
UNIT 1 THE WOMAN, THE MOMENT AND THE MILIEU-I

Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
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- 1.2 Selected Works of Alice Walker
- 1.3 Afro-American Novel : Its Early Roots
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1.0 OBJECTIVES

This Unit will familiarise you with

- The life and important works of Alice Walker
- The early roots of the Afro-American novel.
- A brief history of Black Fiction.

1.2 INTRODUCTION: THE AUTHOR AND HER CREATIVITY

Alice Malsenior Walker was born 9th February, 1944 to Willie Lee and Minnie Grant Walker who were sharecroppers in the small southern town of Eatonton, Georgia. Many of Walker's short stories, poems and novels have the south as their setting. She refers to the injustice, violence and brutality of the south against the blacks and admires the resilience of the blacks in hoping for change. Walker was the youngest of the eight children. Her parents had five boys and three girls. Of the five brothers, Walker states, that she only knew four because one brother had left home when she was barely three years of age. At the age of eight Walker was partially blinded in one eye by a pellet from her brother's BB gun that accidentally hit her. Although the scar was removed through a simple operation six years later, Walker suffered immense emotional and psychological isolation because of it. She says about this incident "I believe . . . that it was from this period—from my solitary, lonely position, the position of an outcast—that I began really to see people and things, really to notice relationships and to learn to be patient enough to care about how they turned out. I no longer felt like the little girl I was. I felt old, and because I felt I was unpleasant to look at, filled with shame. I retreated into solitude, and read stories and began to write poems" (*In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* San Diego: Harcourt, Brace Jovanowich, 1983, pp. 244-245).

Ironically, it is due to this injury that she was eligible for a scholarship to Spelman College, a Black Women's school in Atlanta. She entered this college in 1961. When Walker left Eatonton Georgia for Spelman college in Atlanta—where she was for two and half years—she says "I deliberately sat in the front section of the Greyhound bus. A white woman complained to the driver. He—big and red and ugly—ordered me to move. I moved. But in those seconds of moving, everything changed. I was eager to bring an end to the South that permitted my humiliation" ("From an Interview," *In Search* p. 253).

According to Mary Washington, while leaving for school Walker's mother gave her three gifts: a suitcase, a typewriter and a sewing machine that she said had a symbolic

and practical value. These gifts were bought by her on less than 20 dollars a week that she made as a domestic. The sewing machine, Walker stated, symbolized self-sufficiency to her mother. The suitcase, she says was "as nice a one as anyone in Eatonton had ever had. That suitcase gave me permission to travel and part of the joy in going very far from home was the message of that suitcase." The typewriter clearly stated "Go write. . ." (Mary Helen Washington, "Alice Walker: Her Mother's Gifts." *MS.*, June 1982, 38).

Walker's mother greatly encouraged her to write and made her choose literary pursuits over household chores. She states that her mother was the main source of her "surviving whole" from each vicious, racist encounter. Speaking of her mother Walker states, "And this is how I came to know my mother: she seemed a large, soft, loving-eyed woman who was rarely impatient in our home. Her quick, violent temper was on view only a few times a year, when she battled with the white landlord who had the misfortune to suggest to her that her children did not need to go to school. She made all the clothes we wore, even my brothers' overalls. She made all the towels and sheets we used. . . . There was never a moment for her to sit down, undisturbed, to unravel her own private thoughts; never a time free from interruption—by work or the noisy inquiries of her many children. And yet, it is to my mother—and all our mothers who were not famous—that I went in search of the secret of what has fed that muzzled and often mutilated, but vibrant, creative spirit that the black woman has inherited, and that pops out in wild and unlikely places to this day" ("In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" from *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* p. 239). About her father she says: "My father, near his death, was a gaunt, coffee-colored man, with a fine large nose and immense dark and intelligent eyes. All his life he worked for other people; rough, unpleasant labor that forced him (along with a wife and eight children) to subsist on as little as three hundred dollars a year. My father, then, was a poor man exploited by the rural middle-class rich, like millions of peasants the world over. But as a child I was not aware of any others. I thought it was my father's own peculiar failing that we were poor" (In search "My Father's Country is the Poor" from *In Search* p.213).

Later, in 1963 Walker transferred to Sarah Lawrence College, which was an exclusive and prestigious women's school in Bronxville, New York. She received in 1965. Walker did not find her college education very fulfilling. She said that the focus was on a white literary canon and writers like Langston Hughes, Arna Bontemps, Gwendolyn Brooks and Margaret Walker were never talked about. She realized that her college education would not groom her to be a black writer. She also realized two things while she was in college: One, there are definite links between art and politics. Two, that she must write to liberate black people. She said in an interview, "I am preoccupied with the spiritual survival, the survival *whole* of my people. But beyond that, I am committed to exploring the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties, and the triumphs of black women" ("From an Interview," *In Search* p. 250). She started looking for literary ancestors and found one in Zora Neale Hurston whom she referred to as her "literary progenitor." Hurston's second novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), had an impact on her. The heroine of the novel Janie Crawford, grows from a submissive girl to an independent woman, who educates herself through two unhappy marriages and strikes out on her own, cutting through all barriers. In "Zora Neale Hurston: A Cautionary Tale and A Partisan View," Walker refers to her as a "cultural revolutionary . . . who gave us racial health; a sense of Black people as complete, complex, undiminished human beings. (For details regarding Hurston's influence on Walker, see section on Zora Neale Hurston).

It was during her junior and senior years that Walker got a chance to travel to east Africa. During her travels there she realized that she was pregnant and was suicidal. She even kept a razor blade beneath her pillow and practiced the art of slitting her wrists. Later, a friend took her to an abortionist and she had the child aborted in 1965. It was during this phase of intense emotional and psychological anguish that she

started to write poetry which she showed to Muriel Ruykeyser, a teacher and well-known poet. Ruykeyser arranged to have them read by an editor at Harcourt, Brace, and Jovanovich, which published them in 1968 in a collection entitled, *Once*.

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After her graduation from college in 1965, Walker worked in voter registration projects in Georgia and in the welfare department in New York city. In 1966 she received a fellowship which enabled her to work in civil rights programmes in Mississippi. Here she met Melvyn Rosenman Leventhal, a white civil rights lawyer. They lived together in New York for a year during which time her first essay, "Civil Rights Movement: What Good Was It?" and her first story, "To Hell with Dying" were published. They were married in March 1967 and the same year they moved to Jackson, Mississippi. Here she worked as a writer in residence at Jackson State University and Tougaloo College. Their daughter Rebecca Grant was born during this time. About her experience of having a child she says: "It is perfectly true that I, like many other women who work, especially as writers, was terrified of having children. I feared being fractured by the experience if not overwhelmed. I thought the quality of my writing would be considerably diminished by motherhood—that nothing that was good for my writing could come out of having children. My first mistake was in thinking "children" instead of "child." My second was in seeing The Child as my enemy rather than the racism and sexism of an oppressive capitalist society. My third was in believing none of the benefits of having a child would accrue to my writing ("One Child of One's Own" *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* pp. 362-363). Her first novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* was also written around this time. It was published by Harcourt Brace, and Jovanovich in 1970. This novel deals with her fictional portrayal of domestic violence. She writes, "In my immediate family too there was violence. Its roots seemed always to be embedded in my father's need to dominate my mother and their children and in her resistance (and ours), verbal and physical, to any such domination" (*Gardens* pp. 330-331).

In 1972 she accepted temporary teaching positions, at Wellesley College and the University of Massachusetts, Boston, while her husband remained in Mississippi. In 1973 she published three books. *Revolutionary Petunias*, (a collection of poems) *In Love and Trouble* (a collection of short stories) and *Langston Hughes* (A Children's Biography). In 1974 the Leventhals moved back to New York where Walker accepted a position as a contributing editor of *MS* magazine. They were divorced in 1976. Her novel, *Meridian* was published the same year. After her divorce she moved to San Francisco and then to a farm outside the city. The reason for this second move was because she was having problems writing amidst the hustle and the bustle of the city. She said that the characters just would not emerge and it was only when she moved to a place much like the rural Georgia that she could bring the characters out again. *The Color Purple* (1982) was written here. It was in *The New York Times* best seller list for over six weeks and Steven Spielberg made it into a film the next year and popularised it even more. The film was nominated for several academy awards. In 1983 she wrote *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* which she called "womanist" prose. Her important works are listed separately in this unit. Among her numerous honours and awards are : the Bread Loaf Writer's Conference Scholar in 1966, Merrill Writing Fellow in 1966-1967. McDowell Colony Fellow in 1967, the Rosenthal Award in 1974 for *In Love and Trouble*, The Lillian Smith Award in 1973 for *Revolutionary Petunias*, and the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1982. She was the first Black woman to have won this Prize. Walker now lives in northern California.

1.2 SELECTED WORKS

Walker has written in a variety of genres: Poems, short stories, essays and novels. Her is a selection of some of her works:

The Color Purple

Once (1968). This is a collection of poems which deal with Africa, the south, love and suicide.

The Third Life of Grange Copeland (1970). This was her first novel. It is set in the south and centres around three generations of a black family who worked as sharecroppers. It foregrounds the pain, abandonment, abuse and self-hatred of the blacks in the racist south.

Revolutionary Petunias (1973). A collection of poems that extend some of the concerns of *Once*, and, the themes in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*

In Love and Trouble (1974). This is a collection of short stories, and, as the title suggests, deals with both love and trouble in the lives of black women.

Langston Hughes: American Poet (1974). Deals with the life of the black poet.

Meridian (1976). Walker's second novel, links itself with her first in that, *Meridian* Hill can be seen as a Ruth Copeland grown up and involved in the Civil Rights Movement.

Good Night, Willie Lee, I'll See You in the Morning. (1979) goes back to the earlier volumes of poetry but with a more feminist thrust.

You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down (1981) are basically ideological statements on women's issues in fictional forms.

The Color Purple (1982) is what made her into a celebrity. Its epistolary form was suited to its subject matter viz. the life of black families in America.

In Search of Our Mother's Gardens (1983) is a collection of her essays written from 1962-1982. It refers to women's issues, the writers who influenced her, her political statements and her personal experiences.

Horse Make a Landscape Look More Beautiful (1984). *This is a collection of poems about various kinds of love.*

In addition to these Walker has written several stories and essays which appear in MS where she worked as a contributing editor.

1.3 AFRO-AMERICAN NOVEL: ITS EARLY ROOTS

Blacks in America are called by several names: Negro, coloured, Pan-African, Afro American, black, black-American. The term African is not a homogenized term. Historians state that the term comes from Afri, Afriqui or Afrigi. Originally, it was the name of a small Tunisian ethnic group which then extended to a larger geographical area from eastern Morocco to Libya. The colonialists used the term for administrative purposes therefore the term has certain implications.

In America, unlike the first wave of white immigrants, the blacks (who reached the country in the seventeenth century) were the only ethnic people who were denied their links with their old culture and support systems. The impulse behind this was to enslave them for life. Bernard W. Bell observes, "this development, which began as early as 1640, was the result of the interplay of the economics of slavery and the psychology of racism" (*The Roots of the Early Afro-American Novel* Amherst: MUP, 1987, p.7). The main reason why the Puritan whites wanted to convert the blacks into Christianity was to make them servile, obedient and loyal servants. Cotton Mather's *Rules for the Societies of Negroes* (1693) is illustrative of it.

According to the first census taken of the colonies, 91% of the black population lived in the old south. It was only with World War I that the Blacks started to move up north to cities like New York and Philadelphia. In fact, several scholars have found the old antebellum south a repertoire of Afro-American traditions. This is because several blacks carried with them certain oral traditions from their home country, Africa, and, despite the efforts of the whites to suppress these traditions the blacks clung on to them for continuity and stability. There were several other factors too, which contributed to the Blacks establishing links with their African roots. In general, prevailing in America, there was a notion that the black American had no culture of his/her own. They were treated as barbarians and savages. Moreover, racism in America prevented the blacks from identifying themselves with the mainstream culture. But most importantly, the blacks in America were deprived of the "written word." In the antebellum south, teaching them to read or write was against custom and law. All of these determinants contributed to the blacks going back to their African roots to find a language in which to express themselves. This included hoodoo, magic, field holler, oral narratives, myths and legends. Soon "a separate Negro subculture formed within the shell of American life, [having missed] the bounties of general education and material progress, it [remained] largely an oral, self-contained society with its own unwritten history and literature." The chief characteristics of the Afro-American subculture were its collectivity and functionality.

For nearly four centuries this form created the core of black literature. Use of colourful metaphors, daily language, playful improvisation and repetition were all part of this tradition. There was a certain flexibility in these oral narratives. Ruth Finnegan refers to this in relation to the stories of the Yoruba kings (who claimed to be descendants of Odudwa, the creator of the earth in the Yoruba tradition). She states, that "Yoruba diviners used myth to reinforce belief in the need for making the ritual sacrifices they prescribed to maintain the harmony of the individual and the nation with the rhythms of nature" (*Roots* P. 16). Often, she adds that there were no clear cut categories into which these stories fell because the sacred and the profane, myth and reality, were intermingled in these stories and different African societies interpreted the hero to be either a god or a trickster. Other legends, which either justified or denied the position of blacks in America, also influenced the works of Afro-American novelists. "The legends of black heroes and heroines such as Toussaint L'Ouverture, Cinque, Nat Turner, Denmark Vesey, Gabriel Prosser, Harriet Tubman, John Henry, and Booker T. Washington are common leitmotifs in the early novels" (*Ibid.*, p. 24).

Within this oral tradition, musical forms--using the spirituals--were slowly incorporated. The spirituals came out of the sermon chants and work songs which encompassed the pain and sorrow of the situation of the blacks in America. These spirituals were written by anonymous composers and sung by black people as an emotional release. The chanted sermons based itself on the African musical practice of alternating an improvised line with a fixed refrain. Accompanying these spirituals were hand clapping, body swaying, shouting and tambourine playing. The Bible was also a primary source of these spirituals. Parables and miracles from the gospel were put to music and its message passed down. This form of music was nurtured in front of churches and stores. The spirituals were a bridge between religious and secular worlds. It gave the Blacks tolerance to put up with injustices in a racist America in the hope of a reward in the next world. Here is an example of a Spiritual written by an anonymous composer:

Steal Away to Jesus

*Steal away,
Steal away,
Steal away to Jesus!*

*Steal away
Steal away home,
I ain't got long to stay here.*

*Steal away
Steal away
Steal away to Jesus!*

*My Lord, He calls me.
He calls me by the thunder,
The trumpet sounds within my soul.
I ain't got long to stay here.*

From the sorrow of the spirituals sprang the blues which dealt with the experiences of common black people. It referred to the pain and suffering emanating from the southern legacy. What formed the core of the blues was the "shouts" and "hollering" in the fields and the lamentations on the slave ships. Dance, foot tapping and head bobbing accompanied the songs. Blues were written down only in the 1920s after it had evolved in its classical form. The black novelist, Ralph Ellison, defines blues as "an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by consolation of philosophy, but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism" (Bernard W. Bell, *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition* Amherst: MUP, 1987 p.26). The impact of these musical forms is reflected in Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1923), Countee Cullen's *One Way to Heaven* (1932), Zora Hurston's *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934), Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953) and Margaret Walker's *Jubilee*. If blues deals with sadness and pain, Jazz--a corollary of it--deals with hope and joy through its upbeat rhythms. These musical forms, apart from establishing a sense of bonding among the blacks, also enabled them to maintain self-control in expressing their anger and disgust against a discriminatory white culture.

In the 1960s, The Black Power concept and the Black Arts Movement, revived the Afro-American traditions as a critique of white, western aesthetic. The desire to delve into the symbolism, iconology and mythology of an African past by the blacks was also a desire for self-determination by them in an otherwise racist country.

1.4 A BRIEF HISTORY OF BLACK FICTION

(Primary Source: *The Dark Tower: African American Writers 1900-1960* (Arthur P. Davis, Washington D.C. Howard University Press, 1974).

African American fiction can be divided into three groups: First, writers who raise political questions about the predicament of African-Americans. In this category we have, James Weldon Johnson (b. 1871), W. E. Du Bois (b. 1868), Richard Wright (b. 1871) and Ralph Ellison (b. 1914). In the second category we have authors using the theme of "passing." This means that you are born fair enough to pass as a white. Frank Yerby the African American writing romances of life in the south best example of this. His characters in the novel and his language sound white. James Weldon Johnson's only novel, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912) deals with the theme of "passing." However, the first Black writer to deal with this theme was Williams Wells Brown's *Clotel, or the President's Daughter* (1853). The other Black Americans who talk about this theme are Charles Chestnutt in *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900), Jessie Fauset's *There is Confusion* (1924) and *Plum Bun* (1928), Nella Larsen's *QuickSand* (1928) and Walter White's *Flight* (1926). Several Blacks found this very alienating because their experience as Blacks was not reflected

in the novels. Other examples in the same category are Richard Wright's *Savage Holiday* (1954) and James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* (1956). Third group concerned with Afro-Am problems in the community. Paul Marshall's *Brown Girl, Bronstones* (1959) and James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953).

The Harlem Renaissance is an important landmark in outlining the development of Black fiction in America. According to Abraham Chapman, "From the writers of the 20's and the 30's to Wright, Ellison, Baldwin and the younger Negro writers who are now coming up, we can appreciate the literary validity and continuing historical significance of the Renaissance" ("The Harlem Renaissance in Literary History," *CLA Journal*, XI (Sept. 1967, P. 49). The Harlem Renaissance is usually dated from 1925-1935. That is, with the publication of Alain Le Roy Locke's *The New Negro* to 1935, the year of the Harlem Riots. Locke's *The New Negro* which included five essays was a landmark in Black literature. The essays were: "Foreword," "The New Negro," "Negro Youth Speaks," "The Negro Spirituals," and "The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts." Locke basically spoke of the emergence of the New Negro not only in terms of social change but also in terms of a new way of thinking. He stated that previously Americans wrote about Blacks "not of him." This became the manifesto of the Renaissance which for Locke was a symbol of this new awareness. Some date the Harlem Renaissance from 1920 and state that it ended with the wall street crash in 1929. Others place it between 1925-1960 when the Black Renaissance actually begins.

It was basically a cultural outpouring among blacks. Although New York city was its centre the movement spread to other cities as well. The Harlem Renaissance was seen primarily as a Black male movement. This explains the fact that although several women writers (including poets and dramatists) were also writing during this period, only few got noticed. Their names included Zora Neale Hurston, Jessie Redman Fausset and Nella Ines Larsen.

Before we go any further it is necessary to outline here the various factors that contributed to the Harlem Renaissance:

- 1900-1925: These were very harsh years for the blacks. They were seen as brutes and portrayed as barbarians in the press.
- 1902: Segregation laws were passed in all of the southern states and it had become the custom in the north.
- Political leaders--like Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson--whom the blacks had trust on betrayed them. In the case of Theodore Roosevelt although he made two important appointments of Blacks in the Customs Service, during his second term he turned against Blacks in an attempt to gain Republican votes. Again, although the Blacks voted Woodrow Wilson, the southern Democrat into power, he introduced several segregated facilities in Federal buildings in the capital.

In general, in the 1920s in America, there was a lot of violence against the Blacks. Between June-December 31, 1919, 25 major race riots took place in most cities of which Chicago was the worst. It left: "38 persons dead, 537 injured, and over 1000 families most of them blacks homeless. 83 Negroes were lynched that year, 10 of them in the uniform of their country" (Arthur P. Davis, *The Dark Tower* Washington D.C.: Howard University Press, 1974). During the years 1900-1925 the Blacks were in general patient, waiting for some sort of "delayed justice." The chief spokesman for this school of thought was Booker T. Washington. He was the founder and the principal of the Tuskegee Institute. The whites liked him for his pacifist policies. After his death in 1915, W.E.B. Du Bois emerged on the scene. He was educated in Harvard and Germany and was a trained sociologist and historian. In 1903 he published *The Souls of Black Folk* which exposed America's treatment of the blacks. He was not a pacifist and directed the blacks to a new brand of expression. Du Bois was instrumental in the emergence of the New Negro Movement. In 1910 he set up

(along with some whites) the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People or, the NAACP and its official organ *The Crisis*. Marcus Garvey, a British West Indian from Jamaica, emerged as the first leader of the black proletariat. He started the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) in New York city. Between 1917-1927 he had a huge following of over 500,000 negroes. He spoke of black pride and the possibility of returning to Africa. He was crucial in building up a new confidence in the emerging Black writers. Apart from Washington, Du Bois and Garvey, the most crucial factor that brought about radical changes during the first quarter of the twentieth century to the Black experience in America was World War 1. This war cut off the passage of European immigrants into America. The industries in the north were now forced to look to the south for black labour force. Many of the blacks who had started moving to the North by 1915 found the north easier to live in. Apart from the labour force required from the Blacks, the American army also needed Black soldiers to fight the war. There were over 367,000 Black soldiers and 1,400 Black officers in the American army. These factors, that is the Blacks shift to the north which exposed them to union activities, along with their experience in the war which took them to countries like France where the whites and the blacks mixed freely, made them aware of their rights.

The Harlem Renaissance was important in drawing writers from other cities as well to New York. Several Blacks found the city an exciting place to be in with Blacks from Africa, South America and the West Indies forming a sort of Black community. Apart from the social forces the two primary forces that created the "artistic upsurge" of the period were: First, literary influences from mainstream America. Second, influences from within the Black community of writers in New York city. Of course, The New Negro Renaissance was very particularly influenced by the "Planters." That is, Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson, Claude McKay, Jean Toomer and Alain LeRoy Locke. Regarding the first set of influences:

- The New Poetry Movement, dated around 1912 was significant. During this time several writers (which included poets, novelist, and dramatists), brought out works that had an impact on American literature. Among these were Edgar Lee Masters, Carl Sandberg, T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. Many of the writers like Eugene O'Neill, Sherwood Anderson, Paul Green and Carl Van Vechter showed an understanding of the Negroes in their works although they often sentimentalized or romanticized them. From these works of White writers the Black writers learnt about anti-didacticism, anti-Victorianism and anti-sentimentalism.

Among the influences from within the Black community were the following:

- Two well known Black writers, Paul Laurence Dunbar and Charles W. Chestnutt, who belonged mainly to the nineteenth century, were almost at the end of their writing careers at the turn of the century. Their works were published by the best American publishers. Dunbar was an accommodationist and Chestnutt was a militant. The two represented the range of writings for Blacks. Both these writers used folk material for their novels. What kept alive the Black tradition of literature at the beginning of the twentieth century were several minor writers. Among the minor novelists were Sutton Elbert Griggs. He was a Baptist minister and had his own publishing house. His novels, *Imperium in Imperio* (1899) *Overshadowed* (1901) etc. gave insights into the mind set of the Negroes before the Renaissance. *Imperium in Imperio* is considered to be a very political novel written by a Black. His novel *Overshadowed* attacked Booker Washington's accommodationist policies. The other minor but important writers were Charles Spurgeon Johnson. He was a sociologist and the editor of *Opportunity*. It gave new black writers a chance to publish even before Du Bois' *The Crisis* appeared. In her biography, Zora Neale Hurston states that she was indebted to Charles Spurgeon Johnson, the father of the New Negro Renaissance. The other two

influences were Benjamin Griffith Brawley and William Stanley Braithwhite. Brawley's *A Short History of the American Negro* (1913) and *The Negro in Literature and Art* traced the historical cultural contributions of the Blacks. Braithwhite inspired Black writers to write because he was admired even by the whites. Walter White's *Rope Faggot: A Biography of Lynching* published in 1929 was another significant work from a minor writer. He exposed through this book the horrible American custom of lynching Blacks. His novel, *The Fire in the Flint* (1924) also deals with it.

The Woman, The Moment and The Milieu-I

Among the first crop of writers emerging from the Harlem Renaissance were Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Jessie Redman Fauset, Nella Larsen and Zora Neale Hurston. Each contributed to the Black tradition in their own way. Hughes (who was born in Joplin, Missouri on February 1st 1902) was a poet, novelist and dramatist. He went back to African-American roots in his works. His use of Black dialect, folk tradition, jazz and spirituals had an impact on the New Negro writers. He won several awards for his poetry which dealt with themes of protest and talked about Harlem. Countee Cullen (born in New York on May 3rd, 1903) talked about race relations in his poems and the idyllic life that the Blacks had left behind in Africa which could not be got back. Cullen's romanticizing of Africa enabled several Blacks to cope with the harsh realities of America. Fauset and Larsen in their works dealt with the life of middle class Negroes and through their works they tried to sensitize the whites about the superficial differences that separated them. (For details on the history of Black women fiction writers see Unit 2.1). All through world war II Black writers were writing protesting against racism. Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) William Attaway's *Blood on the Forge* (1941), Carl Ruthven Offord's *The White Face* (1943). However once the process of integration between the Blacks and the Whites started in the forties many of these writers abandoned themes of protest and moved on to problems and conflicts that existed within the community. Gwendolyn Brooks' *Maud Martha* (1953) demonstrates this shift. Her focus is the Black family with its problems. Langston Hughes' *Sweet Flypaper of Life* (1955) which minimizes interracial conflicts, is another example in point.

The integration movement had just caught roots when the Civil Rights movement took over with its assertion of Black Nationalist elements. Richard Wright's *Native Son* and *Black Boy* (an autobiography) made Negro literature important. His work emerged from the 20s and 30s. He ushered in the modern Black American fiction. He was born on a farm near Natchez, Mississippi in 1908. In this novel, Wright uses contemporary techniques and shows the impact of depression and racism on the lives of Black Americans. Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) was important in many ways. Ellison was born in Oklahoma in 1914 and came from a lower middle class family. His *Invisible Man* won the National Book Award. Both Marxists and Black nationalists objected to his approach. The former did not like his notion of universal brotherhood and the latter, stated that he was part of a western Humanistic tradition. His use of myths, episodic structures etc. in the novel contributed to the development of Black fiction. James Baldwin, was another important author contributing to the Black tradition in fiction. He was born in New York city in 1924. His novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953) deals with the Harlem ghetto life in a realistic way. The novel is set in the home and storefront church of the main character's preacher father. The Church with its music and the family are all important topics picked up by Black writers in their works later. By the 1960's Black writers were breaking away from the Western tradition which was anti-Negro. The Black Arts movement (an offshoot of the Black nationalist movement) headed by Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) and Larry Neal was advocating a Black aesthetic by proposing "a radical re-ordering of the Western cultural aesthetic. It propos[ed] a separate symbolism, mythology, critique, and iconology" (from the section heading reference). They do not see this tradition as a derivative of the white tradition. Several young Black writers today are influenced by this.

Interestingly, although the Harlem Renaissance started on a note of hope disappointment soon set in. For one, with the Depression the conditions of the Negroes were the worst. Life in the city--particularly within the context of world war I—was becoming like a ghetto existence. Garvey who spoke of African roots was jailed in 1927 and deported which shattered several Blacks. During this period several Blacks joined the communist movement. The works of Frank Marshall Davis, Langston Hughes and Richard Wright reflect this. In 1935 the Harlem Riots began which was an offshoot of poverty and frustration in the ghettos. These riots put an end to the positive slant of the Harlem Renaissance.

1.5 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit, we discussed the following issues

- Alice Walker as a spokesperson for Black American community
- Black Americans' struggle for a sense of identity because of several pejorative labels being imposed on them
- Black suffering being at the root of black culture and literature
- The emergence of Blacks with courage and a sense of Black pride despite exploitation and oppression.

1.6 QUESTIONS

1. Comment on some of the influences on Alice Walker's life.
2. What are the significant characteristics of African-American culture?
3. Trace the milestones in the history of Black American fiction.

UNIT 2 THE WOMAN, THE MOMENT AND THE MILIEU-II

Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 A Brief history of Black women's fiction
- 2.2 Chief Characteristics of Black women's Fiction
- 2.3 What Does Feminism Mean?
- 2.4 Feminism And The Ideology of Individualism
- 2.5 The Double-Whammy of the Black Mammy Myth
- 2.6 Black Feminism and the Civil Rights Movement
- 2.7 Black Feminism and Capitalism
- 2.8 A Critique on Black Women's Movement
- 2.9 Literary Influences on Alice Walker
- 2.10 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.11 Questions

2.0 OBJECTIVES

We will help you to analyze i. the history of Black women's fiction, ii. the chief characteristics of Black women's fiction iii. history of Black Women's Movement iv. literary influences on Alice Walker v. the meaning of Feminism, vi. Feminism and the Ideology of Individualism, vii. The Double Whammy of the Black Mammy Myth, viii. Black Feminism and the Civil Rights Movement, and ix. Black Feminism and Capitalism

2.1 A BRIEF HISTORY OF BLACK WOMEN'S FICTION

Black women writers in present times Maya Angelou, Gwendolyn Brooks, Ntozake Shange, Gayl Jones, Audre Lorde, Toni Morrison, Margaret Walker and Sonia Sanchez emerged from a black literary tradition beginning in the eighteenth century. Autobiographical writings and slave narratives were the starting points for Black women's fiction. Voices of African-American women such as Phillis Wheatley, Jarena Lee, Harriet Jacobs and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper were significant in shaping African-American Women's fiction. In her essay "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" (1977), Barbara Smith argued that since the "feminist movement was an essential precondition to the growth of feminist literature, criticism, and women's studies," the lack of an autonomous black feminist movement contributed to the neglect of Black women writers. Individual White women helped Black Women publish books but the texts of Black women from ex-slave Harriet Jacobs to educator Anna Julia Cooper reveal the racist practices of the suffrage and temperance movements and the various ways in which white women were complicit with a racist patriarchal order against all black people. The first novels written by Blacks had a White audience in mind. This is because Black people, according to the laws of many states, were not allowed to read or write.

Despite obstacles to literacy several Black women wrote such as Phillis Wheatley (1753-1784), Maria Stewart (1803-1879) and Ann Plato (who wrote early nineteenth century). In fact as early as 1831 and 1832 black female literary societies appeared in Philadelphia and Boston. The text, *Our Nig: or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black*, edited and introduced by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. is an early text. Referring to Frances E.W. Harper's publication of her short story, "The Two Offers," also in September 1859, Gates writes, "That two black women published in the same month the first novel and short story in the black woman's literary tradition attests to larger

shared cultural presuppositions at work within the black community than scholars have admitted before. . . . The transformation of the black-as-object in to the black-as-subject: this is what Mrs. Harriet E. Wilson manifests for the first time in the writings of Afro-American women."

However, throughout the period of slavery and reconstruction, novels written by Anglo-American writers dealt with negative images of Blacks but during this same period the Blacks were writing about the "tragic mulatta" (a hybrid. Children White and Black parentage). Frances Harper's *Iola LeRoy* (1892), the first published novel by a black woman made this character cast a lasting image. Several mulattas tried to pass for whites. We see this in Jean Toomer's *Cain* (1923) and in the novels of Nella Larsen *Passing* (1929).

Until the 1940s black women wrote confronting negative images of black women. Pauline Hopkin's heroine in *Contending Forces* (1900) wants to advance her race. Zora Neale Hurston tried to project positive images of women in her novels. But in reality these images had no impact because of the hostility surrounding the blacks. Characters in novels where they tried to be like the mainstream white culture such as Lutie Johnson, in Ann Petry's *The Street* (1946), and, Cleo in West's, *The Living Is Easy* become frustrated and destructive and alienated from themselves. With Gwendolyn Brooks *Maud Martha* (1953) one sees a shift in African-American fiction. The focus here is more on the process of self-definition. Paule Marshall's *Brown girl, Brownstones* (1959) was influenced by Brook's *Maud Martha*. Marshall's work is a landmark in Black women's fiction. The novel deals with the life of a Black mother and daughter. Very few early writers of Black women's fiction wrote about Black motherhood because of the negative definitions surrounding it. The image of the Black woman became even more complex with the shift of Black women to the north. From cotton pickers, and cooks they now became prostitutes and garment-factory workers. In this transition the works of Ann Petry and Zora Neale Hurston were instrumental. Their works influenced writers like Brooks and Marshall both of who focus on Black community and culture which influenced many writers of the sixties and made them aware of the importance of community in developing one's identity. They made several writers aware that the animosity and patriarchal attitudes between Black women and men had larger links with capitalism and racism. With this new perspective on the Blacks the attitudes to their own community changed. The internalized notions of racial stereotypes that affected Blacks are seen in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*. In these novels the communities are directly responsible for the tragedies. The madness of Pecola Breedlove, the suicide of Margaret Copeland and the murder of Mem Copeland by her husband all stem from it.

In the 1970s and 80s black community was seen as a threat to the survival of Black women. These novels protested against the sexist and racist attitudes in society. Not just Whites but the Blacks too had to change. The fiction of this period Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1978), *Tar Baby* (1980) Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Street*. (1980), Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* (1980). Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982), Joyce Carol Thomas' *Marked By Fire*, Ntozake Shange's *Sassafras, Cypress and Indigo* (1982), Audre Lorde's *Zami* (1982) and Paule Marshall's *Praise Song for the Widow* (1983) all talk about how Black women's lives were affected by sexism and racism. Ntozake Shange, Gloria Naylor and Audre Lorde also indicate the diversity of language in contemporary African-American literature. Shange in *Sassafras* goes back to African culture in drawing upon dreams, letters and recipes. Naylor uses weaves in Afro-American folk dialect to her narrative which itself is very Afro-American.

In the 1990s a lot of fiction by Black women have appeared Marsha Hunt's *Joy* (1990), Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy* (1990), Xam Cartier's *Muse-Echo Blues* (1991), Jewelle Gomez's *The Gilda Stories* (1991)

2.2 CHIEF CHARACTERISTICS OF BLACK WOMEN'S FICTION

- The theme of search for identity. This expresses itself in the form of a journey which is sometimes inward and sometimes outward. For example, Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* the journey is from the plantation back to Edenton, from North Carolina to New York city and Boston and from Boston to England and back. In Walker's *The Color Purple* the journey for Celie is from silent object to speaking subject. The journeys are also expressions of the search for the African-American women's spirit that has not been destroyed by racism and sexism. In Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* Janie Crawford journeys from her West Florida home to Eatonville, from Eatonville to the Florida Everglades, the Muck, and back to Eatonville. The form of journey is also linked to the concept of mobility. Most Black women writers talk about mobility because in the context of slavery this mobility was restricted.
- Renegotiating of identities is basic to Black women's writings. This has partly to do with their cross-cultural context and the history of slavery. Blacks had constantly to fight the identities imposed on them by the White mainstream culture. The stereotypes of Black women portrayed by Whites showed them as Mammies, aunt Jemimas etc. Also, Blacks were called by several names: Pan Africans, Black-American, African-American, Negroes etc.
- Images of powerlessness, entrapment, restricted mobility and helplessness are seen in most of the works by Black women writers.
- Low self esteem in women. Most of the Black women writers discuss issues arising from the intersections of race and gender and how women strive to gain respect and dignity amidst the flashpoints of this intersection. "Surviving whole" therefore becomes a corollary to this.
- The theme of lesbianism is another important characteristic of Black women's writings. Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) Audre Lorde's *Zami* (1982) Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982) and Ntozake Shange's *Sassafras, Cypress and Indigo* (1982) have lesbian relationships. Lesbianism in Black writings is seen as bulwarks against sexism and racism.

2.3 WHAT DOES FEMINISM MEAN?

In the US the contemporary feminist movement has popularly been identified with the movement defined by white, middle-class, college educated women. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) is often cited as the first book of what is called the 'second wave' of feminism. It was a work around which many white women of this socio-economic class rallied as it expressed their frustrations at being excluded from the positions of privilege and power occupied by white males in American society. It also hit a nerve with women who are rankled by seniors within their families or personal lives. To vastly oversimplify, the goal of feminism became to eliminate sexist oppression imposed by the patriarchal society which, it was thought, would end discrimination against women on the job, in the home and in all areas of women's lives. **Equality of opportunity was the objective, and sexism was the enemy.** This often got translated into 'men are the enemy', which made many women uneasy and men defensive. In effect the women's movement seemed to **interpret equality of opportunity to mean the achievement of parity – or better – with white, middle – or – upper – class man.** For a number of reasons, black women did not see this as addressing their concerns.

One of the basic issues that divides feminists is whether they consider the goal to be reform of the present social system or its revolution. And it is on this point that black feminists and the mainstream of the white feminist movement have diverged. Frances Beal (1970), in her essay **Double Jeopardy'. To be Black and Female**, is only one of the many black feminists who has criticized the women's movement for its limited focus. She says: "Any white group that does not have an imperialist and anti-racist-ideology has absolutely nothing in common with the Black Women's struggle's (Beal 1970:98), Black women and men, along with other minority groups, understand that equal opportunity with white male power elites is not only out of reach for the majority of the population but also is not going to alter an oppressive system in any significant way.

Brought to the American continent as slaves in the 17th century, African women were deprived of every basic human right in order to serve the plantation economy of the American South. Even their reproduction, sexual and material prerogatives were appropriated for the benefit of their white masters. This history inexorably impacts the thinking of every black woman's understanding of the connection between sexism, racism, and classism. And they know that the ending of slavery has not ended the systematic exploitation of their labor in American society and that the capitalistic system has created a tier of socio-economic issues which ranks them at the bottom.

Bell Hooks, one of the most eminent and articulate spokespersons of black feminist thought, has pointed at that black feminists are concerned about economic survival and ethnic and racial descrimination as well as sexism, and she faults the mainstream white women's movement for failing to speak to these issues. Speaking of the movement as it took shape in the sixties and as espoused by feminists such as Betty Friedan, Hooks (1984:4) says:

"White women who dominate feminist discourse, who for the most part make and articulate feminist theory, have little or no understanding of white supremacy as a racial politic, of the psychological class, of their political status within a racist, sexist, capitalist state."

Feminism is not, she says, about dressing for success or becoming a corporate executive or taking skiing vacations or the career marriages. Furthermore, as long as any group, whether it is black or white males or white females, defines liberation as "gaining social equality with ruling class white men, they have a vested interest in the continued exploitation and oppression of other (Ibid:15). "Because black women are on the margins of the whole system, Hooks argues, they have a special vantage point from which to criticize the dominant racist, classist and sexist hegemony as well as to imagine and create a system that does not rely on oppression of one segment of population for the benefit of another.

Throughout the history of women's movement in the US, there have been women, black and white, who have objected to the limited – however valid – focus on sexism and patriarchy as the cause of women's position in society. Moreover, working women of all races and ethnic backgrounds felt the effects of classicism. But, either because racial or class discrimination were not experienced by white, middle-class women or because they themselves were unwilling to give up the privileges accruing to them by virtue of their class women were either ignored or rejected as important targets for feminists. White feminists were eager for black women to join their movement and seemed perplexed that they were not eager to do so. Black women, however, were as a group unwilling to ally themselves with white women in opposition to black men who, inspite of their sexist behaviors, were closer in identity to them than white, middle-class women. Various studies have shown that class differences are greater than differences between the sexes within the same class.

2.4 FEMINISM AND THE IDEOLOGY OF INDIVIDUALISM

As all of us know, the 'cult of individualism' is especially pronounced in American society. Americans pride themselves on their individual initiative. While the ideology of individualism has no doubt been responsible for much American innovation and personal achievement, it like all ideologies, has its blind spots, and proponents of individualism ignore the unequal access that minorities and working class people have to economic, educational, and social opportunities, Bell Hooks (Ibid:84) has noted that 'The ideology of 'competition, atomistic liberal individualism' has permeated feminist thought to such an extent that it undermines the potential radicalism of feminist struggle.' One of the promises not questioned by early leaders of the white feminist movement was how American women accepted the same materialistic and individualist values as did American men. It simply did not occur to them that women may be just as reluctant as men to struggle for a new society based on new values of mutual respect, cooperation, and social responsibilities.

The ideology of individualism also was well – adopted to the feminist model of the 'new woman': assertive, capable, strong; the leap-tall buildings super woman image that the movement wished to project, an image that has, incidentally caused untold grief for women who found they could not live up to it. Another unfortunate consequence has been to re-enforce the myth of the amazonic black woman – strong, nurturing, uncomplaining, and all accepting – which has contributed to the acceptance by both white and black males of the theory of black matriarchy and that the myth that the black woman, next to the white male, is the most liberated member of society. The white women's movement, no doubt unwittingly, has contributed to this myth by highlighting the achievements of exceptional black women as if they were representative of what all black women could aspire to within a reformed system.

Phyllis Palmer (1983) in her article "White women/Black Women: The Dualism of Female identity and Experience in the United States," has an interesting discussion about the attraction of white feminists to such black heroic figures as Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman. Basically, she says that the strong black female figure corresponds neatly with the racist – inspired image of the 'black mammy'; disguising the fact that, as Barbara Smith and others have pointed out, black women have been the recipients of the lowest pay, the worst poverty, the least access to child care and the most frequent victims of all kinds of violence, including battering, rape and involuntary sterilization. Smith (1985:5) also says: "An ability to cope under the worse conditions is not liberation, although our spiritual capacities have often made it look like a life."

2.5 THE DOUBLE-WHAMMY OF THE BLACK MAMMY MYTH

From various sections, the myth of the strong black woman has been perpetrated, and in the 1960s Daniel Moynihan lent popular support to it in his report on the black family in which he described the black family as matriarchal, basing his theory on the statistics that 25% black families had female heads of household. **One of the many repercussions of this distortion was that it deflected the cause of the problems of the black family away from the economic and social system and onto the black woman who was portrayed as domineering, castrating and the cause of the black man's low self-esteem.**

Many black women, too, bought this analysis and blamed black women for their problems which exacerbated the conflict between black men and women. **This was a**

prime example of blaming the victim. You should, as a good student, note that Moynihan conveniently ignores such systemic causes of the problems of the black family as the high rate of unemployment, especially among black males, which contributes to the break up of families and the lack of opportunity for black men and women to marry and form family units in the first place.

Further, Barbara Smith (1985:5) has listed *five* myths that have been used by white men to 'divert Black woman from our own freedom'. These are:

- 1) The myth that black women are already liberated;
- 2) the myth that racism is the primary (or only) oppression black women have to confront;
- 3) the myth that feminism is nothing but man-hating;
- 4) the myth that women's issues are narrow, apolitical concerns and people of color need to deal with the 'larger struggle', and
- 5) the myth that "these feminists are nothing but lesbians."

Regarding the myth of the liberated black woman, as many writers have illustrated, the black woman in American society has the fewest choices and is the lowest paid, being the triple victim of racism, classism, and sexism. To the charge that racism should be her only concern, Barbara Smith (Ibid:6) says: "A Black feminist perspective has no use for ranking oppression; but instead demonstrates the simultaneity of oppressions as they affect Third world women's lives". Waiting until racism is ended before tackling sexism which cuts across all racial, national, age, religious, ethnic and class groups would mean waiting a 'long, long time..'

To the accusation that feminism implies man-hunting, Smith and others have repeatedly denounced this claim, 'it is only sane,' she counters, 'for us to try to change that treatment by every means possible.' With all of the violence against women in society, the problem seems much more to be one of woman-hating. For example, one in three American women will be raped in her life time, if the current trend continues.

As far as women's issues being narrow and apolitical, Smith asks *how a movement committed to fighting sexual, racial, economic, heterosexual oppression as well as imperialism, anti-feminism, militarism and all other kinds of oppression – against the young, the old, the physically handicapped, etc. can be called 'narrow?'* And, to the charge that feminism implies lesbianism, the fear merely exposes the homophobia in society and the ignorance of both feminism and lesbianism. "Feminism is a political movement, and many lesbians are not feminists' while some are.

2.6 BLACK FEMINISM AND THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

In addition to the myths perpetrated about black women that have sought to undermine their participation in a woman's movement and the white feminist's rejection of issues of paramount concern to minority and working class women, the Civil Rights movement also highlighted sexist discrimination as it affected black women. Many black women have written about their banishment to the kitchen and the clerical corps by black male civil rights leaders who also discouraged them from using birth control because they decided that the black woman's role was to produce more black children for 'the cause'. **Adding insult to injury, many black civil rights leaders rejected black women and took white women as lovers, causing great enmity both between black women and men and women of both groups.** Historically, since the days of slavery, the white woman-sometimes even more than the white man – has been responsible for the mistreatment of black woman; thus, to find herself in competition with white women for the only men usually available to her as partners severely damaged any fragile chance for a relationship of trust and mutual understanding between black and white feminists.

2.7 BLACK FEMINISM AND CAPITALISM

As an avid reader, you must read the books and articles by Angela Davis in which Davis gives many examples of linkages between women's and men's oppression and the system of capitalism. **If you ruminate over the examples, there will be little wonder that black feminists have been unable to rally around a feminist platform that excludes class and race as co-equal women's issues.**

2.8 A CRITIQUE ON BLACK WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

In this section, we have reiterated some of the important issues discussed in sections 2.3 to 2.7. In distance education, repetition is meant for reinforcement.

The counter-cultural movements in the 1960s in America—anti-Vietnam war, Civil Rights movement etc.—were instrumental in the resurgence of feminism. Several women students worked for the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), a campus based mass organization. It was a radicalized, unorganized movement. Its aim was to pull down the old order which made its participants feel alienated, pawns in the hands of “big military / industrial complexes.” Changing the old order meant ending the Vietnam war, putting an end to the draft, reforming the university and fighting racism. Most of the members of the SDS were radicalized students from middle-class backgrounds and included anarchists, socialists, Maoists, Trotskyites, and Castroites.

For all its openness and democratic idealism the SDS from its very inception operated in a style which favoured the domination of men in the movement. Very few women occupied high positions and women had little say in policy making. Women in the SDS also felt sexually exploited. The counter-cultural activities inside and outside the movement and the invention of oral contraceptives created new forms of sexual exploitation. More and more women were becoming aware of the contradiction between their hierarchical position in the movement and the democratic goals of the movement. From the SDS women had learnt the “Gautemala Guerilla Approach.” This was an approach acquired by the SDS which made individuals talk about the process of their own realization and commitment to the movement and was an important technique in consciousness raising. They were realizing their oppression in the movement. The increased draft call from the mid-sixties further alienated women from the SDS. It made these women see themselves as “auxiliaries” to the draft resisters.

Prior to and paralleling the activities of the SDS were several civil rights movements. These movements sprang up within the context of already existing racial tensions and those compounded by the problems posed by neocapitalism. It is necessary to delineate the nature of these problems.

Industrialization and technological developments not only displaced most Blacks from farms in the thirties, but the new economy offered them few alternatives since it sought highly trained, hi-tech workers. The undereducated Black was at a disadvantage. In other word, the industrial and technological revolution which had improved the quality of life for most middle-class Americans further marginalized blacks. Urban ghettos were a visible consequence of this. These ghettos were rife with poverty and crime and were the hotbeds of racial tension. It is not surprising, then, that when in 1964 a 15 year old Black youth was shot to death by an off-duty officer in Harlem, riots broke out. The Harlem riots were followed by riots in other Black ghettos all over the country. Blacks demanded the expulsion of white control from Black ghettos.

In fact, as early as 1957 Martin Luther King Jr. had already organized the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). Influenced by Gandhian philosophy, the SCLC advocated non-violent ways to obtain civil rights. In Atlanta, in 1960 middle-class Black students were forming the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). SNCC was pivotal in organizing Freedom Rides against segregation on public buses. As a movement, SNCC worked closely with King's SCLC. Since these movements were more community based than the northern SDS, women were far more involved within them. In fact, local women—called “mammies” in the community—were instrumental in building up the network for civil resistance. Yet, by 1964 Black women in SNCC were agitating for sexual equality. These women were becoming increasingly aware of the dichotomy between their own hierarchical position within the movement and its democratic goals. For example, while women were always positioned where the action was viz. the communities, in the “freedom house” itself, they were treated as cooks, typists, etc. by their male counterparts.

By winter 1965 SNCC had over 50% whites in the movement. This created its own tensions. The feminist slogan, “Sisterhood is Powerful” had not yet evolved. Black and White women in SNCC did not trust each other. Moreover, as Evans observes, while for “black men, sexual access to white women challenged the culture's ultimate symbol of their denied manhood,” for Black women, it implied that they were still positioned as the other, the not beautiful. Interracial sex often seemed to duplicate the biases of the mainstream culture against which SNCC was claiming to fight. Anger and frustration was building up in Black women. They felt doubly oppressed and marginalized for being both Black and female. Not surprisingly, the first voices of protest for female equality came from these women.

Though the Women's movement got its impetus from the sexism within the New Left and the Civil Rights movements, it grew outside of these. By mid-sixties, a separate women's movement was in the offing. By 1973 Black women located in New York felt that they needed to go national therefore National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO) was formed. The Black women did not want to repeat the mistakes of the early Civil Rights movements by including the opposition in their forces and allowing them to define their issues. The impulse behind the Black women's movement was not just to fight sexism but racism as well. Compounding this were the factors of poverty and the history of slavery. The intersection between these factors created flashpoints which made the experiences of Black women different from that of their white counterparts. However, this is not to say that Black women did not draw from the theories of the Radical Feminists but they gave them their own twist. For instance, the whole notion of self-definition which is so integral to the women's movement, is redefined by black women to include ethnic and cultural factors as well. For the Black American woman self-definition necessarily includes tracing their roots to African-American history and culture. Language also became an important tool in redefining one's self. Many Black writers use Black English because they believe that the best way one can express oneself is through one's own language which encompasses their experiences. Notion of motherhood also underwent a radical redefinition in the hands of Black women. This redefinition did not take place only within the context of patriarchy but also within the context of racism. For example, with the abolition of the international slave trade the white cotton-growing industry in collusion with the slave-holding class forced Black women to have as many children as possible to create more hands to do the field work. The Black woman was seen as a potential bearer of 12 to 14 children. They were treated as breeders rather than as mothers. The “mammy” figure who was sexually exploited and abused but which projected Black women as being “sexually promiscuous” was slowly eroded. Again, domestic work at home was not derided by Black slave women as much as by the white women. This is because most of them worked in the fields so working at home was seen as the only space for them to have control in. In short, the priorities of Black women were different from those of their White counterparts. Even in terms of literary history, Black women created their own literary history rather than be defined by the literary history of the White women

from which they felt alienated and excluded. (For details see Unit 2.1 for Black Women's Fiction).

The Woman, The Moment and The Milieu-II

Important Historical Names to Remember

- **Sourjourner Truth (1797-1833)**
Nationally known speaker of human rights for women and slaves.
- **Harriet Jacobs (1813-1897)**
Wrote the book, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.
- **Harriet Tubman (1821-1913)**
Led around 300 slaves to freedom as part of her Underground Railway Network.
- **Ida Wells Barnett (1862-1931)**
Anti-lynching leader, suffragist, journalist and speaker.
- **Mary Mcleod Bethune (1875-1955)**
Educationist, political advisor and civil rights leader.
- **Mary Burnett Talbert, Carrie W. Clifford and Gertrude Morgan** were all associated with the foundation and proliferation of the Niagara Movement (1905-1909).
- **Lucille Black, Odette Harper, Daisy Lampkin and Ella Baker** were associated with the National Association of the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) started in 1910 and which is still continuing.

Black Women Theorists

- **Darlene Clarke Hine**-developed the notion of Politics of Silence
- **Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, Eileen Boris and Anne Meis Knuffer** have all written about the notion of Politics of Responsibility.
- **Beverley W. Jones** has written about Motherhood and Victorian womanhood.
- **Deborah Gray White** has developed the notion of Politics of Self-Denial
- **Bell Hooks** writes about the otherness and difference in the experience of African-American women, and wonders why postmodernism cannot be applied as a critical theory of enquiry to the Black experience.
- **Cornell West** writes about the decadency in the Black middle-class. Also highlights that Rap music is the Afro-Americanization of American Youth and the commodification of the Black rage.

2.9 LITERARY INFLUENCES ON ALICE WALKER

Walker associates writing with magic. This is not surprising because for several Blacks literary authority was associated with a Christian God or White people. Therefore, many delved into their African-American roots which included shamanism, animism and voodoo. In 1899, Charles Waddele Chestnutt in *The Conjure Woman* (1899) wrote out of the magic of Black folk life. Zora Neale Hurston went a step further and collected Black lies or folk tales and included them in *Mules and Men* (1935). Several Black women writers were influenced by these ideas. Walker says in *The Color Purple* "I thank everybody in this book for coming" (A.W., author and medium). With this ending note to the novel Walker creates a literary tradition in which several Black women who were unable to express themselves through writings because of the historical moment of slavery in which they lived, are

acknowledged. This is one way she brings together her ancestors who were denied the right to read and write. In *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* she writes, "Yet so many of the stories that I write, that we all write, are my mother's stories" (p. 240). By associating her writing with magic, Walker is also reaching out to her African-American roots which goes "deeper than any politics, race, or geographical locations." She therefore like women writers like the Bronte sisters, Kate Chopin, Simone De Beauvoir, and Dorris Lessing.

Walker states that she was influenced by Russian, Greek, African and Asian literatures. However, the Black woman writer, Zora Neale Hurston is whom she calls her "literary progenitor." Walker was struck by her sense of self. In "Zora Neale Hurston: A Cautionary Tale and A Paritsan View," she refers to her as a "cultural revolutionary . . . who gave us [black people] racial health; a sense of black people as complete, complex, undiminished human beings." It was after reading Hurston that Walker felt that Black people should be connected to each other as a community.

Hurston died in poverty and was not given importance as a writer. In her essay "Looking for Zora" Walker imagines herself to be Hurston's niece while searching for her grave and establishes an imaginary, biological link with her. She writes "By this time I am, of course, completely into being Zora's niece, and the lie comes with perfect naturalness to my lips. Besides, as far as I am concerned, she is my aunt—and that of all black people as well" (102). She acknowledges her indebtedness to Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. She says "there is no book more important to me than this one." Henry Louis Gates Jr. has shown several parallels between this book and *The Color Purple*. He adds that Shug Avery in Walker's novel could be modeled after Zora Neale Hurston.

Apart from Hurston, Walker acknowledges Rebecca Jackson, Phillis Wheatley and Ida B. Wells-Barnett as the first African-American feminists in the country who had an impact on her. She also lists other writers among the many who influenced her: Russians Greeks, Africans, Asians and such Americans, black and white, as Jean Toomer, Arna Bontemps, Emily Dickinson, Robert Graves, Williams Carlos Williams, e.e.cummings, and Flannery O'Connor.

2.10 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit, we discussed the following main points:

- Despite being denied the right to education under slavery, Black women have a history of literary works that go back to the eighteenth century.
- Black American women's movement is distinct from the mainstream White women's movement in America because of the different nature of their experiences
- The search for identity is a significant theme in most Black women writers in America
- Black women go to different sources for creative inspiration

2.11 QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the significant milestones in the history of Black Women's fiction
2. How is the Black women's movement different from the mainstream women's movement in America.
3. What are some of the significant influences on Alice Walker?
4. Discuss the various aspects of Black Feminism.

UNIT 3 *THE COLOR PURPLE* AND ITS STRUCTURE

Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 The origins of *The Color Purple*
- 3.2 The story line of the novel
- 3.3 The novel's epistolary form
- 3.4 Music and Shug in *The Color Purple*
- 3.5 Detailed summary of Celie's letters 1-25
- 3.6 Critical Issues emerging from Celie's letters
- 3.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.8 Questions

3.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we will discuss i. The origins of *The Color Purple* ii. The story line of the novel iii. The novel's epistolary form iv. Music and Shug in *The Color Purple*, and Critical Issues emerging from Celie's letters.

3.1 THE ORIGINS OF *THE COLOR PURPLE*

(The following extract is taken from *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* by Alice Walker published in 1983 Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich)

I don't always know where the germ of a story comes from, but with the *Color Purple* I knew right away. I was hiking through the woods with my sister, Ruth, talking about a lovers' triangle of which we both knew. She said: "And you know, one day The Wife asked The Other Woman for a pair of her drawers." Instantly the missing piece of the story I was mentally writing—about two women who felt married to the same man—fell into place. ...

I also knew *The Color Purple* would be a historical novel, and thinking of this made me chuckle. ... When I was sure the characters of my new novel were trying to form (or, as Invariably thought of it, trying to contact me, to speak *through* me), I began to make plans to leave New York. Three months earlier I had bought a tiny house on a quiet Brooklyn street, assuming—because my desk overlooked the street and a maple tree in the yard, representing garden and view—I would be able to write. I was not. ... I disposed of the house, stored my furniture, packed my suitcases and flew alone to San Francisco. ... [The characters] muttered "It's pretty," but "us ain't lost nothing in no place that has earthquakes." [California is known for its earthquakes].

They also didn't like seeing buses, cars, or other people whenever they attempted to look out. "Us don't want to be seeing none of this," they said. "It make us can't think."

That was when I knew for sure these were country people. ... Eventually we [her lover and her] found a place in northern California we could afford and that my characters liked.

And no wonder: it looked a lot like the town in Georgia most of them were from, only it was more beautiful and the local swimming hole was not segregated. It also bore a slight resemblance to the African village in which one of them, Nettie, was a missionary.

Seeing the sheep, the cattle, and the goats, smelling the apples and the hay, one of my characters, Celie, began, haltingly, to speak.

But there was still a problem [with my finances]. I was accepting invitations to speak. Celie and Shug [told me] give up all this travel and talk shit anyway? So, I gave it up for a year. ...

There were days and weeks and even months when nothing happened. Nothing whatsoever. I worked on my quilt, took long walks with my lover, lay on an island we discovered in the middle of the river and dabbled my fingers in the water. I swam, explored the redwood forests all around us, lay out in the meadow, picked apples, talked (yes, of course) to trees. My quilt began to grow. And, of course, everything was happening. Celie and Shug and Albert were getting to know each other, coming to trust my determination to serve their entry (sometimes I felt reentry) into the world to the best of my ability, and what is more—and felt so wonderful—we began to love one another. And, what is even more, to feel immense thankfulness for our mutual good luck.

Just as summer was ending, one or more of my characters—Celie, Shug, Albert, Sofia or, Harpo—would come for a visit. We would sit wherever I was sitting, and talk. They were very obliging, engaging, and jolly. They were, of course, at the end of their story but were telling it to me from the beginning. Things that made me sad often made them laugh. Oh, we got through that don't pull such a long face, they'd say. Or, You think Reagan's bad you ought've seen some of the rednecks us come up under. The days passed in a blaze of happiness.

The school started, and it was time for my daughter to stay with me—for two years.

Could I handle it?

Shug said, right out, that she didn't know. (Well, her mother raised her children.) Nobody else said anything. (At this point in the novel, Celie didn't even know where *her* children were.) They just quieted down, didn't visit as much, and took a firm Well-let's-us-wait-and-see attitude.

My daughter arrived. Smart, sensitive, cheerful, at school most of the day, but quick with tea and sympathy on her return. My characters adored her. They saw she spoke her mind in no uncertain terms and would fight back when attacked. When she came home from school one day with bruises but said, You should see the other guy, Celie (raped by her stepfather as a child and somewhat fearful of life) began to reappraise her own condition. Rebecca gave her courage (which she *always* gives me)—and —they grew to like her so much she would wait until three-thirty to visit me. So, just when Rebecca would arrive home needing her mother and a hug, there'd be Celie, trying to give her both. Fortunately I was able to bring Celie's own children back to her (a unique power of Novelists), though it took thirty years and a good bit of foreign travel. But this proved to be the largest single problem in writing the exact novel I wanted to write between about ten-thirty and three.

I had planned to give myself five years to write *The Color Purple* (teaching, speaking, or selling apples as I ran out of money). But on the very day my daughter left for camp, less than a year after I started writing, I wrote the last page.

And what did I do that for?

It was like losing everybody I loved at once. First Rebecca (to whom everyone surged forth on the last page to say good-bye), then Celie, Shug, Nettie, and Albert. Mary Agnes, Harpo, and Sofia. Eleanor Jane Adam and Tashi Omatangu. Olivia. Mercifully, my quilt and my lover remained. I threw myself in his arms and cried.

3.2 STORY LINE OF *THE COLOR PURPLE*

The novel evoked mixed responses in the people because it redefined notions of female selfhood, family, God, race-relations and sexuality.

The Color Purple, written in the form of letters, deals with the story of Celie, a fourteen-year old Black girl who has been raped by a man she considers to be her father. His name is Alfonso but she calls him Pa. Later in the novel she comes to know that he is her step and not her biological father. She has had two children through this man. Both the children are given away by him. She has a sister, named Nettie, whom she loves very dearly. Celie gets married to Albert, referred to as Mr.—, who was actually interested in marrying Nettie but Pa did not allow it. His wife, Annie Julia, has been killed by her lover and Mr.—is left with four children to look after. This is the reason why he marries Celie, to act as a caretaker. Mr.—also has a woman in his life called Shug Avery. She is a big singer and leads an unconventional life. When she is very sick Mr.—brings her home to take care of her because no one in town wants her. She has had three children with Albert or Mr.—and has left the children with her parents to take care of them. Nettie in the meantime has gone to Africa with the missionary couple Samuel and Corrine. Through a strange twist of events Celie's two children Olivia and Adam have been adopted by Samuel and his wife, Corrine. Nettie is working for them and she looks after these children. When Nettie had left Celie—whose house she had come to stay in—in order to protect herself from her abusive stepfather, Alfonso or Pa (before working for Samuel and Corrine), she had told Celie that she would write to her. She left Celie's place because Mr.—was trying to molest her. In all the time when Celie and Nettie were together the latter had been teaching the former to read and write. After her pregnancies Celie was not allowed to go to school by her stepfather. When Celie does not hear from Nettie at all she thinks she is dead. Eventually through Shug—with whom Celie has developed a lesbian relationship—finds Nettie's letters hidden away by Mr.— as an act of vengeance against Nettie for not responding to his sexual advances. Celie's letters to god are now replaced by her letters to Nettie. The novel ends with Celie building a community around her and discovering her self in an empowering way.

Historical Parallels and Characters in the Novel

Celie, the protagonist of the novel, is based on Walker's great-great-grandmother, who was raped and impregnated at age eleven by her master, Walker's great-great-grandfather.

Shug Avery, is based on Zora Neale Hurston whom Walker greatly admired and on Walker's own aunts who were domestics up in the north and dressed beautifully.

3.3 THE EPISTOLARY FORM OF THE NOVEL

Walker's novel *The Color Purple*, is written in an epistolary form. That is, in a series of letters. In this it continues the tradition of Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa Harlowe* (1748) and William H. Brown's *Power of Sympathy* (1789). What is unique about the novel is its attack on Black men and the abuse of Black women by them. *The Color Purple* is written in 1982 but set in the early part of the twentieth century. A time of

legal segregation for Blacks. The novel covers more than thirty years between the two world wars. The letters which form the structure of the novel weave in the personal and the historical. For example, Celie's biological father was lynched in the novel for being a successful business man and therefore, a threat to the White folks. He was a farmer and ran a store in the local Black community which was very successful. Celie's mother becomes unhinged mentally after seeing her husband's mutilated body. Lynchings were common in the south at the turn of the century. The lynching of Celie's father is based on a real life incident in Memphis in 1892 which roots the novel in a certain historical context. Those who were not lynched suffered other forms of violence for example, Sofia is put in prison unfairly for eleven and half years for "sassing the mayor's wife" (89). Even after she is released she is made to work for the mayor's wife and the daughter's family.

There are ninety-four letters in total. These letters are from Celie to God; from Nettie to Celie; and, from Celie to Nettie. In a sense the novel is postmodern in its use of many genres such as autobiography, slave narrative, oral tradition all of which are incorporated into the letter form. Celie's letters to God are fifty-one in total. Celie incorporates two letters into her story one from her sister which she includes in a letter to God, and one from Shug which she presents in a letter to her sister, Nettie. In two of her letters to God she makes Squeak and Sofia tell their experiences. Celie's letters are not signed and nor are they dated but they are chronological for the most part. The present tense is used which is part of the oral tradition but it also graphically conveys the presence of rural south with all its ideological underpinnings as it affects the lives of the African-Americans even today. Her letters range in length from two paragraphs to two-three pages which reflect her development from an abused selfless and helpless victim to a woman with a sense of self and who is in control of her life.

Celie's letters to God are disrupted by her discovery of Nettie's letters to her which have been hidden from her by Albert. God is now replaced by Nettie. This is a deliberate technique used by Walker to tell us about the significance of female bonding and empowerment. Celie's decision to stop writing to God after learning about Nettie's letters to her (which have been kept away by her husband, Albert) is the beginning of her autonomy, a feminist sense of self. She writes only three more letters to God after she comes to know about Nettie's letters to her. Nettie's letters are presented separately in the novel and not incorporated into Celie's letters. This is one way Walker makes her protagonist learn about the existence of another world in Africa. This world too, like America, exhibits forms of racism in its imperial form, and also patriarchal oppression in the lives of the Olinka women.

3.4 MUSIC AND SHUG IN *THE COLOR PURPLE*

Many African-American writers were not trained musicians but they use music in their works. Both Alice Walker and Toni Morrison proudly declare that their work is influenced by African-American music. Walker, in an interview with John O'Brien discusses the relationship of her writing to the musical tradition: "[T]he most I would say about where I am trying to go is this: I am trying to arrive at that place where music already is; to arrive at that unselfconscious sense of collective oneness; that naturalness, that (even when anguished) grace." This response explains the importance of music in *The Color Purple* in which Shug, a blues singer, transforms the sordid lives of the Black people with whom she interacts. Calvin C. Hernton (1987) comments about Shug:

She is a representative of the genre of black blues/jazz women who emerged during the beginning of the twentieth century. Similar to Bessie Smith, Mammy Yancey, Billie Holiday and uncounted others along city streets, in nightclubs and joints and in our prisons and graveyards, Shug Avery is the

blues/jazz singer articulating the sorrows, brutalities, endurances and love-fleeting moments of all those women who, like Celie, are shackled down and rendered inarticulate in this woman-hating world. (19)

***The Color Purple* and Its Structure**

In the novel, Shug affects a lot of characters through her love. The men in the novel who are often referred to as beasts, hogs and savages are humanized by her. Harpo begins to appreciate Squeak's and Mr.—learns to cook and sew and love Celie. Among the women characters, Celie and Squeak offer the best examples. Shug teaches Squeak how to sing and makes her realize that her kind of singing is far more humanizing than "all them funny voices you hear singing in church." She further tells Squeak,

I tell you something else, Shug say to Mary Agnes, listening to you sing, folks git to thinking bout a good screw.

Aw, *Miss Shug*, say Mary Agnes, changing color.

Shug say, What, too shamefaced to put singing and dancing and fucking together? She laugh. That's the reason they call what us sing The devil's music. Devil's love to fuck. (99)

Shug's philosophy of life is anti-patriarchal and anti-white. She goes by feelings and desires and not by biased and gendered conventions and traditions. This leads to her redefinition of God, family, notion of motherhood and attitudes to sexuality. It is because of her that Celie begins to believe in a God who is pantheistic. Shug explains to Celie that God is neither He or She but It. Someone that resides within people. This is the sermon that she preaches. A sermon of love and caring. In the novel, Shug's music is more powerful than the sermon of the preacher. Her songs and their fluidity which preach love and growth and acceptance contrast with the clichés stated by the preacher about God's love and wrath. Her music is nurturing and develops the soul. All the characters who change for the better in the novel are affected by her. They can listen to music therefore they are good people. Conversely, the bad people in the novel are those who are deaf to music. In this sense Shug Avery becomes the spiritual centre of the novel. Appropriately, Celie's last letter addressed to the stars and trees to illustrate her belief in Shug's living God.

3.5 DETAILED SUMMARY OF CELIE'S LETTERS 1-25

(Text used Alice Walker *The Color Purple*, New York: Pocket Books, 1982).

In her letters to God written in black, rural dialect, Celie tells us her awful story. The first letter is preceded by a warning from Pa (whom she mistakes to be her biological father) who has raped her—a fourteen year old girl—and told her "you better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy" (p.1). Through Celie's opening letter we learn that her mother is very sick and when she went to visit her sister doctor in Macon, she left the children with Celie. Pa (Alfonso), whom she assumes to be her biological father, rapes her to fulfill his sexual desires which his wife is unable to meet. In the second letter we are told that the mother dies cursing her pregnant daughter. We are also told that Pa "kilt it [the child] out there in the woods" (p.3). The third letter informs us of how her Pa perceives her as "evil" and how he took her "other little baby, a boy this time" (p.4). It is in Celie's fourth letter that Nettie, her sister, is mentioned. She is a very important character in the novel particularly in nurturing Celie and contributing to her growth as an empowered woman. In this fourth letter, Celie tells us that Nettie is being paid attention to by a man almost her father's age who has three children and whose wife (Annie Julia) was killed by her lover. Celie writes that "I tell Nettie to keep at her books. It be more then a notion taking care of children ain't even yourn. And look what happen to Ma" (p.5). Through this we come to know that Celie is very protective of her younger sister and she does not want her to ruin her life marrying young. In this same letter

we are also informed about Pa's marriage to a girl from "round Gray" who is the around the same age as Celie.

As the letters begin to unfold we come to know about life in the South. About the violence not only against the Blacks by the Whites but also within the Black community which has internalized the mainstream attitudes towards them. Very early in her letters Celie tells us that "he[pa] beat me." She says that he accused her of winking at a boy in Church which she says is not true. She confesses openly "I don't even look at mens. That's the truth. I look at women, tho, cause I'm not scared of them"(p.6). As early as this Walker is slowly paving her way for a "womanist" text—a point we will discuss subsequently. Celie informs us of the fact that Pa has his eyes on Nettie and therefore she advises her to marry Mr.—without telling her the reason for it. Celie's complete lack of awareness of her sexuality is revealed when she says "A girl at church say you git big if you bleed every month. I don't bleed no more" (p.6). We are soon told through one of Celie's early letters that Mr.—has asked Pa for Nettie's hand in marriage and that he has refused it on two counts. First, relates to the scandal surrounding the murder of Mr.'s—wife by her lover. The second, is to do with Mr.'s—relationship with Shug Avery. Shug (short form for sugar) is another very important character in the development of Celie. Through her stepmother, Celie manages to get a picture of Shug and she writes: "Shug Avery was a woman. The most beautiful woman I ever saw. She more pretty then my mama. She bout ten thousand times more prettier then me" (p.7). In the following letter, Celie tells us that she pleaded with Pa not to touch Nettie and take her instead. She even dresses with furs and high heeled shoes for him. He calls her a tramp but "takes her" anyway. That same evening Mr.—comes to ask for Nettie's hand in marriage. Pa refuses saying that he wants her to complete her schooling and become a teacher. He however, offers him Celie's hand instead, saying "she ain't fresh tho" but being the oldest should marry first. He also adds "She ugly. But she ain't no stranger to hard work. And she clean" (p.9). Pa further describes her as "too old to be living at home," a "bad influence" on the other children, she "ain't smart either," and that she tells lies (p.9). Celie is at the centre of a bargaining between Mr.—and Pa quite like the way in which slaves were sold. Pa even throws in her cow as an added incentive if Mr.—marries her. Celie is about twenty years of age when this episode takes place. Through this letter, Walker is making us realize the negative way in which Celie is perceived by people and how she has to combat these images of herself before she begins to relate to her self in an empowering way.

By about the eighth letter Celie tells us that she is being taught by Nettie and that Nettie told her that "I ain't dumb." She narrates to us why she was taken out of school by Pa even though she loved it. He told her "You too dumb to keep going to school." Even when Nettie told Pa that Celie is bright and smart and that their teacher Miss Addie Beasley had said so too, he refused to send Celie to school dismissing Ms. Beasley as "Whoever listen to anything Addie Beasley have to say. She run off at the mouth so much no man would have her. That how come she have to teach school"(p.11). One fine day Miss. Beasley even came to their home to persuade Pa to send Celie to school but when she saw Celie in her pregnant state she quietly left. It is in this very letter that Mr.—asks for another look at Celie because the woman who was looking after his children, left. Celie plans to marry the man as an escape route so that Nettie and she can eventually run away. The way Mr.—surveys her brings to mind the slave trade. Celie writes: "I go stand in the door. The sun shine in my eyes. He's still up on his horse. He look me up and down... Turn round Pa say. I turn round. . . Mr.—say, That cow still coming? He say, Her cow" (p.12). Soon she gets married to him and discovers that he has four and not three children as stated by him. We are also told about how the eldest son hates her and threw a stone at her and hurt her very badly. The girls are also very unkempt and dirty and she begins to make them look clean and tidy. When Mr.—makes love to her at night she says that she thinks of Shug Avery and feels warmly towards him. Celie in another letter tells us that she met her "baby girl" while she was waiting in the wagon for Mr.—who had gone to the dry goods store. She tells us the girl's eyes were just like

hers and she refers to her as Olivia. The lady with whom she has come seems very pleasant. Celie says the woman says she has come to buy cloth for her daughter. To this Celie asks who was her father and she responds one Reverend Mr. While the mother and daughter are waiting for the Wagon taken by Reverend, Celie invites them to sit in her wagon and the two women chat. It is this woman to whom Nettie is sent later. Her name is Corrine. The eleventh letter of Celie gives us some crucial information. One, that Nettie has run away from home and has come to live with Celie. Two, that she is helping Celie "with spelling and everything else she think I need to know" (p.17). She also teaches Celie how to handle Mr.—'s very demanding children. She tells Celie, "Don't let them run over you You got to fight"(p.18). Celie responds to this by saying "But I don't know how to fight. All I know how to do is stay alive" (p.18). Walker here is trying to tell us about the basic struggle for survival in the lives of ordinary Black women. It is in this letter again that we are told that Nettie decides to leave Celie's place because of Mr— making advances on her. Each time he gives her a compliment she passes it on to Celie. This makes Celie feel good. It is Celie who gives Nettie the address of Reverend Mr.— before she leaves and they part with Celie telling Nettie to write. Nettie says "Nothing but death can keep me from it." Celie tells us "She never write" (p.19). It is in the later letters that we come to know the reason for this. By now it is very clear to us that Celie and Nettie are very close to each other and that there is a deep bonding that they have between them.

In the next letter to God we are told that Albert or Mr's— two sisters named Carrie and Kate come to visit. They are impressed by the neat and clean way in which Celie keeps the house and also the children. One of the sisters complain about Albert's previous wife, Annie Julia who, she claims, did not look after the children or the house. Kate intervenes and states that no one can blame her because Albert was fooling around with Shug Avery. There is a little discussion between the sisters about Shug Avery and the way she dresses and the kind of life that she leads. Celie listens carefully. In the next visit also mentioned in the same letter, Kate comes by herself. She is about twenty- five years old and an "old maid." She tells her brother to buy Celie some clothes. The two go clothes-shopping to the store. Celie thinks of what Shug would have worn and says "She like a queen to me" and tells Kate that she would like "somethin purple, maybe little red in it too"(p. 22). The colour purple is mentioned in relation to royalty here. This link is picked up later in the text as well. Kate tells Harpo, the oldest boy, that he must help Celie carry the water. He says that it is a woman's job to do it and goes and gets a firing from Kate. She calls him a "trifling nigger." He complains to his father. Kate has an altercation with Mr.— she finally storms out of the house telling Celie what Nettie had told her earlier "you got to fight them, Celie, I can't do it for you. You got to fight them for yourself." Celie says that she does not say anything in reply because she thinks of Nettie who fought back by running away and is now probably dead. She adds, "I don't fight, I stay where I'm told. But I'm alive" (p.22). In the thirteenth letter, Harpo asks his father why he beats Celie and he replies "cause she my wife." Celie tells us that Mr.—beats her with a belt and that she makes herself like wood and not cry. Harpo tells Celie about a girl he met at church and whom he wants to marry. He is seventeen years of age and she is about fifteen. In the next letter we are told that Shug Avery is in town and is going to sing in the "Lucky Star out on Coalman road"(p.25). Mr.— is all excited getting ready for the evening and Celie moves "round darning and ironing, finding hanskers" (p.25), for him. Celie longs to go to the Lucky Star but as she says not to hear Shug Avery sing "I just thankful to lay eyes on her" (p.26). Somehow, from the beginning of the relationship of Celie and Shug, Walker imbues it with sexual undertones. The next letter tells us that Mr.— is very tired after visiting the Lucky Star. Celie is dying to ask him a thousand questions about Shug but refrains from doing so. She continues to work very hard in the cotton fields.

In the fifteenth letter, Celie tells us that Harpo is as big as his father but no good in fighting him. He tells his father that he is tired of working in the fields all day but his dad tells him that he has to do it. Celie tells us that Harpo's face "looks like a woman

face" (p.29). In letter 17 we get three important facts. These are that Harpo's girl friend is Sofia Butler who is "big, strong, healthy girl," whose father does not like Harpo to marry her because of the scandal surrounding his mother's death. We are also told about the episode in which Annie Julia died in Harpo's arms in a nightmare sequence. In this same letter we are informed of the fact that Sofia is expecting a baby and that she has visited Harpo's place to ask his father's permission to marry her. Harpo's father insults her and Harpo is unable to handle the situation. She leaves telling Harpo that he should visit her and the baby after he is out of his father's clutches. In the next letter Harpo gets Sofia and the child and takes them home and gets married in "Sofia sister house. Sister's husband stand up with Harpo. Other sister sneak way from home to stand up with Sofia. Another sister come to hold the baby. Say he cry right through the service, his mama stop everything to nurse him. Finish saying I do with a big ole nursing boy in her arms" (p.35). Harpo also fixes up the creek house which Mr.—used as a shed for them. Celie helps doing it up by making curtains out of sacks. After three years of marriage Harpo complains to Mr.—that Sofia does not listen to him and that she is always running to her sister's place. He asks him if he beats her. To this Harpo answers in the negative. The Mr.—says "Wives is like children. You have to let 'em know who got the upper hand. Nothing can do that better than a good sound beating" (p. 37). Celie also tells Harpo to beat his wife and he does and pays a price for it. In the next letter the fight has gone to a bigger scale with both Harpo and Sofia flinging things at each other. The whole house is turned upside down. Next we are told that the two along with their children are going off for the weekend to visit Sofia's sister.

In letter 21 Celie feels guilty for having told Harpo to beat Sofia. She feels that she has "sin against Sofia spirit." In the meantime Sofia comes to know that Celie had advised Harpo to beat her. She returns all the things that Celie had given for the house saying that "I looked to you for help" (p.42). Although Celie initially denies it she finally admits to it saying that she said so because she was jealous of Sofia and her ability to fight. Sofia tells her that all her life she has had to fight her father, brother and men within the family. Sofia tells her that they come from a family of twelve children; six boys and six girls. She adds "All the girls big and strong like me. Boys big and strong too, but all the girls stick together" (43). She also tells Celie that she pities her because she does not stand up for herself. Celie tells her that the times when she was mad with her parents the words of the Bible came to her. "Honour thy father and thy mother" and she would just take it. She adds "This life soon be over, Heaven last all ways" (44). The two soon start talking and laughing and Sofia suggests that they make quilt out of the "messed up curtains" that she had torn and returned to Celie. Celie says that she runs to get her "pattern book" (p.44). In the 22nd letter Celie tells us that Shug Avery is very sick and nobody in town (not even her parents) want to keep her. She is suffering from "two berkulosis." Even the preacher takes her condition for his text and vilifies her and her lifestyle. Celie expects Mr.—to come to her rescue but he does not. However, soon we are told that Mr.—has brought Shug home. Celie is very happy and observes every single detail about her clothes, make up etc. Shug looks at Celie and says "you sure is ugly" (p. 48). In the following letter Celie tells us that Mr.—is in Shug's room trying to keep her company. In the 24th letter Celie says that Mr.—asks Celie to give Shug a bath. She says "First time I got the full sight of Shug Avery long black body with it black plum nipples, look like her mouth, I thought I had turned into a man" (p.51). Walker here is showing us the sexual attraction that Celie has for Shug which eventually leads to a lesbian relationship. In this same letter Celie comes to know that Shug and Mr.—have had three children and that they are being looked after by the grandparents. When Celie asks her if she misses them she says, "Naw, I don't miss nothing." Walker here is touching on the theme of motherhood which is very important in the text and which we will discuss later. The next letter talks about Celie and Shug having breakfast together.

3.6 CRITICAL ISSUES EMERGING FROM CELIE'S LETTERS 1-25

There are several important issues that emerge from these letters which are developed later in the novel. Let us enlist them:

- Violence in Black families (See Unit 4.2)
- Racist / Patriarchal attitudes among Black people
- Nettie and Celie relationship
- Celie's low self-esteem
- Concept of Motherhood and Mothering (See Unit 6.5).
- The theme of "sisterhood is powerful," lesbian relationship and the move to a Womanist text (See Unit 2.3)
- Introduction of significant characters

3.7 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit we discussed the following issues:

- Through the epistolary form Walker communicates her heroine's anguish
- Blacks have internalised racist/patriarchal attitudes from their experiences with the mainstream white culture
- The quilt metaphor is significant in Black culture
- Motherhood is redefined in Black culture within the context of a slave history

3.8 QUESTIONS

1. Trace the growth of Celie in letters 1-25
2. Comment on the Celie/Nettie relationship as revealed in letters 1-25
3. Discuss the significance of the novel's epistolary form.
4. Comment on the importance of music in *The Color Purple*.

UNIT 4 ANALYSIS OF CELIE'S LETTERS-I

Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 A detailed summary of Celie's letters 26-51
- 4.2 Critical issues Emerging from Celie's letters 26-51
- 4.3 The context of Nettie's letters
- 4.4 A detailed commentary of letters 52-58 (Nettie's letters 1-7)
- 4.5 Critical issues Emerging from letters 52-58 (Nettie's letters 1-7)
- 4.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.7 Questions

4.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we will discuss i. the issues arising from Celie's letters 26-51 ii. the context of Nettie's letters and iii. the issues arising from letters 52-58 (Nettie's letters 1-7)

4.1 DETAILED SUMMARY OF CELIE'S LETTERS 26-51

In Celie's 26th letter she says that Shug has slowly started sitting up in bed and that Celie is continuing to nurse her. When she combs her hair she feels that Shug is like her daughter, Olivia, or, like her own mama. Through these details Walker makes generational links with the women which is important for her Womanist text. In the following letter she informs us that Mr.—'s father, the old Mr., has come on a visit. He asks his son what he sees in Shug. He says, "She black as tar, she nappy headed. She got legs like baseball bats"(p.56). The racism that is internalized by the Blacks is brilliantly encapsulated in these lines where we see the Blacks themselves hating their own image. Mr.—tells his father that he loves Shug and should have married her. Father tells him that "Nobody even sure exactly who her daddy is. ... Plus all her children got different daddys" (p.57). In the same letter we are also told about the visit of Tobias, Mr.—'s brother. He has come to see Shug Avery. The letter ends with Celie saying that she felt good "quilting tween Shug Avery and Mr.— us three set together gainst Tobias and his fly speck box of chocolate. For the first time in my life, I feel just right" (p.60). Letter 28 mentions Celie and Sofia making the quilt. Shug Avery has donated "her old yellow dress for scrap" (p.61). The pattern on the quilt is called "Sister's Choice." Here again the term "sister" is significant pointing to the female bonding that is essential to the growth of the female characters in the novel. While Celie and Sofia are quilting together Sofia complains to Celie about the vast quantities of food that Harpo is consuming. Later on Celie herself notices it. Later we come to know that Harpo is trying to be strong and big so that he can be in control over his wife, Sofia. We also come to know that Harpo loves housekeeping "he love cooking and cleaning and doing little things round the house" (p.63). Sofia, on the other hand, loves to do "manly jobs." When Celie looks out across the yard she says "I see Sofia dragging a ladder and then lean it up gainst the house. She wearing a old pair of Harpo pants. Got her head tied up in a headrag. She clam up the ladder to the roof, begin to hammer in nails. Sound echo cross the yard like shots" (p.64).

The following letter tells us that Harpo has come to spend the weekend with Celie. Mr.—and Shug. While they are asleep Celie hears someone sniffing and finds out that Harpo is crying. He tells her that he is upset because his wife Sofia does not

UNIT 4 ANALYSIS OF CELIE'S LETTERS-I

Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 A detailed summary of Celie's letters 26-51
- 4.2 Critical issues Emerging from Celie's letters 26-51
- 4.3 The context of Nettie's letters
- 4.4 A detailed commentary of letters 52-58 (Nettie's letters 1-7)
- 4.5 Critical issues Emerging from letters 52-58 (Nettie's letters 1-7)
- 4.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.7 Questions

4.0 OBJECTIVES

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The following letter tells us that Harpo has come to spend the weekend with Celie, Mr.—and Shug. While they are asleep Celie hears someone sniffing and finds out that Harpo is crying. He tells her that he is upset because his wife Sofia does not

listen to him. He then compares Celie to Sofia and says that Celie always listens to Mr.— Celie responds by saying that Harpo's father still beats her. She tells Harpo that Sofia loves him unlike her who does not love Mr.— and married him because her Pa asked her to. Here we see a certain growth in Celie in that she is able to analyse her situation and she is also in a position to give Harpo support. In letter 30 three things are mentioned. One that Harpo is eating a lot so that he can be as strong as his wife. Two, that Sofia is getting a little tired of Harpo and in this context the two talk about their sex life and, three, when Sofia mentions moving in with her sister, she remembers Nettie "thought so sharp it go through me like a pain" (p.69). In letter 31 Sofia's sisters come to pick her and her children up. Celie writes "Sofia right about her sisters. They all big strong healthy girls, look like amazons" (p.71). Harpo pretends that he is not bothered about Sofia leaving. Celie also decides to give the quilt to Sofia. In the following letter we are told that Sofia is six months pregnant. Harpo is also now very busy and excited building a jukejoint with his friend Swain. As he tells Celie "one thing he learned is that he cute. Another that he smart. Plus, he can make money" (73).

Letter 33 tells us that Harpo's jukejoint has very few customers. Occasionally Shug and Mr.—go and listen to Swain sing. One day Harpo asks Celie to find out if Shug can sing at their jukejoint. Shug, who has been recovering from her illness, decides to do so and "the first Saturday night many folks come they couldn't git in" (p.76). Celie is delighted because she can at last watch Shug sing. When Celie hears Shug sing she feels very strongly for her and is unable to understand the stirrings in her heart "why my heart hurt me so" (p.77). Shug also dedicates a song to Celie and Celie says that this is the first time "Somebody made something and name it after me" (p.77). Here Walker is showing the connections between sadness and the blues that Shug sings. Celie is a source for a song and Celie, we all know has been abused in life. In the following letter Celie tells us that Harpo's joint is doing well with Shug Avery belting out songs. She also tells us that Shug tells her that she is planning to leave. On hearing this she tells Shug not to leave because Mr.—beat her when she is not around. Shug asks Celie you mean "Albert?" For the first time Celie realizes her husband's name is Albert. Shug tells Celie not to worry and that she will not leave until Albert stops beating her.

Celie's 35th letter is important for several reasons. In this letter she tells us that it is nearing the time for Shug to leave them. The two of them talk about Albert and about having sex with him. Shug says that she loves him with a passion but that he is too weak. Celie says that she has never enjoyed having sex with him. In fact, she says that he just did "his business" and went off to sleep. Shug laughs and says that it sounds like as if he is going to toilet on her. She replies that that is how it felt. Shug then asks her if she never felt any sexual excitement doing it with Pa. She replies in the negative and Shug tells her that she is still a virgin. She advises her to explore herself sexually which she does under Shug's guidance.

In the next letter (letter 36) Celie narrates that one day when Shug is singing at Harpo's Jukejoint, Sofia walks in with a man who looks like a prizefighter. His name is Henry Broadnax but everybody calls him Buster. Celie and Mr.—are both happy to see Sofia. Mr.— and she exchange notes on their children. Mr.—tells her that his girls have "bigged and gone." But "Bub [is] in and out of jail" (p. 85). Here again Walker shows us the kind of life Blacks—who are marginalized in that culture—lead for lack of better alternatives. Sofia also tells them that she has six children now. She looks archly at Celie and tells her (but more for Harpo's benefit) "Life don't stop just cause you leave home, Miss Celie. You know that" (p.85). Shug come across after her song and hugs Sofia telling her that she looks like "good time." Celie comments that this is the first time that she realized that "Shug talk and act sometimes like a man. Men say stuff like that to women, Girl, you look like a good time. Women always talk bout hair and health" (p.85). She also confesses to us that like all the men who are ogling at Shug's bosom, she too feels very excited sexually. She says, "I feel my nipples harden under my dress. My little button sort of perk up too" (p.85).

In this letter we are also told about a fight that takes place between Sofia and Harpo's yellow-skinned girlfriend called Squeak, who like Celie, does whatever her man asks her to do. When Harpo and Sofia start to dance she objects and a fight ensues. Squeak slaps Sofia who retaliates more aggressively breaking Squeak's teeth. Finally, Sofia and the prizefighter leave the joint.

Harpo is looking disturbed in the 37th letter and Squeak does not what is bothering him. Celie informs her that Sofia is in jail for "Sassing the mayor's wife" (p.89). She also asks Squeak for her real name which she says is Mary Agnes. Celie tells her that she should tell Harpo to call her by that name so that she can be noticed by him. Here again we see Celie in her capacity of giving advice. She is obviously growing. Celie then narrates what one of Sofia's sisters told her and Mr.—about how Sofia got into jail. Apparently, one day Sofia, the children and the prizefighter got into prizefighter's wagon and went to town. There the mayor and his wife (Millie) met them. The mayor's wife was very struck by how clean Sofia's children were and asked her if she could be her maid. Sofia replied "Hell no." The mayor was annoyed and asked Sofia "What you say to Miss Millie?" and Sofia repeated "Hell no." and "he slap her." Next Sofia "knock the man down. The polices come, start slinging the children off the mayor, bang they heads togther. Sofia really start to fight. They drag her to the ground" (p.90). Celie then tells Squeak (Mary Agnes) and she asked Sofia's sister, Odessa, what the prizefighter did all this while? He wanted to "jump in" we are told but Sofia wanted to fight her own battle. In any case "Polices have they guns on him anyway. One move, he dead. Six of them, you know. Bub's "grandaddy" who was "the colored uncle of the sheriff" allows Celie and Mr.—to visit Sofia in jail. He tells them that she is insane but he "know how womens is." Walker here shows us how all the men in the novel are patriarchal. When Celie sees Sofia in jail, she wonders how she is alive. She says "They crack her skull, they crack her ribs. They tear her nose loose on one side. They blind her in one eye. She swole from head to foot. Her tongue the size of my arm, it stick out tween her teef like a piece of rubber. She can't talk. And she just about the color of a eggplant"(p.92). Celie then tells us how she cleans her up. Celie's nurturing role is seen here once again. She was the one who nursed Shug back to health and she was the one who looked after her siblings and also Mr.'s—children. The irony is that she cannot look after her own children.

Letter 38 is beautiful insofar as we see a black community emerging. Sofia is now working doing the prison laundry. She tells Celie, Mr.—, Harpo and Shug—who has come from Memphis to see her—that "everything nasty here." When they ask her how she manages she replies that she does what Celie does namely, "do just what they say." At this "Mr.— suck in his breath. Harpo groan. Miss Shug cuss" (p.93). Sofia has been imprisoned for twelve years. Maybe, Harpo tells her that she could get out on good behaviour. To which Sofia replies, "Good behavior ain't good enough for them. Nothing less than sliding on your belly with your tongue on they boots can even git they attention. I dream of murder, she say, sleep or wake" (p.94). Walker is showing us here the anger that was building up in the Blacks against an unjust society. When she asks about her children Harpo says that "Tween Odessa and Squeak, they git by." Sofia responds, "Say thank you to Squeak. Tell Odessa I think about her" (p.94). We see the notion of "sisterhood is powerful" emerging here. In the following letter they are all sitting around the supper table Celie, Shug, Mr.—, Squeak, the prizefighter, Odessa and two more of Sofia's sisters. They are trying to find a way to get Sofia out of prison because they feel that she is not going to last out. Harpo suggest blowing up the place, the prizefighter thinks in terms of smuggling a gun but Odessa says that if Sofia gets out that way they will come for her later. Celie says that she does not say anything but she adds that "I think bout angels, God coming down by chariot, swinging down real low and carrying ole Sofia home. I see 'em all as clear as day. Angels all in white, white hair and white eyes, look like albinos. God all white too, looking like some stout white man work at the bank" (p.96). We get an insight into Celie's notion of God here. Walker is showing us how even the Blacks have internalized God as being white. When Squeak, who has also

been silent, hears that the jail warden's name is Bubber Hodges, the "old man Henry Hodge's boy," Squeak asks Mr.— if he had a brother named Jimmy. To this Mr.— replies in the affirmative and Squeak says that Jimmy (who is now married to another woman) is her daddy and that "He got three children by my mama. Two younger than me). Only once did Bubber come with Jimmy to their house and he "give us all quarter, say we sure do look like Hodges" (p.96). It is very clear now that Squeak has to go see the warden, her uncle to get Sofia out of the prison.

In letter 40 they all advise Squeak what she should tell the warden to go get Sofia. They tell her that she should tell him that Sofia is having a very good time in jail and that what she hates more is to be the maid to some white woman like the mayor's wife. She is also told to say that she is now living with Sofia's husband. They also tell her to mention to Bubber the time when he gave her a quarter. Squeak is all dressed up as a white woman for this event. The next letter shows us Squeak "come home with a limp. Her dress rip. Her hat missing and one of the heels come off her shoe" (p.100). When Harpo enters saying that his wife is "beat up" and his "woman rape," Squeak tells him "Shut up" and that she's "telling it." Here Walker shows us how the women in the novel are slowly learning to speak up and be heard. Squeak does not want anyone to appropriate her story. She says that when she walked into the jail, the warden recognised her immediately and asked her what she wanted. She said that she wanted justice to be done by punishing Sofia more. She told him (what she had been instructed to say by Shug Mr.—, Odessa etc.)namely, that what she hates is to be the maid to a white lady. life and work in jail in comparison to that is fine. The warden kept staring at her and asked her who her father was. Squeak hesitates to tell the rest but Shug says that "if you can't tell us, who you gontell, God?" We can certainly see a sympathetic bonding that is now developing among all these characters. Squeak then tells them that she was raped and asks Harpo if he loves her only for the colour of her skin. Harpo replies that he loves her and calls her Squeak. She protests that she is Mary Agnes. Through such subtle details Walker shows us the growth of her characters and their developing a sense of self. In this case, it was Celie who had told her that she should tell Harpo to call her by her real name and not by the name of Squeak.

In letter 42, six months have passed since Squeak and the jail episode. She has started singing at Harpo's jukejoint. Although she does not have a very good voice she manages. At first she sings with Shug and then she manages all by herself. The letter ends with a song by her in which she picks up the theme of racism. "But if yellow is a name / Why ain't black the same; Well, if is say Hey black girl/ Lord, she try to ruin my game" (p. 104). In the next letter Celie tells us that she visited Sofia at the mayor's house where she is working as a maid for the two children. She is out of the jail after three years to do this job for the mayor's family. When Celie and Sofia talk, the latter says how come that they have not murdered any White as yet. Celie says that Sofia is always talking about "killing somebody." Celie tells her that there are "too many to kill off". She further adds, "Us outnumbered from the start. I speck we knock over one or two, though, her and there, through the years" (p. 105). We are next shown the two children of the mayor (a boy and a girl) who are playing ball in the yard. When the ball rolls under Sofia's foot and the boy commands her to throw the ball back at him, Sofia refuses. He comes storming up to her and hurts his foot in the process. He is just six years of age but Walker shows us the latent racism even in little children. Although the little girl, Eleanor Jane is fond of Sofia, Celie tells us "Sofia never notice, she as deaf to the little girl as she is to her brother" (p. 106). Walker is telling us how the Blacks have just switched off feelings in their interactions with the Whites because of the way they have been treated in general by them. Celie had told us that when Mr.—used to beat her she pretended she was a tree. Now Sofia also deadens herself.

In letter 44 Celie tell us about Sofia's experiences with the mayor's family. She says that they have the nerve to tell her that slavery was destroyed (as if it was worth upholding anyway) because the Blacks did not know how to handle it. They would

let the "mules loose in the wheat," "break hoe handles" etc. We are also told by Sofia that the mayor has bought his wife a car. He said that if coloured people can own cars so could she. However, she has not been taught to drive the car. We are also told that she has "no friends." Compare this to the black community that is slowly building up in the novel. The mayor's wife, Miz Millie, as she calls her, asks Sofia (whom she has seen driving with Prizefighter) to teach her how to drive. She tells us that she has a pokey little room in the mayor's house which is kept barely warm in winter. She also adds that she has been kept away from her children and is at the Mayor's family's "beck and call all night and all day" (p.108). Sofia continues with her story. She says that she eventually taught the mayor's wife how to drive and one fine day she told Sofia that she wanted to take her to her children so that she could spend the day with them. When Sofia gets into the seat next to Miz. Millie she tells her that in the south "have you ever seen a white person and a colored sitting side by side in a car, when one of 'em wasn't showing the other one how to drive it or clean it?" (p. 109). They finally drive off with Sofia in the back seat of the car. When they reach Odessa's home (where Sofia's children are) all her children come running up. "Nobody told them [that she] was coming so they don't now who [she] is. Except the oldest two. They fall on [her]" (p.109). Odessa and Jack her husband did not see Sofia sitting at the back of the car. She continues, "us all stand round kissing and hugging each other" Miz. Millie watches all this and tells Sofia that she will come back at five to pick her up. Sofia says that she thought that she had driven off but Marion (one of Sofia's children) says that the "white lady still out there" (p.110). Sofia discovers that she is not able to drive off because she does not know how to back and Odessa's home is full of trees for her to get out without backing. When Sofia tries to help her out she discovers that the engine has died on them. But Odessa says that not to worry and that Jack can drive Miz. Millie back in his pick-up. To this Miz. Millie says "I couldn't ride in a pick-up with a strange colored man" (p. 110). So Sofia tells her that maybe Odessa can also go along because this way she will get more time to spend with her children. But Miz. Millie does not agree. Finally, Sofia goes with Jack to drop her and later picks up a mechanic to fix up the car engine and by the time it is five o'clock she is heading back to Miz. Millie's having spent only 15 minutes with her children. She ends by saying "And [Miz. Millie] been going on for months bout how ungrateful I is" (p. 111). Walker through a masterful stroke tells us all about slavery. In letter 45 Shug has come with her husband Grady to visit Mr.— in their new car. Mr.—seems upset by the news of her marriage and Celie too feels bad. In the next letter we are told that Mr.—and Brady are drinking "all through Christmas" while Celie and Shug "cook, talk, clean the house, talk, fix up the tree, talk, wake up in the morning, talk" (p.114). Shug has become rich and famous. She tells Celie that once she heard that Mr.—was beating her she began to feel differently for him. She says, "If you was my wife, I'd cover you up with kisses stead of licks, and work hard for you too" (p.115). Celie responds by saying that he does not beat her as much now "just a slap now and then when he ain't got nothing else to do" (p.115). When Shug asks her about her sexual life with Mr.—she says that there is still no joy in it.

The 47th letter is crucial because in it Celie recalls her rape. In this letter Grady and Mr.—have gone out for a drive. Shug asks Celie if she can sleep with her because she is cold. Soon they start talking about "making love." Shug asks Celie if she ever enjoyed it with Pa and she recounts her rape. She tells us how he raped her by asking her to trim his hair. She recounts how shocked she was and in great pain. When her mother questions Pa about finding his hair in the girl's room where nobody but she went, he says that the hair is from one of Celie's boyfriend's head. She begins to cry while narrating all this to Shug and Shug hugs her and says "don't cry, Celie . . . don't cry. She start kissing the water as it come down side my face" (p.117). Shug also says that "I thought it was only white-folks do freakish things like that [referring to the rape]" (p.117). Here Walker is making a comment about how Blacks too have their own notions of Whites. Celie goes on to say that her mama died, Nettie ran away and Mr.—forced and love to her even when her head was bandaged. "Nobody ever love me" she says. It is at this point that Shug says that she loves her and begins

to kiss her. Celie reciprocates and she writes "then us touch each other" (p.119). In the following letter Celie tells us that lying with Shug is like being with her mother or with Nettie but it feels better. Clearly a Womanist text is emerging here. Celie says that she has still not developed a liking for Grady. She also informs us that Shug likes Squeak and trains her to sing. "They sit in Odessa's front room with all the children crowded round them singing and singing. Sometime Swain come with his box, Harpo cook dinner, and me and Mr.—and the prize fighter bring out preshation" (p.120). Shug encourages Squeak to sing and tells her that men would like to hear her. She also tells her that music, dance and sex all go together "that's the reason they call what us sing the devil's music" (p.120). In the 49th letter, Celie discloses the contents of the letter from Nettie that she has in her hand. In it Nettie writes that Mr.—had told her that she would never hear from Celie and the silence from Celie's side has confirmed her fear. Nettie says that she had been writing regularly to Celie but now she writes only on Easter and Christmas hoping that her letter would get to Celie through with other greeting cards. She is not even sure whether this letter will get through but she tells Celie that she is fine and loves her dearly and that Celie's children are also fine. In Celie's letter which follows the disclosure of Nettie's letter, she says that Shug tells her that she has seen Mr.— removing mail from the mailbox, letters with stamps on them. She also asks Celie all about Nettie because, as she says, Nettie is the only other woman whom Celie loves.

In letter 50 Celie comes to know through Shug that Mr.— has been hiding the letters from her. She gives Celie one of Nettie's letters which has a stamp that says Africa. But the stamp has "little fat queen of England" on it. Celie says that since she does not know where England and Africa are she still does not know where Nettie is. However, she is murderous with anger against Mr.—for hiding the letters and almost develops a fever. Shug whose real name is Lillie as we are informed in this letter sleeps with Celie and tells us about her three children through Albert. Shug also tells us that after her third child she was thrown out and went to stay with her mother's wild sister in Memphis. She tells us how she was very hurt when Albert married Annie Julia who was in school with her. She describes her as "she was pretty, man. Black as anything, and skin ust as smooth. Big black eyes look like moons" (p.127). But that was because his people objected to her. In any case, Shug says that she continued to sleep with Albert even after his marriage in a very blatant way. She would keep him away from Annie Julia for weeks and she would come and beg Albert for grocery money to buy food for the children. Annie Julia also neglected by her husband started to have an affair with the man who finally shot her. Shug sheds a few tears and then tells Celie that she feels bad about the way she treated her too when she moved in with Albert treating her like a servant. She tells us that she does not want Albert for a husband anymore because he beats Celie and hid her sister's letters from her. The 51st letter addressed to God Celie tells us that she has discovered Nettie's letters which are hidden by Mr.— in a trunk. She says " bunches and bunches of them. Some fat, some thin. Some open, some not" (p.129). Shug advises her to steam open the letters and leave the envelopes in the trunk. Shug then puts the letters in order using the postmark as an indication. And Celie begins to read these letters. Appropriately the next lot of letters are from Nettie.

4.2 CRITICAL ISSUES EMERGING FROM CELIE'S LETTERS 26-51

In these letters we see the following issues emerging:

1. Celie as a nurturer
2. The notion of Black is beautiful
3. The quilt metaphor
4. Reversal of roles between male and female which demonstrates *The Color Purple* as Womanist text

5. The slogan, "Sisterhood is Powerful" is further developed particularly through Sofia's sisters.
6. Celie's sexual awakening
7. Racism. Anger building up in the Blacks against the Whites
8. Black community life emerging which is necessary for the growth of the characters
9. The notion of God as White perceived by Celie
10. Nettie's letters important in widening the scope of the novel.

1. *Celie as Nurturer*

There are at least three specific examples we have of Celie as nurturer. One is the way in which she looks after Shug Avery when she is very sick. She nurses her back to health. The second is the episode in the jail when Mr.—and Celie go to visit Sofia. Celie cleans Sofia's wounds and bonds with her and the third is when she counsels Harpo about his marriage—which he feels is not working out—and she tells him about how much Sofia loves him. In this episode, Celie analyses her own situation of a loveless marriage with Mr.— and explains to Harpo the strengths in his marriage as compared to hers. We can see from these scenes that Celie has grown from being a helpless victim—who is unable to understand her situation—to a person who understands life and feels holistic enough to nurture people.

2. *Black is Beautiful*

The notion, Black is Beautiful, is repeatedly emphasized in the novel. Walker, emerging from the influences of the countercultural revolutions of the sixties in America, is drawn to Black Pride. (see Harlem Renaissance in Unit 1 section on History of Black Fiction). The White bourgeois notion of beauty is shunned in the novel and what is instead foregrounded is that Black is very beautiful. The description of Shug—the glamorous singer, and, who is pivotal in the novel—in particular, is an example in point. Celie tells us about Shug whom she finds the "most beautiful woman." She says: "First time I got the full sight of Shug Avery long black body with it black plum nipples, look like her mouth, I thought I had turned into a man" (p. 51). Yet another example, is when Shug describes Annie Julia to Celie and says, "She was pretty, man. Black as anything" (p. 127). There are several such instances where black is described in relation to beauty. This is done deliberately as a backlash against White racist culture which excluded Blacks from their definition of beauty.

3. *The Quilt Metaphor*

This will be discussed in detail in Unit 6.4.

4. *Role Reversals and the Womanist Text*

In Celie's letters we are told that Harpo loves to do "womanly" things like cooking, housekeeping etc. and that his wife Sofia loves to do "manly" things like fixing up the roof and other such jobs. We are also told that Harpo looks like a woman sometimes. At Harpo's Jukejoint Celie says that when Shug talks to Sofia she sounds like a man giving her compliments. About her own self too, Celie says that when she saw Shug naked for the first time "she had turned into a man." Walker, through such examples, is telling us the need for both men and women to move out of fixed spheres of work that patriarchy has determined for men and women. Her Womanism is different from feminism in that she believes that ultimately man, woman and nature are all one and should live in harmony. (For Walker's Womanism see Unit 5.7).

5. The Slogan Sisterhood is Powerful

This slogan of the Radical Feminists is further elaborated in Celie's letters 26-51. We see a bonding between the women characters. Celie, Nettie, Shug, Squeak, Sofia and her sisters all form a nice group who nurture each other. When Sofia is in prison, for example, Sofia's sisters and Squeak look after her children. Celie, visits Sofia and is supportive of her. These female networks are important in building up confidence in the women leading to a self awareness. For example, Celie tells Squeak that she should ask Harpo to call her by her name Mary Agnes. Later, we see Squeak telling Harpo to call her by that name. In the episode following Squeak's visit to the jail, when Harpo tries to tell the family about what happened to Squeak in the jail, she tells him to "shut up" adding that she would like to tell her own story. Walker makes Sofia's sisters "all big strong healthy girls, [and who] look like amazons"(p.71). She does this to make us realize that physical strength is also important in women contrary to stereotypes floated by patriarchy that states that women should be delicate.

6. Celie's Sexual Awakening

Although Celie's Sexual Awakening had begun towards the end of letters 1-25, we see it in a more developed form here, that is, in letters 26-51. At Harpo's Jukejoint she is very puzzled by the fact that her heart pains when she sees Albert and Shug kissing each other. At this stage she is still grappling with her sexual feelings for Shug. By letter 35 Shug has asked her to explore her own body and Celie does so under Shug's guidance. Soon they make love to each other. The theme of lesbianism is important in the novel because it feeds into Walker's Womanism. She believes that women should bond with each other and love each other even sexually if they feel like it. This is also an offshoot of Radical feminism which advocated lesbianism as a way out of oppressive, heterosexual, patriarchal relationships.

7. Racism

In the letters we are told about racism about how the Whites treat the Blacks. This is seen in letter 38 when Harpo tells Sofia that maybe she will be sent out of prison soon for good behaviour. Sofia replies, " Good behavior ain't good enough for them say Sofia. Nothing less than sliding on your belly with your tongue on they boots can even git they attention. I dream of murder" (p. 94). The song that Squeak (Mary Agnes) sings at Harpo's jukejoint is another example of racist attitudes to the Blacks by the Whites. She sings " But if yellow is a name/ Why ain't black the same." (p. 104). Walker develops the theme of racism particularly through the White Mayor's family. It is because Sofia refused to work for the Mayor's family that she is put behind the bars. The Mayor's son also shows racist attitudes in his treatment of Sofia. The Mayor's wife best articulates the racist attitudes of the South when she tells Odessa (Sofia's sister) and Jack who have been kind enough to drop her home after her car has broken down " Oh, she say, I couldn't ride in a pick-up with a strange colored man" (p. 110). There are numerous such examples to show the kind of segregated society that the Blacks lived in the South in the thirties when the novel is set.

8. Development of the Black Community

There are some very beautiful vignettes that we get of the Blacks enjoying family and community life despite all odds. One is when Sofia goes to visit her children from the Mayor's place: "us pull into the yard and all the children come crowding round the car. . . They fall on me, and hug me. And then all the little ones start to hug me too" (p.109). The other episode is when Shug teaches Squeak to sing and Celie writes, "They sit in Odessa's front room with all the children crowded round them singing and singing. Sometimes Swain come with his box, Harpo cook dinner and me

and Mr.—and the prizefighter bring our preshation” (p. 120). Try and find other such passages from the text that shows the Black community in an empowering way.

9. Notion of White God

Celie sees God as White. This is seen in the way she describes Sofia who is near to death in the prison in letter 39. “I think bout angels, God coming down by chariot, swinging down real low and carrying ole Sofia home. I see ‘em all as clear as day. Angels all in white, white hair and white eyes, look like albinos. God is all white too, looking like some stout white man work at the bank” (p. 96). It is this image of the White God that Celie abandons later on in the novel which shows her moving away from internalized White values to a Black identity that she can relate to. Her mistreatment by men is what destroys Celie and it is these experiences which make her reject a God defined in male terms and worse still as a White man. Celie is unable to change because she has placed herself in a subservient position. After she displaces her fear of men with anger, she begins to redefine God. God is in everything as Shug tells Celie. He is not a static being but is related to creativity and self-definition. Just as Celie realizes that God is not there for her when she hears about her parent’s history and the fact that Mr.—has kept Nettie’s letters away from her, Nettie too realizes that the African people are not there for her. She tells us that the relationships that she has formed there are not enduring because the Africans don’t see her and Samuel and the children as part of them. If Celie realises that God is in loving and appreciating the stars and feeling connected with the environemnt, Nettie too realizes that love is what will connect people to each other across the world. God is within people and not some indifferent being. In *The Color Purple* traditional notions of divinity are discarded.

10. Discovery of Nettie’s Letters

Discovering Nettie’s letters are important because they widen the scope of the novel. This will be discussed in the next section of this Unit (4.3).

4.3 THE CONTEXT OF NETTIE’S LETTERS

Letters 52-58 in the novel are letters from Nettie (who is working as a missionary in Africa) to Celie. In contrast to the rural, Black dialect of Celie’s letters, Nettie’s letters are written in standard English. Although these, like Celie’s letters, though undated are signed by her. Celie’s letters to God are disrupted by the discovery of Nettie’s letters to her which have been hidden away by Albert as an act of vengeance against Nettie, for not responding to his sexual advances to her. Many critics find this a flaw in the novel. But a careful examination of these letters reveal that these “letters are an embedded discourse within *The Color Purple*.” Celie incorporates the letters into her narrative but she does not edit or revise them. In this sense, Nettie becomes the other narrator in the novel. Significance of the letters:

- God is deliberately replaced by Nettie (after reading these letters) to show the strength of female bonding and understanding in developing an empowering sense of self.
- The two women—Celie and Nettie—create two different communities of womanhood. Celie does so in the American South and Nettie in Africa.
- Walker deliberately presents Nettie’s letters structurally separate from Celie’s to widen the scope of the novel. These letters are not filtered through Celie’s consciousness. They are presented separately the way they way written by Nettie. Reading of these letters is what impacts on the consciousness of Celie and makes her aware of a world outside of the American South. The racist and

patriarchal oppression that Celie experiences in the South—seen in her relations and interactions with people—she realizes, after reading Nettie's letters, is part of a greater international network and has a longer history. Christianity's evangelizing mission precedes the onslaught of Western Imperialism in the African continent. In this sense, Nettie's letters widens the ideological and geopolitical scope of the novel.

- Nettie's letters also document European imperialism as it uproots the lives and culture of the Olinka people in Africa.
- The conflation of Celie and Nettie's letters show the links between oppressed people. Celie's personal tragedy parallels the tragedy of the Olinka people who have also, like her, faced patriarchal, racist, imperialist oppression.
- Most importantly, Nettie's group of African-American missionaries are knowledgeable about their ancestral link to Africa. This undermines the American myth that the Black Power Movement was an off shoot of the American sixties.

4.4 A DETAILED COMMENTARY OF LETTERS 52-58 (NETTIE'S LETTERS 1-7)

Nettie's first letter is told to us by Celie with the comment "*the first letter say*." This is significant, in that, it is Celie who is choosing to show us these letters. It is her voice that we hear in this comment. Earlier, when the novel started, we had heard the voice of Celie's stepfather—whom she imagines to be her biological father—who after raping her had told her not to tell about it to anyone but God. This shift in voice which prefaces Nettie's letters clearly indicate a growth in Celie. Nettie's first letter says that after leaving Celie, Mr.—followed her and tried to rape her. She tells Celie to leave Mr.—because he is a nasty man and that he had told her that she would "never hear from [Celie] again" (p. 131). She also informs Celie that she was able to manage to get to the Reverend's place and that the girl who opened the door for her looked like Celie's child. Nettie's next letter tells us that she misses Celie and has not heard from her. She also tells us that the address of the people she is staying with (that is, the name of the woman that Celie had met when she was waiting in the wagon for Mr.—to finish with his shopping) are very nice to her. The woman's name is Corrine. Her husband's Samuel, who is a preacher. The names of the two adopted children are Olivia and Adam. In Nettie's third letter she is desperate because she has not heard from Celie at all and is convinced now that Mr.—meant business when he told her that the sisters would not hear from each other. She even mails her some stamps so that she can write to her. Nettie tells us Samuel and Corrine and the "children are part of a group of people called Missionaries, of the American and African Missionary Society. They have ministered to the Indians out west and are ministering to the poor of this town" (p. 134).

The 4th letter, Celie tells us is "fat, dated two months later." In this letter, Nettie writes that she wrote to Celie almost everyday on the ship to Africa but tore it into bits and threw them into the water because she knew that Albert would not give Celie the letters. But, she says, that she feels differently now. She remembers what Celie told her about writing to God to express herself when she felt ashamed. Nettie says that whether god read the letters or not Celie had continued to write to him. Similarly, Nettie wants to continue to write to Celie whether she gets the letters or not. She tells us how she got to Africa because one of the missionaries, who was supposed to go, dropped out at the last minute and Nettie was sent instead. In this letter she tells us that prior to her departure to Africa she accidentally met the Mayor's wife and her maid (Sofia) shopping. She also adds that she is reading a lot

about Africa and tells Celie “Didi you know there were great cities in Africa, greater than Milledgeville or even Atlanta, thousands of years ago? That the Egyptians who built the pyramids and enslaved the Israelites were colored? That Egypt is Africa? That the Ethiopia we read about in the Bible meant all of Africa?” (p. 138). She also tells Celie that she did not know how “ignorant” she was and that her real education has only just begun. Nettie, also realizes that there are coloured people who want other coloured people to know unlike Albert, Alfonso and others back home. She tells us that Samuel and Corrine have good marital relationship, very different from that of Pa. and mother. What Nettie is saying is that with education and awareness, even the Blacks can live fully. It is in this letter that she informs Celie that she is indeed looking after Celie’s children who are being raised in a very nurturing way by Corrine, Samuel and Nettie herself.

In the 5th letter, Nettie talks about their parting from the shores of America to Africa. She says that she has slowly begun to realize the Ethiopians in the Bible were all “colored people” but it is the pictures in the Bible that fool people into believing that they were all Whites. She goes on “That’s why the bible says that Jesus Christ had hair like lamb’s wool. Lamb’s wool is not straight, Celie” (p. 141). In this letter she informs us about her trip through New York to Africa. She mentions Harlem and how well the “colored” people live there better than the White man. She tells us that “they love Africa.” Nettie gives another crucial detail in this letter viz. that the White people—particularly men—are given visibility where missionary work is concerned. She says, “My spirits sort of drooped after being at the [missionary] Society. On every wall there was a picture of a white man... I looked for a picture of the white woman but didn’t see one” (p. 143). She concludes the letter with the following lines about what Samuel said “We are not Europeans. We are black like the Africans themselves. And that we and the Africans will be working for a common goal: the uplift of black people everywhere” (p. 143). In the 6th letter Nettie gives us details about the ship in which she sailed to Africa. En route they stopped in England. Nettie describes English custom and culture to us. She also tells us about their long history of working as missionaries in Africa, China and India. She also realizes the imperial / racist tendencies of the English people. She comes to know that the Blacks were captured and sold into slavery by “slave catching wars” which involved Whites. The first stop in Africa is Monrovia. She describes it as “an African country ‘founded’ by ex-slaves from America who came back to Africa to live” (p. 146).

In the 7th letter Nettie says that the first glimpse that she had of Africa was Senegal. She adds that she was struck by how black the people were there “blueblack people wearing brilliant blue robes with designs like fancy quilt patterns” (p. 147). She also sees the links between the African people and African-American people in the American South. The workers, she says, sing while returning from the fields “just like we do at home.” She also tells us that she had not expected to see White people in Africa “but they are here in droves. And not all are missionaries” (p. 148). She soon realises that even the president of Monrovia Tubman does not “own own the cocoa fields” and that the Dutch do. Here we get an insight into Walker’s subtle ways of expanding the scope of the novel by talking about imperialism at an international level. This scope is also widened through Nettie explaining to Celie the details of each state or country that they pass through on their way to serve the Olinka people in Africa.

4.5 CRITICAL ISSUES EMERGING FROM NETTIE’S LETTERS 1-7

- The Blacks have a history
- There are common links between the Blacks in Africa and in America

- Patriarchy cuts across cultures
- Imperialism and its outreach
- Cultural / National details through the countries that Nettie passes through en route to Africa. This expands the scope of the novel

4.6 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit we discussed the following main points:

- We see the notion of Black is beautiful emerge
- Black American culture has deep roots in Africa
- The building up of a Black community is important for the growth of Black people
- Alice Walker's womanism includes men and women by blurring the boundaries between the separate spheres
- Blacks have a history
- The outreach of Imperialism is wide

4.7 QUESTIONS

1. What are the episodes in letters 26-51 that make you feel Celie is a nurturer?
2. How do Nettie's letters widen the scope of the Novel?
3. Comment on the significance of Celie's sexual awakening

UNIT 5 ANALYSIS OF CELIE'S LETTERS-II

Structure

- 5.0 Objectives
- 5.1 Letters 59-61 (Celie's letters 52-54 to God after she reads Nettie's letters)
- 5.2 Critical issues arising from the above letters
- 5.3 Letters 62-73 (Nettie's letters 8-14 to Celie; Celie's letter 55th letter to God (the 69th letter in the novel) and Celie's 1st letter to Nettie (letter 70 in the novel); Nettie's letters 15-17 to Celie (letters 71-73 in the novel)
- 5.4 Critical issues that emerge from these letters
- 5.5 Letters 74-80 (Celie's letters 2-8 to Nettie)
- 5.6 Critical issues arising from letters 74-80
- 5.7 Black Womanist Fiction
- 5.8 *The Color Purple* as a Womanist Text
- 5.9 Let Us Sum Up
- 5.10 Questions

5.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we will continue with the analysis of Celie's letters. Also, we will discuss Black Womanist Fiction.

5.1 LETTERS 59-61

These three letters are written by Celie to God after she reads Nettie's letters. In the 59th letter Celie is very shocked and upset with Mr.—for having hid the letters from her. She writes that both she and Shug found it difficult to “puzzle out words us don't know” (p. 150). Walker here is showing us Celie's education. Nettie, through her letters is teaching Celie about new words, ideas and different cultures. Celie wants to kill Mr.— but Shug tells her that if she tries to do so she will probably meet the same fate and will be in the condition Sofia was in at the jail. Shug tells her that even Christ found it hard to deal with the people around him. To this Celie states that she is no Christ. When she continues thinking about taking vengeance on Mr.— for hiding Nettie's letters from her Shug tells her she should think of Nettie and also of her, Shug. Shug says, “Me, Celie, think about me a little bit. Miss Celie, if you kill Albert, Grady be all I got left. I can't even stand the thought of that” (p.151). Here we see Shug declaring her feelings for Celie. In the following letter Celie says that she feels no sexual excitement sleeping with Shug because she is so upset by Mr.— hiding the letters. Shug tells her that in times like this “us ought to do something different” (p. 152). She tells Celie that they should make pants for Celie. Celie protests saying Mr.— would not like it. To which Shug replies Celie is the one working in the fields doing all the ‘manly’ jobs Mr.— has no right to prevent her from wearing pants. Shug finally convinces Celie that they should make pants together and Celie agrees to it saying “everyday we going to read Nettie's letters and sew. A needle and not a razor in my hand” (p.153). The shift from a razor to a needle indicates the growth in Celie and Shug is instrumental in it. In her 61st letter, Celie says that she has started feeling a little bolder now because she knows Nettie is alive and that one day the two of them along with Celie's two children will get away and live happily somewhere else. Celie also tells us that she feels ashamed when she thinks of the two children. Shame rather than love because Shug has told her that children born from incest belong to the devil.

5.2 CRITICAL ISSUES ARISING FROM CELIE'S LETTERS 59-61

- In these letters we see Celie in a mood for revenge. She is angry with Mr.— for hiding the letters from her. She tells Shug that she is no Christ.
- Through Nettie's letters we see Celie learns about new things. These letters further educate Celie about the world.
- We see Shug and Celie getting closer to each other. Shug openly tells Celie that she needs her.
- The effect of the Bible on the characters is seen when Shug tells Celie about the devil and children born from incest. Celie feels ashamed
- Shug is important in making Celie leave angry emotions against Mr.—behind and move on to more positive things like sewing. In short, the razor is replaced by a needle.
- Celie has hope that one day Nettie and her along with her two children will go somewhere and live happily.

5.3 LETTERS 62-73 : NETTIE'S LETTERS TO CELIE

In the 62nd letter (which is Nettie's 8th letter) she tells us that Samuel and the rest of the family including her were met by an African, Joseph when they reached the port close to the African village of Olinka. He spoke "pidgin English" which is different from the English they were used to in the American South. She states that unlike the Seneghalese who were very black, Joseph and the others were a "chocolate brown." She refers to the strong, white teeth of the Africans and compares it to the bad teeth of the English "so crooked, usually, and blackish with decay" (p. 155). Walker is showing us how Nettie is slowly becoming aware of beauty in Black people. Nettie tells us further that most of the place is run by a white man "but some of the stalls that sell produce are rented out to Africans" (p.156). In order to reach the Olinka village they had to walk through the jungle for four days. She adds that the village people love meat and that they remind her of "folks at home" (p. 156). All the huts have rootleaf as the roof. She says that it is part of the woman's job to pick these leaves and dry them. "Menfolks drive the stakes for the hut and sometimes help build the walls with mud and rock from the streams" (p.157). When they reached the Olinka village, Nettie says that everybody crowded around them. One of the villager asked Samuel if the children belonged to her [Nettie] or Corrine. Another woman asked Samuel if she was his wife. When he responded by saying that she was a missionary, he remarked that he never knew that missionaries could be Black. In this letter we are also told about the history and significance of the rootleaf by one of the villagers. His story is interpreted by Joseph to Samuel and the rest of the family members (pp.158-159). Rootleaf is like God to them. Here we see Walker re-defining God to us which is a theme picked up later on in the novel by Shug.

In Nettie's 9th letter, she gives us some details about her routine in the village and the kind of work that she does in the school. She also tells us about the sexist approach that the Olinka people have. The Olinka "do not believe girls should be educated" p. 61). When Nettie questioned a mother who said this, she replied, "A girl is nothing to herself; only to her husband can she become something" (p.162). When questioned further by Nettie, the mother stated the "something" referred to being the

mother of his children. To this Nettie replied that she was not the mother of children and yet she was something. Nettie was alarmed by what she said, "you are not much, the missionary's drudge" (p. 162). Tashi, an important character in the novel, is the daughter of this lady with whom Nettie has a conversation. Nettie tells Celie, that Tashi is the friend of Olivia and that in school only Adam ever speaks to Olivia. Usually the boys and the girls do their own things. Nettie then says something very important. She writes, "But never fear, Celie, Olivia has your stubbornness and clear-sightedness, and she is smarter than all of them, including Adam, put together" (p. 162). It is in this same letter that Corrine tells Nettie that they should refer to each other as brother and sister because the villagers are getting a wrong idea about them. Nettie says that since Corrine has come to Africa she seems changed as if her "spirit is being tested and that something in her is not at rest" (p. 164). She also tells Nettie to tell the children not to call her [Nettie] mama. This disturbs Nettie because she does treat them like her children without taking Corrine's place. The notion of motherhood is brought out here again. The rest of the letter describes Nettie's hut and its structure.

In the 10th letter, Tashi's parents come to complain about Tashi's changed ways after hanging around with Olivia in Nettie's hut. Tashi's father tells Nettie that the Olinka women are well looked after—unlike the American women—by their father, brother and husband. When Nettie tells them that the world is changing and that Tashi is a bright girl who can study and become a teacher or a nurse, the father replies that in the Olinka community "there is no place for women to do those things" (p. 168). Nettie ends her letter by saying that the way Olinka men speak to their women reminds her of Pa. (p. 168). In the 11th letter, Nettie tells us some important things: 1) that a road is being built in the village and the workers are from the north of Africa. The Olinkas feed them and look after these road builders very well. 2) Nettie and the rest have been living in Africa for five years now. 3) Corrine and she are not very close now. In fact, Corrine has asked her not to let Samuel visit her hut when Corrine is not around. 3) Tashi comes over and tells Olivia and her stories "popular among the Olinka children." The stories that Olivia know, Tashi has the original version of it. 4) Tashi's father has died of malaria and Tashi's mother, whose name is Catherine, has decided not to marry again because she has become an "honorary man" by virtue of the fact that she has had five sons. 5) Olinka women often share a bonding having married the same man. There is a community that they build up looking after each other's children and feeding them etc. But if one of the wife's fall sick then the bonding snaps because sorcery and witchcraft by the other women is suspected. In fact the Olinka man has "life and death power over his wife" (p. 175). Samuel finds it difficult to teach the Olinkas about the Biblical notion of one man one wife.

In the 12th letter, Nettie tells us that the road that was being built in the village of Olinka was not for them and that now the road was being extended cutting through the Olinka fields—including Catherine's yam fields. Apparently, when the Olinka chief went to find out from the coast what was going on, he returned with more disturbing news that the English owned the place and that they were planting rubber trees there. Nettie further states that the Chief tells them that since the Olinka people no longer owned the land or the water in the village, they had to pay a house tax and a water tax. Fighting the White man was of no use because they had guns and a trained army. Nettie ends her letter by saying that Corrine is very sick and that the women in the village are slowly educating their daughters. In the next letter, Nettie says that Corrine questioned her very closely about Olivia and Adam and if she knew Samuel earlier on. Nettie says that she has become suspicious unnecessarily and this is reflecting on her treatment of the children. She also states because of the new road coming up the women have to go further and further away to work. The 14th letter is very important because it tells us that Samuel himself thought that the children were Nettie's which is why he made her come to Africa to look after the children. When Nettie asked Samuel how he got the children he told her a story that was very unsettling (pp. 181-182). Embedded in this story is the information about Celie and

Nettie's biological father's background and the most important news that Pa. is not their father, only their stepfather.

Analysis of Celie's Letters-II

Letter 69-70: Celie's letters

Letter 69 which is Celie's 55th letter to God is a short but a very crucial letter. In this letter we are informed that Shug has asked Celie to go with her to Tennessee. But Celie states that she is still in a daze after hearing about the violent history about her biological family. She now knows that her father was lynched by the Whites for being a successful businessman. She also knows that Pa. is not her biological father. She is shaken up by all these facts and makes the most important statement directly to god saying "you must be sleep" (p. 183). Letter 70 is the first letter that Celie writes to Nettie. In this letter she tells us that she feels a desire to meet Pa. So she and Shug head towards her childhood home. While they are driving, Celie tells us that after she left home she visited Pa. once. At that time he was still with May Ellen (his second wife) and she recalls a little scene of May trying to bend down and fix her stocking and Pa. "was standing over her tap-tap-tapping on the gravel with his cane. Look like he was thinking bout hitting her with it" (p. 184). Walker, through such scenes shows us the misogyny in the men. An important difference that we see in Celie as she drives down with Shug to visit Pa. the second time is the way she observes the beauty in nature. She says that the first thing the two (Shug and she) notice is "how green everything is" (p. 184). In this letter we also come to know that Pa. is now living in a big house which has a domestic named Hetty. He has re-married for the third time to a girl not more than 15 years of age by the name of Daisy. She is the daughter of one of his workers. We learn that May Ellen went away with the children because as Pa. says "Got too old for me" (p. 187). Celie tells him that she got a letter from Nettie in Africa stating that Pa. is not their biological father. He knows that Shug is aware of what he has done to Celie but he does not care. Daisy is impressed by the fact that Pa. never really told Celie and Nettie about their biological father being lynched. She believes the story that Pa. has told her regarding how selfless he was etc in raising the children. In this letter, Pa. also tells Shug and Celie how to be a successful businessman. He says that Blacks don't know how to run businesses and he give us his theory of including the Whites by giving them part of the profits in any business for it to be successful (p. 188). When Shug and Celie leave searching for Celie's parents graves, once again the beautiful landscape is described with birds in the air etc. Walker is showing us how the ugly childhood episodes are now being replaced by more positive aspects of life.

Letters 71-73: Nettie's Letters to Celie (15-17)

Letter 71 in the novel is Nettie's 15th letter to Celie. In this letter, Nettie says that she went to Corrine to tell her the truth about Olivia and Adam but that she is too sick and does not believe her or Samuel. The notion of motherhood is picked up again here by Walker when Nettie tells Corrine that she had shown evidence to her by showing her her stomach which did not have any stretch marks from pregnancy. To this Corrine says, "What do I know about pregnancy, I never experienced it myself" (p. 190). Nettie then tells Corrine about the time when Celie met her shopping. But Corrine, she says, cannot recall the incident. Letter 16 from Nettie to Celie states that Nettie in an attempt to make Corrine recall the episode of Celie meeting her in town shopping for cloth, she pulled out the quilts which Corrine made with the cloth from the clothes that the children had outgrown. Nettie also tells us that Olinka men make beautiful quilts. Finally, Corrine remembers when Nettie points out a piece from the dress material that Olivia wore in her early years. Corrine admits that Celie looked a lot like Olivia and she was worried if Celie would take the child away. She also remembers the humiliation that she faced in the store by the clerk there who treated her like any "nigger" (p. 193). Corrine dies after remembering the event and realizing that the children were not Nettie and Samuel's as she had suspected. Nettie's 17th letter reports about the funeral that they had for Corrine which was conducted the Olinka way. She also tells us about the taboo surrounding menstruation in the

village. Menstruating women should not be seen around. She also tells us of the friendship between Olivia and Tashi and the family that she has in Samuel, Catherine and the children. Nettie redefines family and community here (p.196).

5.4 CRITICAL ISSUES ARISING FROM LETTERS 62-73

- Through the above letters we learn more about Africa and African culture particularly of the Olinka people
- The theme of imperialism is developed further expanding the scope of the novel
- Patriarchal rituals and customs of the Olinka people are shown to demonstrate that patriarchy cuts across class and culture.
- God is replaced by Nettie in Celie's letters
- We get through flashbacks, details about Celie's parents and her visit to Pa.
- Nettie, like Celie, is building up her own community in Africa.
- The tension between Corrine and Nettie is important in the novel. It tests the slogan "Sisterhood is Powerful."

5.5 LETTERS 74-80 (CELIE'S LETTERS 2-8 TO NETTIE)

Celie's 2nd letter to Nettie tells her how she has now moved away from the White, patriarchal notion of God. She narrates to us how this change happened in her. She states how after hearing the story of her biological parents, she realized that there was no God. She told Shug, "the God I been praying and writing to is a man. And acts like all the other mens I know. Trifling, forgetful and lowdown" (p.199). Sh then goes on to say that Shug told her to break out of the male, White notion of God and instead think of God as neither "he" nor "she" but "it." Shug explained to her that God is everywhere and present most in the things we enjoy. "God is everything. Everything that is or ever was or ever will be. And when you can feel that, and be happy to feel that, you've found it" (p.203). Shug further tells her that the trees, environment everything is part of God and enjoying it and feeling connected with the cosmos is the best way you can pray to God. Celie admits to Shug that "this hard work, let me tell you. He been there so long, he don't want to budge. He threaten lightning, floods and earthquakes. Us fight. I hardly pray at all" (p.204). In the next letter, Celie says that Shug is amused by the fact that God has been replaced by Nettie in Celie's letters. In this letter, Celie explains to Nettie that the woman that she saw with the Mayor's wife was Sofia and how she was in jail for three years and was later placed as a maid in the Mayor's house. There she worked for eleven and a half years and was sent six months early for good behaviour. When Sofia returns home her older children are married and gone and the younger ones do not recognise her and are puzzled by her affection for the little White girl, Eleanor Jane (the daughter of the Mayor). When Sofia sits for dinner the children act as if she is not there. "Children call Odessa mama. Call Squeak little mama. Call Sofia 'miss'" (p. 206). Notion of motherhood is played upon again over here. Later on we are told that Sofia is willing to look after Suzie Q (Jolentha, the child of Squeak and Harpo). It is in this letter that Celie confronts Mr.—about the way he has treated her. She is ready to leave with Shug for Memphis when Shug makes the offer to her. Squeak on her own says that she wants to go north. She says, that since Suzie Q was born she has not been able to sing which is what she wants to do. Harpo is surprised to hear this

because he felt that he had provided for her. All that Mr.— is worried about is what will people say. Both him and Harpo begin to stammer and stutter. They are slowly being silenced by the women. When Grady tries to tell Celie that no man will consider a woman if people talk negatively about her for leaving house and family, Celie, and Shug giggle and the other women join in as well. “Shug look at me and us giggle. Then us laugh sure nuff. Then Squeak start to laugh. Then Sofia. All us laugh and laugh” (p.208). Sofia also implies to Harpo that he is not the father of her sixth child. The letter ends with Celie telling Nettie that Eleanor Jane came to talk to Sofia because their family was having a hard time “A lot of drinking in that family, say Jack. Plus, they can’t keep that boy of theirs in college. He got drunk, aggravate his sister, chase women, hunt niggers, and that ain’t all”(p.211). Walker is deliberately using Black stereotypes to describe a White family. In the 4th letter to Nettie, Celie describes her parting with Mr.— she says that he acted as if she was not there. He also told her “You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. Goddam, he say, you nothing at all” (p.213). Celie, however, also tells him what she feels about him. She curses him and leaves.

In Celie’s 5th letter to Nettie she describes to her Shug’s big house in which she is living. Celie informs us that Shug is working very hard on a road show and is not looking after herself properly. When Celie offers to travel with her in order to take care of her she says “You not my maid. I didn’t bring you to Memphis to be that. I brought you here to love you and help you get on your feet” (p.218). Celie tells in this letter that she has started making pants for a living. Shug has helped her with the money for the material and also the orders from her band and later she is swamped with orders from everywhere. Shug gives her dining room as a factory space for Celie and tells her “You making your living, Celie” (p.221). Celie signs her letter as Celie, Folkspants Unlimited/Sugar Avery Drive/Memphis, Tennessee. In the next letter Celie tells Nettie “I am so happy. I got love, I got work, I got money, friends and time” (p.222). She also tells us that Jerene and Dalene who are twins come and help her with her business. They are unmarried. Darlene tries to teach Celie how to talk correctly. In the 7th letter, Celie goes to visit Harpo and Sofia because Sofia has lost her mother. She tells us that Harpo has built a big house just below the juke-joint. When she goes to Harpo’s place she passes Mr.— who does not recognise Celie with her different look. Celie tells us “Got on some dark blue pants and a white silk shire that look righteous. Little red flat-heel slippers, and a flower in my hair” (p.224). Before she reaches Harpo’s house she hears an argument between Harpo and Sofia. Harpo objects to Sofia saying that she wants to be a pallbearer for her mother’s funeral. Harpo tells her that men do such jobs but Sofia says that she and her sister will be the pallbearers. (p.225). Here again we see role reversal which is crucial to the Womanist text. In this letter we are also told that Squeak is now doing well in Memphis, she and Grady are a twosome (a sexual relationship is implied) and they all smoke Reefers. In the 8th letter, Celie tells us that when she met Mr.— at Sofia’s mother’s funeral he looked clean and good. But he seemed somehow scared of her. Celie says “Well good, I think, Let his feel what I felt” (p.230). Sofia tells Celie that the man has changed over a new leaf and now talks of religion, does house work like cooking and cleaning. When Celie asks her what made his change like this. She says that he went through a very bad phase and started living badly, neglecting his house and himself. He was scared of everything finally when things got bad Harpo started nursing his back to health. But what made him really pull through was the fact that Harpo made him send Celie” the rest of [Nettie’s] letters. Right after that he start to improve” (p.231). Sofia then adds “You know meanness kill” (p.231). It is in this letter that we are also told that Sofia is still looking after Eleanor Jane (the Mayor’s daughter) whose mother is no more and who is herself is not too well. Sofia’s daughter, Henrietta, we are told is also very sick with some blood disease. This reminds Celie of what Nettie had written to her about children in Africa dying of some blood disease. Walker is clearly making connections here between Africans and African-Americans, pointing to their common history.

5.6 CRITICAL ISSUES ARISING FROM LETTERS 74-80

Critical Issues arising from the above Letters

- Celie moves away from the notion of a White God. Shug is instrumental in this. (p.199). Shug teaches her about God in nature etc.(p.203).
- Celie confronts Mr. - about the way he has treated her and is ready to leave for Memphis with Shug.
- Squeak decides to go north so that she can start singing again. She tells Harpo that ever since Jolentha was born she has not been able to work.
- The men in the novel are slowly being silenced.
- Reversal and change in the men folk too can be noticed. (p.225).
- Celie starts her own business and is now economically independent.

5.7 BLACK WOMANIST FICTION

Black women in America are triply burdened. They suffer from racial, sexual and class prejudices and are forced to occupy a very marginal place in male dominated America. As a result, their humanity and the black female self are denied by white men. This made them feel insignificant, faceless, subservient and devoid of identity. The responsibility of giving them back their rejected humanity and their womanhood falls on the shoulders of black women writers. These writers can be labeled as black womanist writers. Alice Walker is one of those pioneers who believes in the black womanist tenets.

The term womanist has been described by Alice Walker in detail in *In Search of our Mother's Garden*. She writes that the word 'womanist' means (Walker 1938: xi-xii):

- i) From womanish (opposite of "girlish", i.e. frivolous, irresponsible, not serious). A black feminist or feminist of color.....
- ii) Also: A woman who loves other women sexually and /or non sexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture women's emotional flexibility ...and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or non-sexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female....
- iii) Loves music. Loves the moon. Loves the spirit, loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the folk. Loves herself. Regardless.
- iv) Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender.

It is obvious, from the passage quoted above, that black womanism celebrates blackness, black people, and presents a balanced picture of black womanhood. Chikonye Okonjo Ogunyemi (1985-64) thinks that the black womanist will recognize "along with her consciousness of sexual issues, she must incorporate racial, cultural, national, economic, and political considerations.....".

Sherley Anne Williams (1986:304) has also approved and accepted this term propounded by Alice Walker. Its premises and compulsions demand, of course, that black women must believe in the wholeness of community.

Black womanism does not believe dividing black society from within on sex lines, but stands for integration and has faith in the "wholeness" of black society. Black womanism also indicates a notion of sisterhood developed by Fran Sanders (1970-78).

I am not and never have been a sister to any man except my brother, Danny, and I feel that the whole thing is about to go too far. It seems positively incestuous. I mean, how does one make the transition from brother to lover if need be? Do I suddenly see this man who has previously been addressing me as sister as a potential lover? Not hardly? ... Better to see the woman as a woman and treat her accordingly while at the same time trying to upgrade the quality of the relationship.

Since times of slavery, black womanhood has been destroyed, distorted, dismantled and abused with racial, sexual and inhuman practices by blackmen and white men and also white women. In the process, they have lost their genuine "self" and have developed a triple consciousness – white, black, and female. They see themselves with the eyes of white men and women and black men. This has ultimately been responsible for the destruction of their self-confidence and the feeling of being human. They looked upon themselves as chattel. The task of the black womanist writers, therefore, is to give back to black women their own black woman self, their beauty, physical and sexual strength, motherhood, sisterhood, wifehood, etc. At the same time, they need to recover from psychological and mental traumas of inferiority. This is possible only if their wholeness and roundness as women are restored.

5.8 THE COLOR PURPLE AS A WOMANIST TEXT

At one level *The Color Purple* is a typically Radical American text because it speaks about female bonding and lesbian relationships. Yet Walker does not call herself a feminist but a womanist. Walker's womanism is her brand of feminism (for a brief history of Black Feminism see Unit 2.3). She started writing at a time when the feminist movement was at its height. But she rejects the term feminist for womanist. She defines "womanist" as a "feminist of color" and a woman who "loves other women sexually or nonsexually" but is committed to the "survival" and "wholeness" of people at large. In an interview she says "I am preoccupied with the spiritual survival, the survival *whole* of my people... but beyond that, I am committed to exploring the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties, and the triumphs of black women... For me, black women are the most fascinating creations in the world. Next to them, I place the old people-male and female-who persist in their beauty in spite of everything."

In her novel, *The Color Purple*, Walker through two women-Celie and Nettie—challenges several patriarchal notions about family, women's identity and role and community. Each women character in the novel occupies a conflictual space between demands of father and husband. All of them suffer some form of violence. Sofia survives mutilation, brute labour, unjust imprisonment due to racist attitudes. Squeak is raped by a White male. Celie is raped by a man she consider to be her father. But through all this degradation these women find a place for themselves in life. Walker makes her character achieve this through female bonding and nurturing. The womanist perspective is what bonds people in love and caring. The quilt metaphor (discussed in Unit 6.4) picks up Walker's womanism, in that, a quilt is associated with bits of pieces sewn together women too pull themselves out of their fragmented lives and piece their stories together and gain and identity and a self confidence

which is empowering. For example, Celie does not die in this world in order to be born blessed in the next. She is reborn in this world which enables her to enjoy life and life it to its full. Just as Celie tries to link herself with other women so does Alice Walker link herself with her literary maternal ancestors and her African-American roots. In fact, the very form of the novel is evolutionary and points to Walker's womanism. Letters and diary entries were the only forms traditionally available to women. Through letters, Walker shows us the growth of her characters. The very inception of the story line of the novel was inspired by a sisterly chat between Walker and her sister Ruth (for details see Unit 3.1)

The reversal of roles that we see in the novel where women dress like men (as in the case of Sofia), and where men cook and clean (as in the case of Harpo), and where women love women as men love women, sexually, is part of Walker's womanist agenda. She believes that womanism must include women as men. But women will be the centre in building up family and community. We see this in the novel through the impact that Shug has on Mr. --, Celie and the others: It is her love that brings about radical changes in the lives of the characters in the novel. It is interesting that even God is replaced in the novel by Walker's womanism to mean beauty in nature and the universe. Her pantheism is an offshoot of her womanism. Celie best represents this when she addresses her last letter to "Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God." This including "peoples" and "everything" is for Walker womanism. In her prose work *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* she says, "so many of the stories that I write, that we all write, are my mother's stories. Only recently did I fully realize this; that through years of listening to my mother's stores of her life. I have absorbed not only the stories themselves, but something of the urgency that involves the knowledge that her stories -like her life- must be recorded"(p.240).

5.9 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit, we discussed the following issues:

- Lesbianism is an important issue with Black women writers
- Life and culture of African particularly the Olinka people is shown
- To redefine God from being a white male to an all encompassing energy is crucial for the Blacks to relate to him
- Life in South of America during slavery is exposed

5.10 QUESTIONS

1. What are the details that we get of Celie's childhood in letters 62-63?
2. Comment on the significance of the Shug/Celie relationship
3. What are some of the patriarchal rituals of the Olinka people that you see?
4. Discuss the change attitudes of the men in the novel

UNIT 6 THEMES EMERGING FROM CELIE'S LETTERS

Structure

- 6.0 Objectives
- 6.1 Letters 81-82 (Nettie's letters to Celie 18-19) & Letters 83-86 (Celie's letters to Nettie 9-12)
- 6.2 Critical Issues emerging from the above letters
- 6.3 Letters 87-91 (Alternating letters from Celie and Nettie to each other) and the critical issues arising from these letters.
- 6.4 Significance of the Quilt metaphor
- 6.5 The Notion of Motherhood and Mothering
- 6.6 Select Annotated Bibliography
- 6.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 6.8 Questions

6.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we will mainly discuss the themes emerging from Celie's letters.

6.1 LETTERS 81-82 (NETTIE'S LETTERS TO CELIE 18-19) & LETTERS 83-86 (CELIE'S LETTERS TO NETTIE 9-12)

Letters 81-82 (Nettie's Letters to Celie 18-19)

Nettie, in her 18th letter to Celie informs her of her marriage to Samuel in England. In this letter she also tells us about the plight of the Olinka people because of Imperialism. Their village has not only been taken over for Rubber plantation but now they have been told to leave the village and have been "placed on a barren stretch of land that has no water at all for six months of the year. During that time, they must buy water from the planters" (p. 232). Worse still, the roofleaf that the Olinka people worship have been destroyed by the White plantation owners and since the Olinka people protested that they would not live in a house without roofleaf for a cover, their houses have been left uncovered. Now they have put corrugated metal sheets as roofs and made the Olinka people pay for it. This has rendered several Olinka people very poor because it drained their meagre savings. It is in this long letter that we are given details about Doris Baines, the White missionary working in Africa—about whom we were told earlier by Nettie. She was on the ship with Samuel and Nettie sailing to England after her retirement. She is described as about 65 years of age and has adopted a Black boy called Harold whom she calls her grandson. She says that her pen name is Jared Hunt and she is a success as a writer in America and England. In England she hails from a very wealthy family and had decided to work in Africa where she owns the village of Akwee. She, like Samuel and Nettie, wants to help the African people who are being victimised by imperialism. Walker is telling us here that there were White people too who felt very strongly about the way Africa and its people were being exploited. Doris Baines is also important in that she tells us about the time period of the novel. She says "a big war is coming. Bigger than the one they were starting when I left. It'll go hard on England, but I expect we'll survive. I missed the other war, she said. I mean to be present for this one" (p. 234). Nettie writes that when she reached England and went to present the Olinka's grievances to the Bishop of the English branch of the church,

the Bishop was more curious to know why Nettie had not returned to America after Corrine's death. Here we see the typical patriarchal attitude of the Bishop who is more interested in what people will say about Samuel and Nettie together rather than about the problems of the Olinkas. In this letter we get information about Samuel's childhood. He was a New Yorker and met Corrine through his aunt who was a friend of Corrine's aunt—both of whom were missionaries in the Belgian Congo. Corrine was sent to Spelman Seminary where Aunt Theodosia had gone. This place was started by two White missionaries from New England. These two ladies got huge donations and spread their missionary work by starting a school. We are also told that "sixty years or so before the founding of the school, the Cherokee Indians who lived in Georgiawere forced to leave their homes and walk, through the snow, to resettlement camps in Oklahoma. A third of them died on the way" (p. 241). Du Bois is mentioned in this letter indicating the time period to us. In reality he as the Black leader who was a radical and believed in Black pride without any compromise unlike the pacifist approach of Booker Washington. When Aunt Theodosia narrates to Edwards Duboyce (as Du Bois is referred) and the other youngsters gathered at her place about how she got a medal from King Leopold of Belgium for her missionary work, he says that in accepting and feeling proud of that medal she is an accomplice to the exploitation of the Blacks by the White imperialists. He states that the king was a "despot who worked to death and brutalized and eventually exterminated thousands and thousands of African peoples" (p. 243). Here Walker is making links with Christianity, its missionary work and imperialism. The letter concludes with Nettie telling us that Adam has developed an interest in Tashi and that she has told the children about their biological mother, Celie and she goes in to some more details about the Olinka culture—female circumcision, scarring of the face etc. Samuel's feelings about the Africans not really accepting them is also highlighted. Through all this Walker is showing us that Africa too is no ideal paradise. In her 19th letter to Celie, Nettie says that they have returned back to Africa after their trip to England where they had gone to get support for the Olinkas from the ruthless exploitation of the White Plantation owners. When they go back to the Olinka people they realise that Tashi has gone through the African rituals of female circumcision and "facial sacrifice" ceremony. We are told that Adam has conflicting feelings for Tashi now and that Nettie and Samuel are very happy with each other.

Letters 83-86 (Celie's Letters to Nettie 9-12)

This is a crucial letter because in it Celie tells Nettie about the death of Pa. (Alfonso). She says that Pa.'s third wife, Daisy, called him and told her about it. Contrary to the violent death that Celie expected Pa. to die he died in his sleep. Daisy informs Celie that both she and Nettie have inherited Pa.'s house because all the property he owned actually belonged to their biological father who was lynched. He had willed it to his wife, their mother after her it passed on to the sisters. Alfonso hid this information from them. At first Celie says that she did not want anything that belonged to Pa. but later Shug tells her not to be foolish and she inherits the big house and the dry grocery store along with Nettie. She ends the letter saying that "you have a home to come to" (p. 253). In this letter we are also told that she visits pa.'s grave and tells us of the words written on her tombstone: "Sure enough it's got Alfonso's name on it. Got a lot of other stuff on it too. Member of this and that. Leading businessman and farmer. Upright husband and father. Kind to the poor and helpless"(p. 252). The irony in these lines are self explanatory. In her 10th letter Celie writes to Nettie that Shug is in love with somebody else and that Celie's heart is broken. She feels that if she had stayed on in Memphis last summer this would not have happened but she wanted to fix up the inherited house before the arrival of Nettie, Samuel and the children. Shug tells Celie that she is in love with a nineteen-year-old boy named Germaine. He played the flute in her band. Celie tells Shug that she wants to move out and that she cannot live with her. Shug pleads with her but to no avail. Mary Agnes and Grady have got together and are in Panama owning land with reefers in it. She occasionally sings there and both she and Grady are in general doing well. Cuba is mentioned and about coloured folks who live there. All this expands the scope of

the novel. In the 11th letter to Nettie, Celie tells us that she watching over Henrietta who is very sick and as told by Nettie that in Africa people take yam to get cured they are all making yam dishes for her. Everybody in the community comes over with yam dishes. A Black community is certainly building up (p. 258). She also tells us that she meets Mr. who has sobred down a little. He asks about her and she tells him that she is making pants and doing it as a business. She also tells him that she started the business in his home to prevent herself from killing him. In the 12th letter Celie says that the only mail that Mr. placed in her hand directly was a telegram "that come from the United States Department of Defense. It say the ship you and the children and your husband left Africa in was sunk by German mines off the coast of someplace called Gibralta. They thinkd you all drowned. Plus, the same day all the letters I wrote to you over the years come back unopen" (p. 262).

6.2 CRITICAL ISSUES EMERGING FROM THE ABOVE LETTERS

Letters 81-82 (Nettie's letters to Celie 18-19)

- Nettie tells us of her marriage to Samuel
- Plight of the Olinka people due to imperialism is further highlighted. Nettie informs us how they have to pay land and water taxes in their own land.
- The White missionary worker, Doris Baines is described in detail. She has adopted a Black boy called Harold.
- Samuel's childhood in New York and how he met Corrine is described.
- The links between Christianity and Imperialism are made more clear.
- Adam develops an interest in Tashi
- Adam and Olivia are told about their biological mother, Celie.

Letters 83-86 Celie's Letters to Nettie 9-12

- Celie informs Nettie about the death of Pa. and also about his third wife Daisy
- Celie and Nettie have inherited all the property after Pa.'s death because it was theirs from the beginning
- Shug is involved with Germaine who is a 19year-old flute player in her band
- Mary Agnes and Grady are together in Panama and doing good business there
- Cuba, Gibralta, German mines and Panama all expand the scope of the novel. Also important to note the imperial powers at work through America, England, Germany, Belgium etc.
- We are informed about Henreitta, Sofia's youngest child as being very sick
- Mr. and Celie are once again in contact and Mr. has sobred down a lot.

6.3 LETTERS 87-91 (ALTERNATING LETTERS FROM CELIE TO NETTIE TO EACH OTHER)

In Nettie's letter to Celie she tells her that Tashi and her mother, Catherine have joined the Mbeles. These are people who live deep in the jungle and are anti-White. We are also told about the fact that the Whites by destroying yam and planting rubber for money have ruined the ecological balance. People are very sick with malaria. The Olinkas combated with malaria by eating yam. We are told that "nearly thirty years have passed without a word" (p. 264) between the two sisters. Wonders if Celie will still be an open person or would years of abuse have changed her. Nettie also writes that "God is different to us now, after all these years in Africa. More spirit than ever before, and more internal. Most people think he has to look like something or someone—a roofleaf or Christ—but we don't. And not being tied to what God looks like, frees us" (p. 264). She further adds that American society will not be a shock to the children except of course the racism there. Nettie also confesses that despite spending a lot of time with the Olinkas they have not developed any strong ties except with Tashi and her mother. She says "After all, the Olinka know we can leave, they must stay. And, of course, none of this has to do with color. And—" (p. 265). The letter ends with her informing Celie that Adam is missing and may have gone in search of Tashi.

Significance of Nettie's Letter to Celie

- In this letter we come to know about the passing of thirty years since the sisters last met.
- God is redefined in keeping with African notions which eventually feed into Shug's definition of God that influences Celie
- Nettie tells Celie about Samuel and her inability to make any lasting ties with the Olinkas except with Tashi and Catherine. Walker here points to the notion of Blacks feeling displaced both in Africa and in America.

Celie's Letter to Nettie

This is one of the longest letters in the novel clearly pointing to Celie's growth. The letter begins with self doubt about herself and her physical appearance and moves on to Mr.—and how she does not hate him anymore. She also adds that he is the only one who understands her feelings about Shug and he listens to people now. We are told about Sofia and Eleanor Jane who has now married a man called Stanley Earl. Their son named Reynolds Stanley becomes the target of a rift between Sofia and Eleanor. The former tells the latter that she will never be able to love Reynolds the way Eleanor wants her to love him because Sofia feels that he will ultimately become a White man. Shug is in touch with her and has written that she and Germaine now live with James, Shug's third son. He is married to Cora Mae and they have two children Davis and Cantrell. Although Celie is upset with Shug about living with Germaine, she adds, "Shug got a right to live too. She got a right to look over the world in whatever company she choose. Just cause I love her don't take away none of her rights" (p. 276). We see a certain maturity in Celie here which indicates her growth. Celie also reports a conversation that she and Mr.—had about Shug. He says that he loves her style because "Shug act more manly than most men. I meant she upright, honest, Speak her mind and the devil take the hindmost" (p. 276). To this Celie states that all these qualities that Mr.—has outlined about Shug is what she considers to be womanly qualities because she has seen them in Sofia and Shug. The Mr.—says that Shug told him that she could not love him because he was beating Celie. He says that when Shug and he fooled around with each other after he had married Annie Julia, his wife had no one to complain to. Her own family had

abandoned her. He now understands her pain. He also understands Celie's pain after Shug got involved with Germaine. He says, "I am real sorry she left you, Celie. I remember how I felt when she left me" (p.278). They then have a moment of togetherness as she says "two old fools left over from love, keeping each other company under the stars" (p. 278). She also comes to know from Mr.—that while he was growing up he had learnt how to sew. Celie encourages him to start sewing again. She tells him to stitch pockets for her pants. She adds, "Now us sit sewing and talking and smoking our pipes" (p.279). Here Walker is demonstrating to us her philosophy of womanism where men and women do each other's work and there is no division of labour in the patriarchal sense between men and women. Celie narrates to Mr.—Nettie's African version of the creation myth in the Bible (p. 278). She also tells him that Adam is called something that sounds like Omatangu. She says, "It mean a un-naked man somewhere near the first one God made that knowed what he was. A whole lot of the men that come before the first man was men, but none of them didn't know it" (p. 283). She concludes the letter by saying that she feels that she can talk to Mr.—now. She says, "he ain't Shug, but he begin to be somebody I can talk to" (p. 283).

Significance of Celie's Letter to Nettie

In this letter we see Celie's growth. This is seen in at least three instances:

- Her attitude to Shug. She feels that Shug has a right to lead her own life.
- Her feelings of hate towards Mr.—have now turned over a new leaf. This is partly because Mr.—has also changed for the better.
- When Mr.—delineates qualities such as honesty, directness and an ability to speak up as those associated with men she immediately states that these are qualities that she sees in women like Shug and Sofia. In short, she sees women in a positive life. They are no longer seen as victims by her.

Nettie's Letter to Celie

In this letter we are told that Adam has gone to the Mbeles to find Tashi. We also get a description in this letter about the African people who are fighting Imperialism (p. 284). Adam has asked Tashi's hand in marriage and Tashi says that she is not looking forward to going to America because she will be different there what with her 'sacrification marks.' To prove her wrong Adam goes and gets "scars identical to Tashi's on his cheeks" (p. 286). He is referred to as Tashi Omatangu. They were married by Samuel.

Significance of the above letter

- In this letter we get some information about the way the Mbeles try to combat imperialism.
- We also get some insights through Tashi's comments about America as to how the Africans view the country.
- Adam has identified himself with Africa and is now clear about his roots when he goes back to America.

Celie's Letter to Nettie

In this letter Celie writes that Mr.—informed Shug about the lost ship in which he presumes Nettie and her family were travelling. Shug feels horrible when she thinks of Celie suffering. Celie also tells Nettie that she has hired Sofia to clerk in the store that the two sisters have inherited. Celie also tells us that Eleanor cooks yam dishes

for Henrietta and her White folks pretend she does not work for these Niggers. Mr.—and Celie also have a heart to heart talk which is narrated in this letter. Celie says that Mr.—was telling her one day about how he felt that his life was not as successful as Shug's because no body loved him except Shug whereas all love Shug. Celie told him that if he felt sorry in his heart then there is still hope for him. Mr.—tells Celie that after much thinking he has realised that “in wondering bout the big things and asting bout the big things, you learn about the little ones, almost by accident. But you never know nothing more about the big things than you start out with. The more I wonder, her say, the more I love” (p. 290). Celie tells him that is how people love him back and he agrees with her. Celie then tells us that just when Mr.—asked her to re-marry him in “spirit as well as in the flesh, and just after I say Naw” (p. 290), she gets a letter from Shug that she is coming back. She says something which shows her maturity and growth: “*I be so calm. If she come, I be happy. If she don't, I be content. And then I figure this the lesson I was suppose to learn*”(p.290). The letter also tells us about Shug's visit to Celie's inherited house and about Celie's room in which everything is “purple and red” (p.291). The mantle piece has a purple frog when Shug asks her where she got it from, she says Albert carved it for her. Walker shows her growth by the fact that she calls Mr.—Albert now. The color purple shows that Celie is queen over herself now.

The last letter in the novel is also written by Celie but is addressed to “Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God.” This letter records the visit of Nettie and her family who have come to be reunited with Celie. When they come Celie and Shug and Mr.—are sitting out on the porch. The novel ends with Nettie, Samuel, Olivia, Adam and his wife, Tashi all reuniting with Celie and Harpo and the rest feeling very happy.

Significance of the above letters

- Role reversals, Eleanor cooks for Henrietta
- Mr.—and Celie develop a friendship.
- Celie has grown. This is evident from the fact that she is willing to say no to marriage when Mr.—asks for her hand. Also, she is very mature about handling Shug's visit.
- The “color purple” is mentioned to show that Celie is queen over herself now.
- The last letter is addressed to a pantheistic god.

6.4 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE QUILT METAPHOR

Quilting literally means stitching together pieces of cloth. The concept of the quilt gained significance in American academia with the resurgence of the feminist movement in the sixties. Nineteenth century writers like Louisa May Alcott and Harriet Beecher Stowe had incorporated the metaphor of the quilt into their texts (in *Aunt Jo's Scrapbag* and “The Minister's Wooing” respectively) and this tradition continues today with Alice Walker and other twentieth century writers like Gloria Naylor and Toni Morrison. Elaine Showalter stated in 1986 “the strongly marked American women's tradition to piecing, patchwork, and quilting has consequences for the structures, genres, themes, and meanings of American women's writing in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.” Today the metaphor of the quilt is used to express women's writings in which personal stories that throw light on social and cultural histories are quilted into the text. The personal and the public aspects that are woven into the literary quilt makes it “double-voiced.” The making of a quilt involves a process of piecing together of discontinuities. The letter writing or

epistolary mode that Walker has used in *The Color Purple* reflects this. For several women this was the only form of writing available. Most women were constantly denied any quality time by their family and children. Whatever creative work they undertook was disrupted by duties within home. Letter writing, is like quilting, in that you write a bit and then if you are disrupted from it, you get back to it later. The reversal of roles necessary for a Womanist text is also shown by Walker through the metaphor of the quilt. Shug, Mr.—and Celie sit and quilt together. For the world to be a happy place, men and women have to work together. Quilting as a metaphor also shows that for Walker, one genre is not adequate to express her varied experiences. She uses slave narrative, spiritual autobiography, personal letters etc. to express herself.

Critics state, that the act of tearing which defines the patchwork quilt, is symbolic of women beginning their lives afresh from a past that was painful. For example, in *The Color Purple* Celie who is raped at 14 by a man she considers to be her father tears herself away from this past and quilts a new life for herself at the end of the novel. For feminists quilting also represents putting yourself together from fragments. Connection to self, they believe, is related to connection to others. Celie, in her growth, quilts together other women's experiences and stories. They all widen her horizons and helps her develop as a holistic woman. In the novel Sofia and Celie begin quilting together after a little showdown the two have had over Celie telling Harpo to beat Sofia to "mind" her. Upset at this Sofia returns the curtains that Celie had made for her house. But the two reconcile "mak[ing] quilt pieces out of these messed up curtains." They are involved in a process of healing. From passive victims they become agents of their life. Similarly the relationship between Shug and Celie also begin with them quilting: "[Shug] pick up a random piece of cloth out the basket. Hold it up to the light. Frown. How you sew this damn thing? She say. I hand her the square I'm, working on, start another one. She sew long crooked stitches, remind me of that little crooked tune she sing." Later Shug gives a piece of her yellow dress to Celie to make the quilt that she has been making called "Sister's Choice." Nettie and Corrine too reestablish faith in each other over a quilt. It is a piece in the quilt that makes Corrine, who is very sick, recall the time when she went to buy cloth with Olivia and had met Celie near the shop. This recollection dismisses all fears that she had in her mind regarding the parentage of Adam and Olivia. Quilting, as we have seen, helps women come together in the novel. Jointly made by women, Quilts are not used like objects—as in patriarchy—but becomes a symbol of women's love and openness in sharing and helping each other. Celie gives the quilt to Sofia as an act of love. She says she does not know how cold Sofia's sister's place will be.

In this novel African quilting patterns are mentioned linking up Black Americans with a tradition in which they have roots. In fact one of the first things that Nettie writes to Celie about is about the "brilliant blue robes with designs like fancy quilt patterns" that the Senegalese wear. In another letter she states "the Olinka men make beautiful quilts which are full of animals and birds and people." Gloria Naylor, Toni Morrison and Alice Walker through the African links of the quilts talk about a different aesthetics which situate their works in a different context from a white, bourgeois, European form.

In terms of the form of *The Color Purple* too, there is a quilting of different genres such as biography, music, poetry, letters and diary entries. Celie's life in the American South is quilted with Nettie's life in Africa. Celie too, who begins with feeling that she is nothing quilts her experiences into something and develops an empowered notion of her self. Her quilt pattern "Sister's Choice" is metaphoric of her journey through life. Her new bond with her community lies not with men as much as with women as is indicated from the name of her quilt. Similarly, Walker quilts a Black literary history and fills its gaps of silences and stereotypes of Black people with words and empowering notions of Black women.

6.5 THE NOTION OF MOTHERHOOD AND MOTHERING

In the novel *The Color Purple* images of birthing, gestation and nurturing are abundant which foreground the concept of motherhood and mothering in the novel. Different kinds of motherhood are seen in the novel. Celie is a mother through rape but has to give away her children and look after Mr.'s—children. Nettie is childless and raises Celie's two children. Sofia has six children and is not always there for them because she has been forced to be the "mammy" for the White Mayor's children. Squeak has her child Suzie Q (Jolantha). When she wants to pursue her singing career Celie offers to look after Suzie Q. Squeak, along with Odessa, looks after Sofia's children while she is in jail. Shug's three children are looked after by her own parents. Eleanor Jane, who is a mother herself also looks after Sofia's daughter, Henreitta, while she is sick. Corrine who is childless, adopts two children Adam and Olivia (who happen to be Celie's children). Through these examples, Walker is showing to us that women and children were treated as moveable property by patriarchy. This was further compounded by racism and slave history. In most of Walker's novels, violence is inflicted on mothers because they are helpless. Although there is so much of motherhood and mothering shown in the novel it is not privileged. It shows how women are defined by it. That is, the complexities involved in the maternal role for women is demonstrated through these examples. Walker elides literary motherhood with biological motherhood by tracing a maternal ancestry. She admired Zora Neale Hurston, her own mother and other women writers who came before her.

6.6 SELECT ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Christian, Barbara. "Alice Walker." *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Volume 33. Edited by Thadious M. Davis and Trudier Harris. Detroit: Gale Research Company, 1984, pp.258-271.

Presents a discussion of the major influences on Walker's writings; her life at Spelman and Sarah Lawrence Colleges, her female ancestors, her familiarity with other Black writers and writers from other countries. Explores the themes of all her works through *The Color Purple*. Includes brief secondary bibliography.

----. "No More Buried Lives: Theme of Lesbianism in Audre Lorde's *Zami*, Gloria Naylor's *The Women in Brewster Place*, Ntozake Shange's *Sassafras, Cypress and Indigo*, and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*." In *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers*, 187-203. New York: Pergamon Press, 1985.

Describes lesbian relationships in four contemporary novels. Sees Walker's work as distinct from Lorde's and Shange's in that it does not create a lesbian subculture; instead the love between Shug and Celie helps to create a truly human community for both men and women. Celie's affection for Shug is in part a reaction to her mistreatment by men. The emphasis is on female bonding rather than sexuality.

Evans, Mari, Editor. "Alice Walker." *Black Women Writers (1950-1980): A Critical Evaluation*. Garden City, New Jersey: Anchor Press/ Doubleday, 1984, pp.494-495.

Provides brief listing of personal data, awards and honors and primary and secondary sources.

Fifer, Elizabeth. "A Bibliography of Writings by Alice Walker." *Contemporary Women Writers*. Edited by Catherine Rainwater. Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 1985, pp.165-171.

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Letters**

Contains primary sources which include books, short stories, poems, articles, and reviews.

—. "The Dialect and Letters of *The Color Purple*. In *Contemporary American Women Writers: Narrative Strategies*. Edited by Catherine Rainwater and William J. Scheick, 155-71. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1985.

Discusses the relationships between the letters and diction of Celie and Nettie. The letter form itself allows for both narrative intimacy and authorial distance. Celie's language gives very precise shape to her experience, while Nettie's standard usage is a foreign form in Celie's world. Celie's letters progress from a simple reporting to insight and humor. The dialect gives us both the positive qualities of Celie's world and the sinister aspects. The principal value of Nettie's letters is in establishing that Celie's values have validity in the macrocosm. Includes a bibliography of primary materials.

McFadden, Margaret. "The Color Purple." In *Magill's Literary Annual, 1983: Essays—Reviews of 200 Outstanding Books Published in the United States During 1982*, Volume 1. Edited by Frank Magill, 139-43. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Salem Press, 1983.

Argues that the epistolary form makes the story more intimate, since no authorial voice stands between Celie and the reader. Suggests that while Nettie's letters are important in making cultural connections between Africa and America and in providing plot information, they nonetheless are weaker than Celie's. Sees the main themes as redemptive love and female bonding. Finds the language of black folk English to be crucial to our appreciation of the novel. "Alice Walker's triumph here is in creating a unique set of people who speak to the human condition."

Rush, Theresa G., Carol F. Myers, and Esther S. Arata, Editors. *Black American Writers: Past and Present*. Metuchen, New Jersey: Scarecrow Press, 1975, pp. 727-729.

Lists Walker's collected and uncollected writings, with a brief selection of criticism and reviews.

Taylor, Daniel. *Masterplots II: American Fiction Series*, Volume 1. Edited by Frank N. Magill, 311-14. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Salem Press, 1986.

Examines the novel critically in addition to summarizing the plot. Provides themes, meanings and character analysis.

Washington, Mary Helen. "An Essay on Alice Walker." In *Sturdy Black Bridges: Visions of Black Women I Literature*. Edited by Roseann P. Bell, Betty J. Parker and Beverly Guy-Sheftall, 133-56. Garden City, New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1979.

Argues that a basic belief for Walker is that black women suffer the greatest oppression.

Says that in this writing this suffering often emerges as psychological distortion.

Traces an evolution in the fiction from pure victimization to control for women.

Willis, Susan. "Black Woman Writers: Taking a Critical Perspective." In *Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism*. Edited by Gayle Greene and Coppelia Kahn, 211-31. London: Methuen, 1985.

Identifies three issues in fiction by Black women: community, journey, and sensuality/ sexuality. Focuses on work by Walker, Toni Morrison, Paule Marshall, and Zora Neale Hurston.

6.7 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit, we discussed the following issues:

- the plight of the Olinka people due to imperialism is highlighted
- The links between Imperialism and Christianity are made clear
- The significance of the color purple is highlighted

6.8 QUESTIONS

1. Trace the development in Celie from her belief in a white male Christian God to a pantheistic genderless God.
2. What is the importance of the Mayor's family in the novel?
3. Discuss the title of the novel in relation to its theme.
4. Discuss the men characters in the novel and their importance in it.