relationship with the white man. The protagonist says "Mama asked me didn't I know he was a white man? Didn't I know he was a married man with two children? Did I have good sense?" (*You Can't Keep A Good Woman Down* 24). The mother's first concern is on the race of the man who is going out with her daughter. She does not see good sense in her daughter, a black girl, dating a white man. Although the daughter tries to convince her that the white man loves her, the mother cries and beats the daughter almost to death. She cannot understand such a thing, falling in love with a white man. It is an abomination to her; in her view, the two sexes cannot intermarry.

The mother of the girl hates whites because of their racist attitude. She makes this explicitly known to her daughter. The girl had not paid much attention to racial differentiation as she says

That night [Mother] told me something I hadn't paid much attention to before. She said: 'On top of everything else, that man's daddy goes on the TV. every night and says folks like us ain't even human.' It was his daddy who had stood in the schoolhouse door saying it would be over his dead body before any black children would come into a white school (24).

The short story illustrates the divide between the two races, blacks and whites and how integration failed on both parties. The mother's sentiments express the reality which black Americans faced at the hands of whites; they were segregated from public schools and

considered less than human. This is what drives her anger towards whites; she sees them with a scornful eye.

However, despite the advice from the mother, that whites are racists and she should not marry one, the black girl keeps thinking that the white man loves her. She says “I thought he loved me. That meant something to me. What did I care about ‘equal rights’? What did I care about integration? “ (*You Can’t Keep a Good Woman Down* 24”. She begins to hate her mother because of her advice. Infatuated by love she tells the boy friend [Bubba] about her mother’s resentment toward their relationship, how she was beaten because of him and how the mother despises him. Upon hearing this Bubba, the white boyfriend, “was really pissed off that any black person could despise him” (25). Bubba is angry not because the mother disapproves of his relationship but because he does not expect a black person to dare despise him.

Alice Walker’s “Elithia” is another short story which also satirizes white and black antagonism. In the short story the narrator says that blacks are reduced to mere producers of labour who cannot enjoy its benefits. Blacks work for the whites; they produce things they cannot benefit from. This can be likened to the days of slavery when blacks worked for whites and did not enjoy the fruits of their labour. In the short story a white man owns a famous restaurant which he calls Old Uncle Albert’s. Blacks are outcasts in this restaurant though they work there: “Black people could not eat at Uncle Albert’s, though they worked, of course in the kitchen” (Ibid: 40). In most cases blacks feature in situations where they have to serve the whites; the slave - master relationship which dates back to slavery is captured in these characters’ relationship. The narrator mentions some racist actions which Uncle Albert does to scare black folks. The story is told that whites hang a black boy’s private parts at the end of the street where all black folks shopped to scare them away (*You Can’t Keep A Good Woman Down* 29). Alice Walker presents black characters serving the whites’ interests; the slave-master relationship which dates back to slavery is captured in these kinds of relationships. In this story we also see Alice Walker rewriting history of the hostile white and black relationship.

Alice Walker also satirizes the white and black antagonism in *The Color Purple*. In the novel the conflict between the two races is seen in Alice Walker’s portrayal of a black character’s attitude towards whites. When Sofia is put in prison, she confesses that she is happy to be in prison although the conditions are appalling. She says that her main worry is the thought of

ever being some white woman's maid (*The Color Purple* 94). To be a white woman's maid is the worst thing Sofia and even her relations expect her to become. Thus when the white Mayor's wife asks Sofia to become her maid, Sofia is enraged. She tells her that she is "never going to be white woman's anything, let alone her maid" (94). Sofia resists being a servant for whites. It is clear from Sofia's statements that working for the whites would be a reminder to her of slavery. Sofia's hatred for whites stems from the harsh history of slavery which black Americans experienced. She says "Whites have the nerve to make us think slavery fell through because of us. Like us did not have sense enough to handle it" (100).

Through the characters of Miss Millie and Sofia, Alice Walker shows the fractured relationship which exists between blacks and whites. Sofia works for Miss Millie, the wife to the Southerner Mayor. The Mayor buys his wife a car because coloreds have had cars already. He says "If coloreds had cars, then one for her [being a white woman] was past due" (:100). This again is a racist remark. Miss Millie has a car but she does not know how to drive it, she needs somebody to teach her. Sofia knows how to drive. Miss Millie asks Sofia to give her driving lessons. During the driving lessons the two sit like teacher and student, both in the front seat. Sofia says

Well, after a while she got the hand of it, more or less. Then she really get it. Then one day when we come home from riding, she say to me, I'm gonna drive you home... You ain't been home or seen your children in a while. I say, Yes ma'am. It been five years. Well, ... I was so use to sitting up there next to her teaching her how to drive, that I just naturally clammed into the front seat (*The Color Purple* 100-101).

However, to Sofia's amazement, when she gets into the front seat she is scorned by Miss Millie. Miss Millie stands outside, on her side of the car, clears her throat and finally says to Sofia, with a little laugh, "this is the South." She clears her throat, laughs some more, and cautions Sofia that "Look where you are sitting" (*The Color Purple* 101). Innocently, Sofia replies telling her that she is sitting where she always sits. With a racist rage Miss Millie charges at Sofia: "That's the problem. Have you ever seen a white person and a colored sitting side by side in a car, when one of them wasn't showing the one how to drive or how to clean it?" (102). Miss Millie's behaviour illustrates white exploitative attitude towards blacks. Whites need black only when they want to use them, when they want blacks to work for them. Sofia says that white folks are a miracle of affliction; they always want to use blacks.

Miss Millie drops Sofia home to see her children. She does not want to stay with Sofia the whole day; she decides to start off for home. However, she fails to start the car and she needs the services of Sofia again. When Sofia proposes that her son-in-law Jack drives her back home, Miss Millie refuses and makes another racist remark that “I could not ride in pick-up with a strange colored man” (103). Since she still needs the services of Sofia, Sofia’s visit is reduced to fifteen minutes. Sofia would have loved to stay longer with her people but her trip is cut short because she has to obey her mistress. Sofia has no social existence of her own; she is treated like a slave or a robot, her life is at the mercy of her mistress.

In the same novel, *The Color Purple*, the narrator says that the ship which is used by both whites and blacks has some compartments which non-whites cannot access. “Only white people can ride in the bed and use the restaurant. And they [whites] have different toilets from colored” (125). Blacks are denied some of the social amenities in the ship because of their blackness. When Nettie is on a trip to Africa in this ship, she is asked by a white person about where she is going. When Nettie says “Africa” the white man feels offended and gets angry that Nettie, a black girl, is going to Africa. He says “Niggers going to Africa! Now I have seen everything” (126). It is beyond the white man’s comprehension that blacks would be going on a missionary journey to Africa. For him going to Africa on missionary work is for the superior white race only, it is something which has never happened.

However, as much as the white person on the train thinks that it is surprising for blacks to go on a missionary journey to Africa, Samuel, who is Nettie’s companion on a missionary voyage to Africa, tells Nettie that blacks have one advantage over whites working in Africa. “We are not white. We are not Europeans. We are black like the Africans themselves. And that we and Africans will be working for a common goal: the uplift of black people everywhere” (*The Color Purple* 127). Alice Walker uses the character of Samuel to demonstrate black pride which counteracts white superiority. Underlying these attitudes was the conviction that blacks are connected in their blackness and that they would join hands in fighting all forms of racism.

The above discussion, on Alice Walker’s portrayal of the white and black racial antagonism, shows that she does not divorce herself from the history of slavery in her fiction. As the black-American folk expression goes “Every shut eye ain’t sleep, every good-bye ain’t gone,” years after the official abolition of slavery Alice Walker fictionalizes the black

American racial experiences at the hands of whites. It can be deduced that Alice Walker's fiction is memory that virtually rewrites the history of racism in America. In all their relationships between the two races blacks are racially disadvantaged while whites are advantaged. Dalton H concludes that 'Whites move to the head of the line simply by being born white' whereas blacks move to the edge of the social margins by being born black (1995: 7).

While this chapter has explored white and black antagonism, from a general perspective, the following chapter focuses on the experiences of women in America at the hands of blacks. The subsequent chapter likens racism to sexism by analysing male and female antagonisms as portrayed by Alice Walker in the selected works.

CHAPTER FOUR

ALICE WALKER'S PORTRAYAL OF BLACK WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES: FAMILY VIOLENCE, TRAUMA AND GRIEF

"If the women of the world were comfortable, this world would be a comfortable world"

Alice Walker

Introduction

Toni Morrison, a contemporary of Alice Walker, in *Beloved*, writes about black women's experiences in America, that the black woman "had nothing to fall back on; not maleness, not whiteness, not ladyhood, not anything. And out of the profound desolation of her reality she may well have invented herself" (1988:104). The present chapter analyses Alice Walker's portrayal of black women's experiences. The central argument of the chapter is that Alice Walker's portrayal of black women's experiences presents a psychic reality, a situation of mental and physical torture black women have had to experience just by virtue of being women. The chapter further analyses traditional practices which imprison and endanger women's lives, like female circumcision and incision.

In the works under study, Alice Walker concurs with Mary Eagleton who observes that "black women experience oppression due to sex, race, class and sexual orientation. This is reflected in every area of their lives..." (1986:56). Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and *Possessing the Secret of Joy* explores the experiences of black women in their family and social interaction.

Family Violence and Female Objectification

Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* tells the story of Celie, a young black girl growing up in the reconstruction South of the United States. In a series of letters to God and to her sister Nettie, Celie tells the story of her life. She is abused as a child and as a married woman.

In the first entry of this epistle novel, Celie narrates her experiences with the man she considers to be her father. The man abuses her sexually. It surprises Celie that the man she considers to be her father never has kind words and actions for her. He insults her and later rapes her. One day, Celie says, "he grab hold of my titties. Then he push his thing inside my pussy. When that hurt, I cry. He start to choke me, saying You better git used to it." However,

Celie says, “But I don’t git used to it” (*The Color Purple* 11). Celie does not grow up in a friendly environment. She grows up in a dysfunctional family; where love does not exist.

In addition to the sexual abuse from her step father, Celie is forced into marriage to a man she never loves. The man who marries Celie first falls for Nettie, Celie’s sister, but Celie advises Nettie not to marry the man because she is young and she has to concentrate on school. Nevertheless, the step father tells Mr____, the nameless widower who is Celie’s suitor that “I can’t let you have Nettie. She too young. Don’t know nothing but what you tell her. Sides, I want her git some more schooling. Make a schoolteacher out of her. But I can let you have Celie” (17). The step father treats Celie and Nettie as if they are his personal commodities. Commodities he can dispose at will. This “commodification” of human beings resembles slavery. The step father and Mr____ discuss Celie and Nettie as if they are two items on sale. The step father tells Mr____ about Celie as if she is a commodity on sale; he says “next time you come you can look at her... But she’ll make a better wife...and I just be fair” (18). The step father’s words illustrate that he is in control of Celie; that Celie does not have any word on who she should marry. Through the character of the step father, who arranges Celie’s marriage without her consent, Alice Walker portrays the theme of male chauvinism.

When Mr____ comes, Celie is called and shown to him. Mr____ inspects and looks at Celie as an object he wants to purchase. The step father tells Celie that “Mr ____ wants another look at you... move up he won’t bite, turn round” (20). Celie is finally “auctioned” into marriage on the terms agreed upon by Mr____ and the step father. Through this episode, Alice Walker exposes cultural injustices of prearranged marriages, which demean and objectify the other person. Such kinds of marriages reduce the girl child to the level of an object.

When Celie marries Mr____ she is further reduced to an object. She has no control and influence in her family; every time she has to take directives and orders from the husband. Consequently, she is psychologically traumatized and she is never happy. Marriage becomes something she has to bear for survival. She shoulders the responsibility of taking care of the four children which Mr____’s first wife left. The experience disfigures and distorts Celie’s psychic and emotional operations. The narrator says most of the time she is absent minded, marriages ceases to have meaning in her life. Even when she is making love with Mr____ she is not emotionally present. Celie herself reports that “I lay there thinking about Nettie while he on top of me, wonder if she safe.” (*The Color Purple* 186). Marriage becomes a

burden to carry; Celie does not enjoy it. Although Celie takes good care of Mr ____' children who are mean and demanding, Mr _____ does not appreciate this. Celie does not want to fight his husband and not even the naughty children who can go to the extreme of beating her. When Celie shares her experiences with Nettie, Nettie advises her to fight for her place. However, Celie is submissive; she tells Nettie that "I don't know how to fight. All I know how to do is stay alive" (26). Celie's character represents women who suppress and repress their feelings just to remain in marriages.

When Celie's sister-in-laws visit her they compliment the decency of her house. They say she is better than their brother's first wife, Annie Julie, who was nasty, would not cook and acted like she had never seen a kitchen. They even compare her to Shug Avery, their brother's girl friend. They say Celie beats them both; "she is a good house keeper, good with children and good cook" (28). However, despite all these good attributes, the husband does not take good care of her. Mr ____ does not even buy clothes for Celie. When Kate, a sister to Mr____, visits Celie she instructs her brother to buy clothes for Celie because her clothes are torn and not pleasant. When the dress is bought Celie says "I can't remember being the first one in my own dress. Now I have one made just for me..." (28). These remarks suggest that all of Celie's clothes were second hand clothes yet her husband was spending a lot of money on other women like Shug Avery.

Celie's sister in-laws advise her that she got to fight for her place; she should not let Mr__ defines it for her; however, she submissively says "I don't say nothing. What good it do? I don't fight; I stay where I'm told. But I am alive" (*The Color Purple* 28). Celie is submissive; hence she does not live married life she survives it. Celie's family experience is like slavery; actually it is slavery more profound than physical bondage. She is not only physically imprisoned but also psychologically detained in that she has no room to express her feelings to the husband, actually she does not even call her husband by name, she calls him Mr_____ yet he is Albert.

Harpo, a child to Mr_____ is equally surprised at the treatment his father gives to Celie. He asks his father why he beats his wife. Mr_____ tells Harpo that "Cause she *my* wife.... All women good for _____, he don't finish" (30). The first reason Mr__ gives for beating Celie is that she is his wife nothing more. Socialized in this family set up where the husband ill-treats the wife, Harpo grows up thinking that wives can be treated anyhow at the husband's

will. Mr____ beats Celie in their room and the children watch through the cracks. Each time she is beaten she remains docile; she says “all I can do is not to cry, I make myself wood. I say to myself, Celie, you a tree” (30). Celie reduces herself to the status of a tree, not a human being. Some women reduce themselves to trees by suffering silently, and pretend as if all is well. Celie submits to male superiority until Shug Avery comes into her life as a liberator. Shug Avery tells Celie that

You have to git man off your eyeball, before you can see anything a’tall. Man corrupt everything...He on your box of grits, in your head, and all over the radio. He try to make you think he everywhere. Soon as you think he everywhere, you think he God. But he ain’t. Whenever you try to pray and man plop himself on the other end of it, tell him git lost, say Shug (179).

Celie does not live her own life; she lives under the dictates of Mr____; she has no self social existence. In Toni Morrison’s words, Celie has nothing to fall back on, not maleness, not ladyhood. She is an object of male manipulation.

Alice Walker’s theme of male chauvinism is further seen in *The Color Purple* when Harpo wants to marry Sofia. At first Harpo confides in Celie that he is in love with Sofia Butler. But when he tells his father, Mr____, about it, he tells him to bring Sofia over for inspection and scrutiny (34). By the time Harpo brings Sofia to be shown to his family she is about seven or eight months pregnant. Mr____ asks Sofia who is responsible for the pregnancy and when she says it is Harpo, she is further asked how sure she is that it is Harpo because “young womens no good these days. Got they legs open to every Tom, Dick and Harry” (34). Since Mr____ thinks he can make decisions for everybody in the family, he tells Sofia that “No need to think I’m gon let my boy marry you just cause you in the family way” (38). Mr____ thinks that he can make decisions for Harpo as he does for Celie. Sofia is disappointed, she leaves for home, and refuses when Harpo wants to escort her. When Harpo gets up to escort her she says “Naw, Harpo, you stay here. When you free, me and my baby be waiting” (38). Sofia knows that Harpo is chained by his bossy, cunning and unloving father. Harpo is also disappointed; he sits with his father for hours without talking to him.

However, despite his father’s disapproval of their marriage, “Harpo went and brought Sofia and the baby home” (40). The idea of men being in control of the family is inculcated in Harpo’s mind from childhood. When Harpo is married he goes to his father and “want to know what to do to make Sofia mind. He sit out on the porch with Mr____. He says, I tell

her one thing, she do another. Never do what I say. Always backtalk” (42). Harpo wants Sofia to be submissive as Celie does, to take the husband’s commands every time without objection. He wants Sofia to be under his armpit. After this complaint about Sofia’s insubordination, Mr___ questions Harpo “do you ever hit her? How you spect to make her mind? Wives like children. You have to let ‘em know who got the upper hand. Nothing can do that better than a good beating” (42). Mr_____ teaches Harpo that wives have to be beaten if they do not conform to their husbands’ directives. Mr___ tells Harpo that he has to let Sofia know who has the upper hand. Simply put, Mr_____ teaches Harpo that men have to take control over women. Too often, as Alice Walker portrays, men have a philosophy of manhood that relegates women to the social margins.

However, there are some women who do not want to be controlled by men; they stand for their rights and freedom. In *The Color Purple*, Sofia represents such women who are determined to fight for their place in the family and society at large. Sofia refuses to be controlled by Harpo despite all the efforts Harpo makes to dominate her; she *fights* back. The narrator says that Harpo and Sofia fight like two men. Celie admires Sofia’s determination to fight her husband, the thing she fails to do herself; she just sits back like a tree. Sofia tells Celie that “All my life I had to fight. I had to fight my daddy. I had to fight my brothers. I had to fight my cousins, and my uncles. A girl child ain’t safe in a family of men. But I never thought I’d have to fight in my own house...” (*The Color Purple* 42). Sofia grew up fighting men and this explains why she does not have problems challenging Harpo. Probably Alice Walker makes a deliberate contrast between Harpo and Sofia, Harpo grows up believing that males are superior to women, whereas Sofia grows up challenging male figures. The encounter and the experiences between these two put males and females at par, none of them concedes to the other’s superiority.

Everyone sympathises with Celie because of the way she is treated by Mr____. Mr _____ brings in Celie’s house a prostitute by the name Shug Avery, the woman he openly declares to Celie that he loves and would have loved to marry her. Upon learning that Albert brought a prostitute in her house Mr___’s father tells Celie that “you have my sympathy. Not many women let they husband whore lay up in they house” (59). Mr _____ overstretched Celie’s emotions beyond limits; she has to bathe and feed the sick prostitute whom she shares the husband with in her own house.

Mr_____ and Harpo treat their wives as if they are less than human beings. Harpo has frequent problems with Sofia yet Sofia loves him, and according to Celie, she is a good wife, good looking, God fearing, and good to children. Celie asks Harpo “I don’t know what more you want?” Harpo tells her that “I want her to do what I say, like you do for Pa... You don’t do what he say he beat you” (65). Harpo tells Celie that Sofia is not a good wife because she challenges his male superiority. He complains to Celie that “Sofia do what she wants; don’t pay me no mind at all. I try to beat her, she black my eyes” (66). Sofia does not want to be manipulated simply because she is a woman.

Sofia’s self-determination, as demonstrated by her behaviour, portrays her belief that a female is valuable and worthy of respect. Sofia boldly says I’m getting tired of Harpo. All he thinks about since us married is how to make my mind. He does not want a wife, “he wants a dog” (*The Color Purple* 67). Sofia’s use of the word “dog” is not literal; the word dog alludes to the objectification of women.

Unlike Celie who is submissive towards her husband, Sofia is not. Celie thinks that because Harpo is Sofia’s husband then Sofia has to abide by all what he says: “he your husband, got to stay with him. Else, what you gon do” (67). Celie believes that women are men’s subordinates. However, Sofia refuses to be defined and controlled by Harpo. Sofia’s behaviour shows that “the ultimate responsibility for self-definitions and self-evaluations lies within the individual woman herself. An individual woman may use multiple strategies in her quest for the constructed knowledge of an independent voice” (1990: 112). Sofia uses some subtle powers to have her voice; she refuses to make love with Harpo. She says “I don’t like to go to bed with him no more. Used to be when he touch me I’d go all out my head. Now when he touch me I just don’t want to be bothered. Once he git on top of me I think about how that’s where he always want to be” (*The Color Purple* 68).

Patricia Hill Collins observes that in the face of hard experiences which black women undergo “Whether by choice or circumstance, African-American women have ‘possessed the spirit of independence,’ have been self-reliant, and have encouraged one another to value this vision of womanhood that clearly challenges prevailing notions of femininity” (109). For example, Sofia’s reaction to Harpo shows her self-reliance; she does not want him to control her just because she is female. When Harpo and Sofia meet at the drinking place, Harpo tells

Sofia that it is not good for a woman of five children to be at the bar. Sofia tells Harpo that even a woman needs little fun once in a while (*The Color Purple* 83).

Alice Walker does not only expose how female characters suffer at the hands of men, she also explores the sisterhood which helped some black women out of family bondage. In *The Color Purple*, Shug Avery's relationship with Celie typifies women's encouragement of each other to attain self-hood. Although Shug Avery and Celie meet as enemies over a husband, they end up loving each other and share problems and joys. Shug Avery sympathises with Celie over the treatment the husband gives her. When Celie tells Shug Avery about Mr____'s frequent beatings Shug tells Celie that "once you told me he beat you, and won't work, I felt different about him. If you was my wife ... I would cover you up with kisses stead of licks and work hard for you..." (106). Shug Avery and Celie become so intimate that they plan to live together. Celie has to leave for Memphis to live with Shug Avery in flight of Mr ____'s frequent abuses but Mr____ is in opposition to the move. He tells Celie, "What will people say, you running off to Memphis like you don't have a house to look after" (182). Mr____ wants Celie not to leave so that she continues to look after his children but Shug Avery, Sofia and Squeak in their sisterhood encourage her to leave. Mr____ insults Celie because she is leaving him, he says she is ugly, skinny and her shape is funny. He says no one would want to marry her. He asks Celie "what you gon do?" (187). Mr____ thinks Celie cannot do without him, that is why he asks "what you gon do?" implying that Celie is so dependent on him that she cannot do without him.

However, when Celie joins Shug Avery, she proves Mr____ wrong; she becomes independent. At Shug Avery's place Celie develops knitting skills, she makes pants which are on high demand around her vicinity; everybody wants a pair (191-192). Celie makes a happy living, she supports herself, and she forgets about Mr____ and becomes self-reliant. What Alice Walker illustrates through the characters of Celie and Shug Avery, is that women can uplift each other and that "women must assume responsibility for strengthening their self-esteem by learning to love and appreciate themselves."¹⁹ When Celie builds confidence in herself, she is freed from the bondage of domination. This, for Celie, comes about because of group thinking rather sisterhood. Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* cautions women that "... in these times of group-thinking ... no person is your friend (or kin)

¹⁹ Claudia Tate as quoted by Patricia Hill Collins p.107

who demands your silence, or denies your right to grow and be perceived as fully blossomed as you were intended. Or who belittles in any fashion the gifts you labor so to bring into the world.”²⁰

Culture and Women Dehumanisation

Alice Walker has not just written for her immediate readers, African Americans. The experiences she portrays in the selected works are experiences of black women as a race. The preceding paragraphs have discussed Alice Walker’s critical analysis of sexist practices which subjugate women in their family and society at large. However, Alice Walker also discusses some traditional practices which demean women. In *The Color Purple* and *Possessing the Secret of Joy* Alice Walker explores the subject of female genital mutilation and facial incision. Tashi is a female character in both *The Color Purple* and *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. She is an African girl who befriends Nettie’s niece and nephew Olivia and Adam respectively, during their missionary voyage in Africa. Adam develops a passion for Tashi and when he goes to England, he misses Tashi very much. Although Adam misses Tashi, he is very angry with her because before they leave Africa Tashi plans to scar her face (*The Color Purple* 211). Adam and Olivia do not like the facial incision, a practice the Olinkas value. Olivia and Nettie come face to face with the Olinka culture which they think demean women. Nettie says, as missionaries to Africa, “One of the things we thought we would help to stop was the scarring or cutting of tribal marks on the faces of young women” (211). Olivia’s response to Nettie represents the voice of an African woman. She tells Nettie that facial incision

is the way the Olinka can show they still have their own ways, even though the white man has taken everything else. Tashi did not want to do it, but to make her people feel better, she’s resigned. She is going to have the female initiation ceremony too (*The Color Purple*: 211).

It is important to note that Tashi undergoes facial incision because she wants to make her people feel good. In a way she does not live her own life. Tashi risks her health to be identified with her people as a woman. Nettie is worried about this cultural practice and disapproves of it because she perceives it as dehumanizing. She says “That’s so dangerous. Suppose she becomes infected?” (211).

²⁰ Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens* 1983: 36 as quoted by Patricia Hill Collins in *Black Feminist Thought* pp.107-018

When Olivia tells Tashi that “nobody in America or Europe cuts off pieces of themselves,” (157) referring to female circumcision and facial incision, Tashi is very happy that it is not done there because “that makes it more valuable...” (212). The fact that facial scarification and the rite of female initiation are only done to black women in Africa, Tashi thinks it makes them unique. Tashi is proud of that revelation; she does not see these cultural practices as dehumanizing to women until later in life when she suffers its consequences.

In *Possessing the Secret of Joy* Alice Walker presents Tashi as critical of female circumcision; she sees it as the practice that endangers women’s lives, concurring with Olivia’s fears expressed earlier in *The Color Purple*. In *Possessing the Secret of Joy* Olivia meets Tashi mourning the death of her sister Dura who has died of bleeding after undergoing female circumcision. Tashi hates the practice; Dura’s death affects her psychologically; the memory of it keeps on haunting her and she has to go for psychotherapy. However, instead of being helped Tashi suffers a double blow; she meets a racist and prejudiced white psychiatrist. The psychiatrist tells Tashi that “Negro women can never be analysed effectively because they can never bring themselves to blame their mothers” (*Possessing the Secret of Joy* 22). The psychiatrist pushes Dura’s problem to her ancestral origin.

In *Possessing the Secret of Joy* Tashi is a victim of female circumcision. Tashi undergoes female circumcision not because she likes the practice but because she is in an identity crisis. She is initiated at an older age than normal. She is not initiated at a proper age because Catherine, her mother, refuses to have her operated on. Catherine belongs to the group of women who do not want to adhere to cultural practices which sexually abuse and dehumanize women. When she is advised that Tashi should go for the operation she does not listen to M’Lissa. However, because Tashi wants to be identified with her people, she seeks the operation herself. “M’Lissa says with a grimace of justification that it was the grownup daughter who had come to her, wanting the operation because she recognized it was the only remaining definitive stamp of Olinka tradition” (*Possessing the Secret of Joy* 64). Tashi is convinced that “the operation she’d done to herself joined her, she felt, to these women, whom she envisioned as strong, invincible. Completely woman. Completely African. Completely Olinka” (64). Tashi thinks that the operation would not only define her identity as a woman, but also as an African, and Olinka in particular. Much as she is proud of the operation, little does she know of its long lasting implications.

During the operation Tashi's vagina is fastened together, shutting the opening completely, leaving a small opening. Because of the operation she had undergone "it now took a quarter of an hour for her to pee. Her menstrual periods lasted ten days. She was incapacitated by cramps nearly half the month" (64). Although the operation was ritualistically good, in that it identified her with her people, it also violated her life physically. If Tashi had not decided to undergo the female circumcision she would have a different experience, but culture cripples and disfigures her physically and psychologically. She becomes very passive. She is "No longer cheerful, or impish. Her movements, which had always been graceful, and quick with the liveliness of her personality, now became merely graceful. Slow. . . That her soul had been dealt a mortal blow was plain to anyone who dared to look into her eyes" (66). Tashi was grieved and traumatized by the operation.

When Tashi visits Olivia in America "she had taken to spending half the month completely hidden from human contact, virtually buried" (67) to avoid face the embarrassment because of her situation, the smell and the scar between [her] thin legs. The scar that gave her the classic Olinka woman's walk" (66). She has to cope not only with physical pain but emotional pain too.

The aftermath of the circumcision remains a heavy burden throughout Tashi's life. When she gets married to Adam, she has problems to conceive because Adam fails to penetrate her. Each time he tries to penetrate her, she feels a lot of pain. She suffers double humiliation because of the marks on her face and the failure to conceive. Because of these, Adam's father does not approve their marriage. He says "he would grow ashamed of the marks on [Tashi's] face" (*Possessing the Secret of Joy* 66). However, despite the tribal marks on Tashi's face, Adam loves her. To show that he really loves Tashi Adam equally marks off his face. Olivia does not like this as she says "Adam had these same Olinka markings carved into his own cheeks. His handsome face was swollen" (66). Although the incisions disfigure both men and women the main victims of the practice are women. This is because women are culturally bound to have the incisions done on them. Because of the circumcision after her late conception Tashi has problems to deliver. She cannot deliver normally because of the operation she has done to her sexual parts. Nurses are surprised and shocked at the sight of her private parts. She becomes the centre of attention for all the nurses. "American nurses looked at her as if she were some creature beyond their imaginings" (60).

Tashi begins to question some of her cultural practices after being exposed to other cultures through interaction with Olivia. Tashi's mother and father are upset that "she is changing, becoming someone else, too thoughtful like her aunt who refused to marry the man chosen for her. She refused to bow to the chief and was sold off" (*Possessing the Secret of Joy* 148). Nettie, the character who is representing women activists in the novel, tells Tashi's parents that "the world is changing. It is no longer just for boys and men" (148). She tells Tashi's parents that they should change their preconceived ideas about women's inferiority. Tashi's father charges against Nettie and says

Our women are respected here. We would never let them tramp the world as American women do. There is always someone to look after the Olinka woman. A father, An uncle, A brother, or nephew...We understand that there are some places in the world where women live differently from the way our women do, but we do not approve of this different way for our children (149).

Although Tashi's father says Olinka women are respected, his views about women reflect his belief in women's subordination to men. All the people Tashi's father mentions as women custodians are male figures, a thing which implies women's dependence on men. When Nettie points out to Tashi's father that Tashi is very intelligent, she could be a nurse, a teacher and help people in the village, Tashi's father replies that "there is no place here for a woman to do all those things" (*Possessing the Secret of Joy* 149). When Tashi shows signs of change, he is not happy and he stops her from visiting Olivia. He thinks that the change is a result of Olivia's interaction with his daughter. He orders that only Olivia should visit Tashi not vice versa so that Olivia learns from Tashi what women are for in Olinka society. For him, women are for domestic chores and are supposed to remain under the confines of male control. Men do not like girls to go to school; they fume "Who wants a wife who knows everything her husband knows?" (157). The Olinka are slow in accepting that females could do the same kind of work as men, because males consider themselves superior to women. When Nettie asks an African mother why she thinks girls should not be educated she replies that "a girl is nothing to herself; only to her husband can she become something...a mother of his children" (157).

Alice Walker continues to portray women who are submissive to male domination. In reference to Olinka women, Nettie says "Even though [women] are unhappy and work like donkeys they still think it is an honor to be the wife" (*Possessing the Secret of Joy* 157). For

them status is gained through marriage, they cannot think of anything a woman can do, Nettie tells Olivia that “that is as high as they can think” (157).

In *Possessing the Secret of Joy* Alice Walker also attacks patriarchy in religion. Lisette, the female character, says her religion is patriarchal; she does not see the place of women in it. She tells Adam that “I looked and looked in this religion of mine and I am no where in it (31). She says that her religion is male centred. Lisette says that during the wedding ceremony she “could not reconcile the word ‘obedience’ that the bride says in the church wedding with any kind of spiritual or physical expansion” (: 31). She wonders why the word exists in a ceremony between equals and loved ones.

It can be concluded that through the characters of Shug Avery, Sofia, Nettie and Olivia who are not submissive, either to male or white figures in the novels, Alice Walker acknowledges the efforts of her sisters in the struggle for freedom in the mid-twentieth-century Civil Rights Movements. Through these characters, Alice Walker “pays tribute to black foremothers who paved the way [for women liberation] even under the most difficult circumstances.”²¹ Tashi’s challenge of Western culture in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* can be attributed to Alice Walker’s womanism. Tashi represents Alice Walker who divorces from the mainstream western feminism. Whites always want things to be done their way, but Tashi resists such kind of reasoning. She likens Olivia to white people and she challenges Olivia that “who are you and your people never to accept us as we are? Never to imitate any of our ways. It is always we who have to change” (*Possessing the Secret of Joy* 22).

The preceding chapter has demonstrated that culture, stereotypes, socialization and perceptions are responsible for the black women’s predicament. The chapter has explored black women’s struggle at the hands of whites and black figures, as an experience which doubly yoked them as blacks and women. The foregoing discussion has demonstrated that women suffered more than men in a racist America because their exploitation, dehumanization and oppression were coupled with racism.

²¹ See Lovalerie King “African American WOManism: From Zora Neale Hurston to Alice Walker” in *The African American Novel* edited by Maryemman Graham p. 233.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

Black/African Americans occupy a unique space in America; their unique history and experience of slavery set them apart from the white race. This experience continues to affect the black Americans even in the post slavery era. Throughout their history, black Americans have been subjected to unprecedented abuses. During slavery blacks suffered human abuses such as discrimination, lynching, segregation, denial to education, in brief, blacks were denied all human freedom. They suffered both physically and emotionally. Most of these human abuses have been written down in history and others in imaginative forms. The present study has looked at how Alice Walker artistically rearticulates the black American's experiences in America. The study focussed on Alice Walker's portrayal of racism and sexism in her fiction and explored how the two are interrelated.

In examining the black women's experiences in America, the study has found that women's experiences were more intense than that of men. Black women in America had to cope with the pangs of racism and sexism; were not only treated differently on the basis of their race but also their sex. And the study has explored that black women did not only suffer at the hands of white racists but also black sexists. The study has shown that the patriarchal stereotypes and prejudices resemble those of racism, whereby the *Other* is treated differently from the *Self*. Harpo's treatment of Sofia, his perception of Celie and Mr___'s abuse of Celie are good examples of the ingrained sexist tendencies in males. The study has underscored Patricia Waugh's assertion that "traditionally women have been positioned in terms of *Otherness*" (1986: 360). Men's treatment of women parallels the abuses of blacks by whites.

The study has exposed how the life of black Americans have been shaped by the history of slavery. Alice Walker recalls this American history to memory through fiction. This thesis focussed on one particular period of the American history, the Civil Rights Movement, through the character of Meridian, in the novel *Meridian*. Paula Giddings says black women are "linchpin between two of the most important social reform movements in American history; the struggles for Blacks rights and women's rights (1985: 6-7). Alice Walker's Meridian is a determined character who portrays that in the American racial struggle women fought in every way as men did. In the novel *Meridian*, Meridian tirelessly fights for black

equal rights in the civil rights movement. Meridian is portrayed in the feminist battle demanding the same protection, treatment and properties that men and whites enjoyed.

It has been noted in the study that Alice Walker's women characters display strength, endurance, and resourcefulness in confronting and overcoming oppression in their lives. The study has revealed that Alice Walker is frank in depicting the often devastating circumstances of the twin affliction of racism and sexism. "Black women are called the 'mule of the world' because they have been handed the burdens that everyone else- *everyone* else – refused to carry"²²: the burden of being born black and female in a racist and sexist America.

Alice Walker's female characters defy male prejudices which place them at the bottom of the social scale. There is an inherent awareness in these female characters that when men ask about black women

What they really want
at times
is a specimen whose heart is the dust

A mother-of-suffer
trampled, oppressed
they want a little black blood
undressed
and validation
for the abused stereotype
already in their heads (1984: 125)

The study has also shown how culture imprisons women physically and mentally. Tashi, a black girl in *The Color Purple* and *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, is physically and psychologically tormented by female circumcision and facial markings.

In the works analysed, black women step forward to demand rights for the black race and their rights as women. The study has explored the black American's twin affliction through the analysis of black women's experiences. The study concluded that racism and sexism stem from the same root, concurring with Carol Anne Douglass who argues that

²² see http://www.gale.cengage.com/free_resources/bhm/bio/walker_a.htm.

I do not think that the oppression of women was the first oppression, the means by which human beings learned to oppress one another. First men learned that they could control the women who were their mates and relatives. They learned it was useful to be able to own somebody else's body and their work. They told themselves that women's different bodies were inferior to their own. Later, they saw other people, who in some cases were physically different. The men, from their experience with women, figured that they could enslave these other men and women too, use their bodies sexually and for their labour... Their sexism became racist and their racism became sexist.

Carlo Anne Douglass

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