

Alice Walker's Womanist Fiction

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Tensions and Reconciliations

By

Iman Hami

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	viii
Abstract	ix
Introduction	1
Why Alice Walker?.....	1
Womanist Ideology and Its Relation to Female Bonding	3
Alice Walker in African American Literature: The Rise of Women	
Authors	17
Influences on Walker's Work	19
Narrative Style	24
Chapter Outline.....	30
Chapter One.....	36
<i>The Third Life of Grange Copeland</i> : Masculinity and the Legacy of Slavery	
Introduction.....	36
Dysfunction and African American Men.....	36
African American Women and the Lingering Impact of Slavery	46
Female–Male Relationships	47
Female–Female Relationships and Lack of Autonomy.....	51
Conclusion	56
Chapter Two	59
<i>Meridian</i> : Walker's First Female Protagonist and the Question of Female Agency	
Introduction.....	59
The Dysfunctional Mother–Daughter Relationship	59
The Role of Female Friendship.....	69
Black Men as Dependants.....	72
Conclusion	76

Chapter Three	77
<i>The Color Purple: A Womanist Novel</i>	
Introduction.....	77
Womanism and Its Complexities in <i>The Color Purple</i>	77
Celie’s Female Connections: Achieving a Sense of Belonging	81
Male Characters and the Cycle of Patriarchal and Masculine	
Silence.....	82
Kate: The First Woman Rejecting Patriarchy.....	83
Shug and Celie: Womanist Relationship.....	85
Sofia and the Power of Resistance	90
Nettie and African Heritage	94
Male Characters and the Cycle of Patriarchal and Masculine	
Silence.....	98
Conclusion	102
Chapter Four.....	104
<i>The Temple of My Familiar: Deconstructing the Concept of Marriage</i>	
Introduction.....	104
Shug and Lissie: The Pillars of the Temple	108
Lissie and the Concept of Wholeness and Marriage.....	108
Fanny: The Third Pillar of the Temple	110
Carlotta and Her Healing Ceremony.....	113
Male Characters and Sexual Avarice.....	116
Conclusion	117
Chapter Five	119
<i>Possessing the Secret of Joy: Dysfunctional Female Bonding</i>	
Introduction.....	119
Female Bonding and Its Connection to Place	124
Tashi and Lisette	126
Tashi’s African Background versus American Culture	128
Female Bonding and Cultural Difference	130
M’Lissa: Agent and Victim of Patriarchy.....	133
Dysfunctional Mother–Daughter Relationship	135
Tashi and Raye: A Brief Example of Functional Female Bonding...	136
Male Characters and Their Quests for Identity	138
Third Generations	140
Conclusion	142

Chapter Six	144
Later Work and the Didactic Turn: Walker's Figuration of Gender and Religious Affiliation	
Introduction.....	144
<i>By the Light of My Father's Smile: Religion Against the Female Body</i>	144
Female Friendship and Jealousy	147
Religion and Questions of Growth.....	155
<i>Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart: Religion and Identity</i>	158
Conclusion	167
Conclusion.....	170
Bibliography	173

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ABSTRACT

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

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

INTRODUCTION

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

—Alice Walker¹

Why Alice Walker?

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

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

¹ Qtd in *Alice Walker* by Maria Lauret, p. 14.

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

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

Nevertheless, within this myriad of thematic connections between her novels, there is one obvious common point in all of Walker's works: her interest in writing for/about women, in order to elevate women's position in society. In *Meridian* (1976), she writes about women's influential role in the Civil Rights Movement; in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, she explores the destructive effects of female genital mutilation; in *The Color Purple*, she makes her readers aware of the significance of female sexuality and the female sexual body; while, in *The Temple of My Familiar*, a new church is established, in which women are the leaders, the preachers of a womanist gospel. This focus on women might pose a challenge for male readers, but it is an intentional challenge—Walker not only writes about women but also perhaps invites her male readers to know more about women. Her male characters are mostly irresponsible, careless, and brutal—yet while this may seem an unfair belittling of one gender in order to emphasise praise towards another, it is notable that Walker always offers a ray of hope for male characters at the very end of her novels, whether it be Grange in *The Third Life*, Truman in *Meridian*, Mister in *The Color Purple*, or Robinson in *By the Light of My Father's Smile*. Walker might exaggerate the negative side of her male characters by depicting many unsuccessful Black males in her novels, but as a writer she does so in order to draw her readers', especially her male readers', attention to the point that there is need for them to change in their relation to women.

This book focuses on tracing female bonding across Walker's novels through the lens of womanism. There are various types of female bonding shown in her novels, some of which help female characters forge

their individuality; however, there are some female connections that are apparently constructive but actually aim at destroying female selfhood and female self-actualisation. The following sections cover four areas: firstly, what womanism is and how it is related to female bonding; secondly, how Alice Walker's works have been influenced by other African American writers such as Zora Neale Hurston, Paule Marshall, and Toni Morrison; thirdly, Walker's narrative style will be discussed; finally, I will provide a chapter outline of the book.

Womanist ideology and its relation to female bonding

Walker introduced the new term "womanism" in 1984 through her non-fiction book *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*.² "Womanist is to feminist," Walker writes, "as purple to lavender" (xi). Womanism and feminism are related to each other; however, the former exhibits features that feminism lacks. In *The Womanist Idea*, Layli Maparyan writes of this passage, noting that while purple is the analogue of womanism, the lavender analogue Walker attributes to feminism is also "a color that has historically been associated with lesbianism," given this, she writes that Walker's sentence "is often interpreted as a suggestion that womanism is a more intense (literally, more saturated) form of woman-centeredness than is lesbianism" (21). The term was introduced in one page, but through this brief introduction Walker makes womanism stand as a new term, although still sharing some common elements with feminism.

Working on Walker can be a challenge for, as mentioned, her novels are like a river, and these twists and turns apply to her treatment of the concept of womanism as much as they do any other theme. Walker introduced womanism in her non-fiction text, but her novels sometimes depict themes that appear to oppose her definition of the term. There are different types of female bonding in her works, some are functional and lead

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

women into self-actualisation, and some are dysfunctional. An example of dysfunctional female bonding, and one that is consistently depicted in her novels, is that of the mother–daughter relationship. The mother–daughter relationship is the first, and the most significant, relationship in a woman’s life; however, Walker’s female characters largely do not benefit from this primary female bond. The narrative quest is such that the female characters, like Celie, Meridian, and Susannah, who lack success in this initial act of female bonding, aim to fill this gap later in life; they are looking for a surrogate mother. Sometimes this surrogate mother can be a singular person, as Shug is for Celie in *The Color Purple*, or it can take the form of a broader community, such as the Civil Rights Movement for Meridian, the eponymous character of Walker’s second novel. This book uncovers how these female characters, either in or reaching adulthood, attempt to replace their failure to achieve a substantial bond with their mothers by way of developing female bonds to various degrees—whether as friendships or open sexual relationships with females or males—in later life. It explores how the development of Walker’s concept of womanism can be traced in her works, and aims to answer several questions: how the theme of women’s individuality as born out of sexual freedom, and the theme of spirituality in the development of women’s selfhood, both relate specifically to womanism; how her male characters are constructed as benefiting from and/or are harmed by the employment of Walker’s womanistic ideology in her narratives. These are the questions and issues this book will try to explore and answer in the following chapters.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

makes clear, “we [Black women] did not see ‘womanhood’ as an important aspect of our identity” (*Ain’t I*, 1). Following this recognition, Black women decided to claim their rights from the White supremacist society. The reason for the emergence of Black feminism, then, is not because feminism itself ignores Black women, but because White society as a whole, whether male or female, tended to erase “Blackness” itself, as exemplified by truth. Bell Hooks continues: “in the eyes of the 19th century White public, the Black female was a creature unworthy of the title woman; she was mere chattel, a thing, an animal” (159). Maythee Rojas agrees, suggesting that:

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

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

Womanism however has some features that distinguish it from Black feminism and feminism. To return to the broadness of Walker’s concept of womanism, Walker’s term includes detailed exploration of hetero/homosexuality and spirituality, which are less emphasised by other Black feminist critics. Walker believes that sexuality is as crucial as spirituality for women’s attainment of individuality and freedom. And Walker gives priority to female bonding over female–male relationships. Her definition of womanism argues for: “a woman who loves other women

³ Black feminism is an intersectional term that draws attention to racism as well as sexism. See Kimberley Crenshaw’s “Mapping the Margins,” pp. 1245–51. See also Barbara Christian on postmodern issues of Black feminism in *New Black Feminist Criticism*, pp. 7–15.

sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength" (xi). The womanist, according to Walker, then, is a woman who engages more intently in female bonding as opposed to heterosociality. However, Walker does not fully exclude opposite-sex relationships, stating also that a womanist "sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually" (xi). Womanism is not against heterosexuality/sociality, instead the point here, as suggested by the "sometimes" of the passage, is that a womanist tries to find individuality in women's company most of all, with less reliance on developing relationships with men. According to Walker, women should not model themselves on men, and should instead value "women's emotional flexibility" (xi). A womanist cries and does not consider it to be a sign of her weakness, but instead a natural emotional reaction. Recalling bell hooks, who said that historically Black women were silent because they "did not see 'womanhood' as an important aspect of our identity" (*Ain't I*, 1), Walker's womanism places most emphasis on this historically undervalued womanhood and foregrounds the value of its associated emotions and thoughts. As with Audre Lorde, who writes in *Sister Outsider*: "if we [Black women] do not define ourselves for ourselves, we will be defined by others for their use and to our detriment" (99), Walker's womanism advocates women to reconstruct and evaluate their own histories and social emplacements for themselves, through their own perceptions. It is by doing so that women can help and back each other, developing the power to release themselves from patriarchal and racial oppression. In *Communion*, bell hooks wrote: "Most women search for love hoping to find recognition of our value. It may not be that we do not see ourselves as valuable; we simply do not trust our perceptions" (121). Womanism wants women to love themselves and search for love within themselves, rather than looking for it in the world outside. And this search for the self is aided by interaction with other women. This is demonstrated, for instance, in *The Color Purple*, where the homosocial love between Shug and Celie helps the latter free herself from Mister's dominance and stand on her own feet, living for herself rather than existing as an object that serves patriarchal purposes. Through Shug's help, Celie comes to understand her own body and sexuality, which leads her to sexual self-awareness. This acceptance of the physical empowers acceptance of the mental and emotional; as bell hooks writes: "female self-love begins with self-acceptance" (107). As soon as Celie recognises and accepts her body, she sees herself as an individual being. This sense of ownership over her physical body helps Celie develop her self-confidence. This is also demonstrated, on an opposite track, by

Walker's character Tashi in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. Due to her being sexually mutilated, Tashi finds that she cannot have the same sense of belonging as seen in Celie. This lack—her inability to fully embrace the female body that has been partially taken from her—means that Tashi is unable to find peace and stability within her life.

In *Communion*, bell hooks further states: “the more we love our flesh, the more others will delight in its bounty. As we love the female body, we are able to let it be the ground on which we build a deeper relationship to ourselves—a loving relationship uniting mind, body, and spirit” (120). This mind-body-spirit unity is what Walker emphasises in *The Temple* and *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart*. Fanny, in *The Temple*, appears as a masseuse who tries to create this link between body and spirit. She massages Carlotta, another female character, and through both caressing her body and engaging her in conversation, Fanny tries to heal her mental wounds as well as her physical strains. Walker also expresses this unity between body and spirit in *Now Is the Time*, through Kate who goes on a river journey through the deep Amazonian Forest. On this trip, she and the other passengers take a special drink that makes them vomit and is believed to purify the body. After getting physically purified they gather together and each one relates his/her story to others who listen and then place their hands upon his/her body and pray for them. In such later works, Walker attempts to link womanism to Buddhism, and through these examples links body with spirit. Interestingly, bell hooks also stated that “any woman eager to learn the art of loving can start, as the Buddhist teachers say, ‘right where you are’ by being self-loving” (*Communion*, 105).

It has been suggested that, along with self-loving, womanism promotes women to develop female bonds, which aids such self-love. Female bonding starts at the earliest stages of a girl's life, with her mother. In *Black Feminist Thoughts*, Patricia Hill Collins also places great emphasis on the mother-daughter relationship within African American families: “The mother/daughter relationship is one fundamental relationship among Black women. Countless Black mothers have empowered their daughters by passing on the everyday knowledge essential to survival as African-American women. Black daughters identify the profound influence that their mothers have had upon their lives” (102). Collins describes the tracing of the African American mother's role throughout history as the most challenging task. This is because: “[u]ntil the growth of modern Black feminism in the 1970s, analyses of Black motherhood were largely the province of men, both White and Black, and male perspectives on Black mothers prevailed. Black mothers were accused of failing to discipline their children, of emasculating their sons, of defeminizing their daughters, and of

retarding their children's academic achievement" (173). However, Black feminist women writers have also suggested the potential flaws in such bonds, suggesting that some mother-daughter relations can be marked by jealousy and competition. "Plenty of talented, successful, powerful women," bell hooks said, "compete in unkind and cruel ways with their daughters" (*Communion*, 123). This competition can also result from the context of the patriarchal value system, whereby a young woman often receives greater attention and love than offered to an older woman. The notion that successful mothers try to thwart their daughters' quests for achieving further levels of success and happiness is expressed in Walker's novels. In *Meridian*, the destructive mother-daughter bond is depicted through Meridian and her mother, Gertrude, a successful teacher and a financially self-sufficient woman, who never recognises or supports Meridian's achievements. On the contrary, she only reproaches and discourages Meridian in her decisions. It is interesting that another contemporary title character, Toni Morrison's *Sula*, is never supported by her own mother, nor by her grandmother, despite being a powerful woman. As the matriarch who holds the family's purse strings, Sula's grandmother does not want Sula to become more powerful than herself.

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

Women, because of educational deprivation and the absence of a usable past, tended to rely more heavily on their own experiences in developing their ideas. [. . .] Wifehood and motherhood were the experiences most females had in common with other females. But wifehood, under patriarchy, involved women in competition with other women, both to

secure and find a man who would offer them support and protection and, once they have married him, to hold him. (119)⁴

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

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

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

In her novels, Walker, after showing that mothers can also be encaged by patriarchal ideology, often presents her female characters as searching for a surrogate mother to fill the gap left by the dysfunctional mother–daughter relationship. The surrogate mother in Walker’s novels can be actual or symbolic; sometimes it can be another woman, as with Shug for Celie; or even “Mother Earth,” as it is for Kate in *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart*. The search for female role models can also be observed in Walker’s literary career as well. Carolyn Heilbrun, in *Reinventing Womanhood*, writes of this phenomenon in general terms: “women literary scholars set out to bring before the consciousness of their critical and scholarly colleagues the work of formerly unknown women, new interpretations of the life and work of women writers, and a sense of relationship between the major literary women of the past” (93–94). The search for this figure is more challenging, even, for African American women writers. For Walker it is Zora Neale Hurston, whom Walker

⁴ See *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness* by Gerda Lerner, pp. 116–37.

⁵ See *Communion* by bell hooks, pp. 127–30, to understand the extent to which a mother can be a force in her daughter’s life that leads her to being a victim of sexism. hooks writes: “most shocking to me was the reality that many of these successful moms were advocates of feminism” (127–28).

accepts her as her literary role mother. In *In Search*, she published two articles about Hurston and mentions her numerous times throughout her book.⁶

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

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

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

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

⁶ See *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* by Alice Walker, pp. 93–119.

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

In establishing a womanist discourse in her novels, Walker often employs a strategy of negative exemplification—of failed women's relationships littering the path to realising womanism. This includes instances of dysfunctional female bonding, beyond that between the mother and daughter. Josie in *The Third Life* is one of those women who spends her life competing with Mem, Ruth, and Margaret—the other female characters of the novel—to win either Grange's or Brownfield's love. In *Communion*, hooks describes this type of destructive female bond:

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

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

Returning to Walker's definition of womanism, we note also that, although patriarchal thoughts have been damaging to women, womanism embraces men as well as women in order to fully respond to patriarchy. Womanist interaction with men is valued for helping women to have a better

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

Sexuality itself is a very significant aspect of womanism. Women’s sexual awareness can help them regain their individuality and self-empowerment. In *The Color Purple*, it is only once Celie comes to understand her own sexuality, with the help of Shug, that she stands up against male hegemony and rebels against her husband, Mister. When marriage becomes an obstacle to a woman’s empowerment, Walker rejects it and gives priority to her characters’ self-actualisation. Walker not only wants her female characters to be sexually free, but also wants them to use their sexuality as a source of power. Shug, as depicted in *The Color Purple*, exemplifies this point; she uses her sexuality to attract men to her and to control them. Audre Lorde addresses this: “the erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognised feeling” (*The Audre Lorde Compendium*, 106).⁷ In *Possessing*, we see that patriarchy aims to suppress

⁷ See *The Audre Lorde Compendium* by Audre Lorde, pp. 106–18, where she discusses the differences between pornography and female sexuality as a source of

female sexual power by directly targeting female genitalia, destroying them because they imagine the clitoris and female sexual pleasure are a threat to male sexual power. Walker's interest in female sexual freedom and sexual power can be traced in all the novels.

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

Although female bonding is valued by Alice Walker, Bell Hooks, and Audre Lorde, the way Walker looks at female homosociality/sexuality differs from the latter two thinkers. The ultimate point of womanism is to reunite all creatures and to help them have a better understanding of themselves and the world around them, both aspects resulting in an attainable peace. In this respect, womanism considers men, as well as other forms of creation, as an essential part of the healing process, whereas Hooks

power. She states: "pornography is a direct denial of the power of the erotic, for it represents the suppression of true feeling" (107).

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

and Lorde can be found to sometimes exclude men from this circle and to consider men as women's enemy. For instance, in *Sister Outsider* Lorde writes, "Black men's feelings of cancellation, their grievances, and their fear of vulnerability must be talked about, but not by Black women when it is at the expense of our own 'curious rage'" (114). Lorde, then, does not believe male concerns are unimportant, but promotes a feminism that values female empowerment, to which men are cast as outsiders. This is in contrast to womanism, which looks at women, men, and all creatures in a circle by which one's love, peace, and happiness are interconnected with that of others. According to womanism, one cannot have his or her own world and claim a happiness that ignores that of others. Womanism is about love and love among women is essential to the process of attaining peace according to womanist ideology. However, if men become excluded from this circle of love, then this circle cannot go round. This is where bell hooks and Audre Lord differ from Alice Walker's notion of womanism, as well as that of Maparyan and my own understanding of womanism.⁹ I understand womanism as a term that wants to bring men and women together rather than separating them. Womanism focuses on the interconnectedness of all creation with the main focus on women. The common point among these different understandings is that women should seek and enjoy female community.

To discuss female bonding within the womanist fiction of Alice Walker is to address female homosociality and homosexuality. Walker's works include lesbian characters like Celie, Shug, Pauline, and Susannah. Although some of these characters, such as Celie and Shug, have sexual or non-sexual heterosocial relationships, they choose and prefer to be engaged in the intimacy of a female community rather than a male community. They feel safe and supported within the female community, especially Celie, given that her choice of being among women is partly due to her fear of men. Celie can be regarded as lesbian since due to her circumstances she is in women's community and feels empowered among them. Although Audre Lorde, bell hooks, and Walker all value women's interconnectedness, these three theoreticians each look at lesbianism differently. Lorde and hooks want to give priority to female bonding even if it excludes men, while Walker sees lesbianism as a healing process to reunite with all creatures including men. In womanist thoughts, lesbianism exists as a step towards understanding, in a process that may include homosexuality, homosociality, heterosexuality, and heterosociality. In this reading of womanism, lesbianism is part of

⁹ I earlier cited a quotation from bell hooks that shows her viewpoint towards women's heterosexuality, but for further reading please refer to bell hooks, *Communion*, pp. 33–45.

womanism; however, womanism's ultimate goal is to reach a better understanding of one's self and the surrounding world. Critics like Cheshire Calhoun believe that "lesbian thought becomes applied feminist thought." She continues, "lesbian theory and feminist theory are one and that one is feminist theory" ("Separating Lesbianism," 559). Although both lesbian and feminist theory accentuate female bonding and female friendship, they differ from womanism in the sense that the latter attributes a spiritual dimension to this female bonding. Lesbianism and feminism in the 1970s claimed women's freedom in society, so their aims were more political. Heterosexuality as a social and political norm in a patriarchal society was meant to be re-examined in order to bring women sexual awareness, whereas womanism looks at lesbianism as a medium to reach its ultimate goal, which is the unification of creatures. As such, while one can state that Celie's engagement with the female community renders her a lesbian, the spiritual aspect of this lesbianism within the womanist concept is emphasised at the end of the novel, which finds Celie, on the verge of self-actualisation, addressing her letter to all creatures. Through lesbianism, Celie achieves a better understanding of her self and the world around her. She remains lesbian when she appears in the following novel, *The Temple*, where this spiritual aspect is heightened, thus making her a womanist character par excellence.

With respect to the previous point, we recall that Walker's definition of womanism states that womanism is "committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female" (*In Search*, xi). And Walker, most explicitly in her later novels, tries to embrace both males and females, through the employment of religious themes. Such works suggest that if both men and women are sheltered by religion, they can both be free and live together in peace. Walker introduces a womanist religion that incorporates tenets of Buddhist beliefs in *The Temple* and *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart*. In the former, Walker reintroduces Shug as a woman who has her own church, and whose gospel gives a lot of attention to women and family union. Shug's gospel is, like womanism, for the "wholeness of entire people" (see chapter three). In the latter text, Walker uses Buddhist ideology to show how men and women in the modern world can change their thoughts and love each other (see chapter six). However, in the texts preceding these, especially *The Color Purple* and *By the Light of My Father's Smile*, Walker shows how a patriarchal religion like Christianity can widen the gap between men and women, and can also be damaging to entire peoples. Sheile Collins argues: "patriarchalism refers to a metaphysical world view, a mindset, a way of ordering reality which has more often been associated with the male than with the female in western culture" (*A*

Different Heaven, 51). Walker wants to change this mindset so that both men and women can benefit from the same equal rights, such that none is superior to the other. Jacquelyn Grant, in her book *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus*, writes: "providing the social context for the development of Christology, patriarchy virtually insured that women's questions would be irrelevant to Christological concerns. If women are indeed to be saved, they must begin to re-articulate Christology starting from the questions which arise out of their experience" (83). Through Shug in *The Temple*, Walker tries to establish a religion that is about and related to womanism and womanist experiences, and that clearly demonstrates her interest in the three issues described by Layli Maparyan, who writes: "womanists are simultaneously concerned with rectifying the relationships between humans and other humans, humans and nature, and humans and the spirit world" (*The Womanist Idea*, 35). The present book, which mainly focuses on the relationships between humans and other humans, will also briefly look at the other two types of relationships that Maparyan identifies.

Alice Walker in African American literature: the rise of women authors

Female authors in African American literature have struggled to have their voices heard in literature. They have had to endure a long path in order to reach where they now stand: ranging from authors of slave narratives such as Laura Haviland and Martha Jackson, to Zora Neale Hurston and from Hurston to Alice Walker. Hurston wrote right after the Harlem Renaissance (1918–30), when African Americans had founded a rich culture of contemporary music and literature.¹⁰ Yet Hurston's writing itself is a turning point in African American writing since she began a new path for African American *women* by writing about women who, at that time, were still suffering the pressures of patriarchy. Most of the great African American authors of Hurston's era were men like Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright. It was a challenge for Hurston to write about women, who did not have a voice in the American South, let alone in Black communities in general. Following this period, female authors managed to raise their voices and follow what Hurston had started almost a half century previously. The most prominent African American female authors of this period, which extends into the present, are Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, both of whom took huge steps to communicate the voices of Black women. Walker regards

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

Hurston highly, citing her as an inspiration to write her own works. In the aforementioned *In Search of our Mothers' Gardens*, Walker writes: “the quality I feel is most characteristic of Zora’s work [is] racial health, a sense of Black people as complete, complex, undiminished human beings, a sense that is lacking in so much Black writing and literature” (85). The quotation demonstrates a connection between the two authors in terms of attempting to promote a wholeness in the African American female self. And just as Hurston influenced the subsequent generation of African American female authors, she herself had also been influenced by the female writers that preceded her—those who wrote slave narratives.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the focus of African American literature was mainly on the communication of slaves’ narratives. African Americans hardly had a voice within the white supremacist society of the United States. In his book *Chaotic Justice*, John Ernest writes that such slave narratives “are performances devoted to representing an absent subject—not only the historically and culturally isolated narrator or the narrative subject, but also and more importantly the variable dynamics of racial construction, identification, and positioning that are rendered virtually invisible in a White supremacist culture” (77). It was at this time—the mid-nineteenth century—when slavery was at its peak, that African Americans were so dehumanised that they were “sold by receipt” (Lerner, 9). Even mothers were sold away from their daughters. Solomon Northup, in his *Narrative of Solomon Northup*, writes: “Freeman out of patience, tore Emily [the daughter] from her mother by main force. [. . .] ‘Don’t leave me, mama—don’t leave me’” (qtd in Lerner, *Black Women in White America*, 12). Black women, in both their lives and their sexuality, were under the control of their White masters. “Under slavery, Black women were savagely exploited and unpaid workers [. . .] Black women bred children to the master’s profit and were sexually available to any White man” (Lerner, *Black Women in White America*, 45). The first half of the nineteenth century was a dark time in African American history; the stories of these slaves are related in slave narratives, which were often dictated to a White amanuensis due to the slaves’ lack of access to education.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the circumstances of Black women had not improved much. Women were treated as sexual objects. For instance, “a [Black] nurse” recounts how, while working as a servant in a White man’s house, she was sexually abused by the employer, only to be interrupted by her husband. Following this intervention, “the police judge fined [her] husband \$25.” She writes: “I was present at the hearing, and testified on oath to the insult offered to me. The White man, of course, denied the charge” (qtd in Lerner, *Black Women in White America*,

156). By the mid-twentieth century however, African American literature began to proliferate, and authors like Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright were writing about Black people's civil and social rights, infusing their prose with activist sentiments. Zora Neale Hurston, who emerged even before those male authors, further focused on the African American woman's emancipation from sexism and racism. Innovative and prescient, her work formed a model for Walker.

Influences on Walker's work

Alice Walker has been influenced by many authors from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century English literature and also by many African American authors. However, I will briefly discuss the influence of three key female African American authors: Zora Neale Hurston, Paule Marshall, and Toni Morrison. When discussing the influences on Walker, addressing Zora Neale Hurston is inevitable. Alice Walker identifies Hurston as a significant author, praising her on many occasions. In *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, "Looking for Zora" is about Walker's attempt to find Hurston's hometown and to describe the way she lived. In this text, Walker recounts the extreme measures she takes to gather any snippets of information about Hurston, going so far as ordering a headstone for the late author when she finds out that her grave lacks one. She even introduces herself as Zora's niece when she meets people who might know her. Walker says "I hate myself for lying [. . .]. Still, I ask myself would I have gotten this far toward getting the headstone and finding out about Zora Hurston's last days without telling my lie?" (110). This demonstrates Walker's passion towards Hurston, her wish to better know this writer who is so important to her. Maria Lauret, in her book on Alice Walker, writes: "Hurston then is not only a role model and ancestor, but a legitimating presence for Walker in the African American literary tradition" (*Alice Walker*, 15). Walker's enthusiastic search into Hurston's life appears as a quest for her own ancestors; the truth behind the lie is that she knows Hurston is only her "literary mother," and that it is this writerly closeness that causes Walker to tell this lie. In an interview for "Authors at Google," Walker states that Hurston "is the literary foremother of all of us"; in so doing, Walker further expresses the great influence of Hurston on her works (Talks at Google).¹¹

¹¹ Talks at Google, 5 November 2010, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MGYCTUTXdKE>>.

Harold Bloom writes that “the anxiety of influence comes out of [. . .] creative interpretation; [. . .] there must be a profound act of reading that is a kind of falling in love with a literary work” (*The Anxiety of Influence*, xxiii). Walker also expresses this sentiment when she states the significant impact Hurston’s novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* continues to have on her: “Reading *Their Eyes Were Watching God* for perhaps the eleventh time, I am still amazed that Hurston wrote it in seven weeks; that it speaks to me as no novel, past or present, has ever done” (2). It is also worth mentioning that both Walker and her precursor, Hurston, are southern writers. In *A Web of Words: The Great Dialogue of Southern Literature*, Richard Gray states that writers who are part of, or experience, a shared ideology demonstrate similar linguistic habits; they may construct similar characters and draw on common themes and images (65). As will be discussed in the following chapters, since Walker and Hurston come from the same region, they are undoubtedly influenced by experiencing the ideologies inherent in that place, resulting in some shared themes—like female friendship and women’s folly—and also characters of similar types. However, the way that Walker uses these components in her work is different from Hurston. For example, Walker picks up the idea of realising identity through voice; in so doing, she fully develops an idea that was touched upon by Hurston. In *Their Eyes*, this notion is depicted through the oral culture used to tell family and cultural narratives, but Walker does this through stressing the power of the written word, often in letter-writing, which is an ancient form of communication and self-expression. The literature of each period “in part denounces and renounces its past” (*Stealing the Language*, 10); Walker is not imitating or overshadowing her “literary foremother,” but is instead in dialogue with Hurston. To demonstrate the influence of Hurston on Walker in more detail, I will compare Hurston’s *Their Eyes* with Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* in chapter three.

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

But male authors can also be traced in Walker’s oeuvre. Ralph Ellison is an icon whose most remarkable novel, *Invisible Man* (1952), is