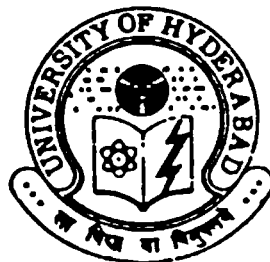


Journey to Wholeness: From Girlhood to Womanhood.

A Study of Selected Works of Alice Walker and Bama

A dissertation submitted to the University of Hyderabad
in partial fulfilment for the degree of
Master of Philosophy
in
English

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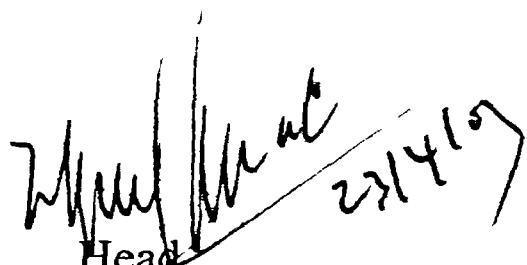
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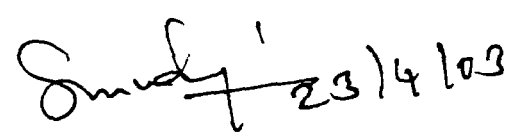
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This is to certify that Annam Ragamalika worked under my supervision for her M.Phil. Degree in the Department of English. Her dissertation titled "Journey to Wholeness: Girlhood to Womanhood. A Study of Selected Works of Alice Walker and Bama" represents her original work at the University of Hyderabad and it has not been submitted for a degree or diploma elsewhere.

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Declaration

I hereby declare to the best of my knowledge that the dissertation titled “Journey to Wholeness: From Girlhood to Womanhood, A Study of Selected Works of Alice Walker and Bama” carried under the supervision of Prof. Alladi Uma has not been submitted for a degree or diploma elsewhere.

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Contents

Acknowledgements	iv-vi
Preface	viii-xiii
Chapter 1: African American Women's Writing and Tamil Dalit Women's Writing: An Introduction	1-9
Chapter 2: "The Right to Life": Mute Cry in Society	10-31
Chapter 3: "Poisoned Shadows": Familial Spaces in Society	32-49
Chapter 4: Sisters "In Love & Trouble": Mother-Daughter Relationships	50-63
Chapter 5: "Revolutionary Petunias": Flowers of Survival	64-81
A Select Bibliography	82-100

Preface

My exposure to the rich and varied literatures of the African Americans during my postgraduate study invoked my interest in the notion of survival that pulsates in them. When groups of people who are occupying a disadvantaged position strive to rise above their subordinated state, there are many hurdles to cross. Applying the same logic, we can note that a girl who occupies the peripheral position within this oppressed group must brave many more levels of suppression in order to survive. Initially, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* are the books that caught my attention for their representation of girls. Soon after I noticed that African American women's writing showed a marked presence of girlhood and the writers were concerned about the crucial phase of girlhood that makes them the women they are. The girlhood of poor African American women is quite different from that of their White middleclass counterparts. As Joyce A. Ladner observes:

The poor Black girl reaches her status of womanhood at an earlier age because of the different prescriptions and expectations of her culture. There is no single set of criteria for becoming a woman in the Black community; each girl is conditioned by a diversity of factors depending primarily upon her opportunities, role models, psychological disposition and the influence of the values, customs and traditions of the Black community. It will be demonstrated that the resources which adolescent girls have at their disposal, combined with the cultural heritage of their communities, are crucial factors in determining what kind of women they become. (11)

African American women's writing bears testimony to the multiple layered oppression the girl confronts in her society and family. When I was contemplating the relevance of my choice of the area of study, I could perceive similar subjugation in our society also. If the African Americans suffer from racial oppression, the Dalits in our country face persecution owing to their caste. The "World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Tolerance" (WCAR),¹ organized by the United Nations in Durban from August 31 to September 2, 2001, and the heated debates that followed reinforced my decision to do a study of the African American girl and the Dalit girl as represented in the fiction of Alice Walker and Bama. The choice of these writers is not arbitrary. I have read among others, the works of Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou and Alice Walker. I chose Alice Walker because of the considerable presence of girlhood in her works, her questioning of rigid Christianity and political compulsions that motivated her to write. Tamil Dalit writing by women has blossomed in the recent past only. Therefore, Bama with her concern for Dalit girls and women, her attitude towards institutionalized religion and her preference to politicize the self by serving her people drew me to her writings.

Why compare African American literature and Dalit Literature? In its early stages, Tamil Dalit Literature got its inspiration and strength from African American Literature, Marathi, Gujarati and Kannada Dalit Literature. According to Bama Dalit literature is "Liberation literature like Black Literature, Feminist literature and Communist-Socialist Literature. *Dalit Murasu (The Dalit Drum)* a magazine that addresses Dalit issues has published the translation of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* as a serial. Another Dalit journal called *Nirapirigai (Spectrum)* published a special literary issue on African

American literature, which had translations of works of writers like Alice Walker and other critics. A. Marx, writer and critic feels that African Americans were brought as slaves to America before four hundred years and their literature is two hundred years old whereas Dalits belong to India and two thousand years of Indian history has denied them literary space. He feels that like African Americans, Dalits also can devise their own language, style and theme in literature. Interestingly, Bama uses the spoken language of her people for her works. According to her:

...every dominant literature should be inverted. This process of inversion can be seen in the Tamil oral tradition—the folklore. There are traces of the agony and the ecstasy of the Dalits, the direct and emotional outbursts, the collective identity, the mockery and caricature of the immediate oppressors, the super natural powers of oracle and the mythical heroism: these are the several elements for the construction of a conscious Dalit literature. (97-98)

Bama uses a language unfamiliar to the mainstream, upper caste society to write her works. She discards the “chaste” Tamil that is made unavailable for her people but employs the oral folk language, which is familiar to her society. Unlike writers like Sivakami, Vidivelli and Imayam, who use the Dalit language only in dialogues between their characters, Bama writes her whole work in the language of her community. This can pose a challenge to a reader unfamiliar to the nuances of the Dalit language.

At this point, I wish to record a question raised by a Dalit friend of mine that perturbed me and made me contemplate on my choice of study. She wanted to know as to why I, a non-Dalit, should work on a Dalit writer. This question made me realize the need to situate myself in a study such as this and it has helped in the shaping of this work. I feel

that being a Christian I can comprehend the insecurity that surrounds a minority community and by being a non-Dalit, a privileged status, I can re-define my subjectivity in my work. As a woman who continued my education after some years' gap, I have faced certain inconveniences but I do acknowledge the fact that I am more privileged than many of my less fortunate counterparts. I cannot overlook the fact that various factors like my background and economic condition have contributed to my education. I cannot universalize my experience to all women. I believe that it is by acknowledging this "difference" that a study like this can benefit. In this context, I wish to recall the thought-provoking words of Sharmila Rege:

The dalit feminist stand point which emerges from the practices and struggles of dalit women may originate in the works of dalit feminist intellectuals, but it cannot flourish if it is isolated from the experiences and ideas of other groups and must educate itself about the histories, preferred social relations, the utopias and the struggles of the marginalized. A transformation from "their cause" to "our cause" is feasible for subjectivities can be transformed. By this we do not argue that non-dalit feminists can "speak as" or "for the" dalit women but they can reinvent themselves as dalit feminists. Such a position, therefore avoids the narrow alley of direct experience based "authenticity" and narrow "identity politics". (6)

I trust that my study would enable me to review my privileges and thus redefine my subjectivity. This study would seem to draw more from Alice Walker than Bama because Alice Walker, who started her writing career in the 1970's, has written many works unlike Bama who started to write in the 1990's and is at the threshold of her writing career.

Though my study might appear to depict a more elaborate analysis of Alice Walker, it is merely due to the presence of availability of more works of Walker and it does not in anyway underestimate Bama's concern for the survival of girls. The idea for the title "Journey to Wholeness: From Girlhood to Womanhood," is drawn from Alice Walker's notion of "Surviving Whole". According to Walker a womanist is one who is "committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female "(xi). She stresses on the significance of overcoming difficulties and surviving totally. I have demonstrated this idea in detail in my fifth chapter titled "Revolutionary Petunias": Flowers of Survival.

All translations from Tamil to English used in this dissertation, unless otherwise specified are my own. I have referred to the format suggested by the MLA Handbook (fifth edition) for this dissertation.

Notes

¹ For detailed views on the Durban conference, see Maaya 29; Vishwanathan 3123-26; “Jadhiyam Varnasirma Inavadhamay” 22-23.

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Chapter 1

African American Women's Writing and Tamil Dalit Women's Writing: An Introduction

At the outset of a study such as this, I feel it is essential to set the backdrop by presenting a survey of African American women's writing and Tamil Dalit women's writing. In my introduction, I propose to do a chronological study of African American women's writing and Tamil Dalit women's writing by tracing their literary traditions.

African American Women's writing has a rich matrilineal literary tradition beginning from Phillis Wheatley with the publication of a book of poems in 1773, though Lucy Terry's "Bar's Fight" written on August 25, 1746, is the first poem composed by an African American. Ann Plato is the first African American to publish a book of essays in 1841. Harriet Wilson with the publication of *Our Nig* in 1859 was the first African American to publish a novel in America. Frances Harper's *Iola Leroy* and Anna Julia Cooper's *A Voice from the South*, both published in 1892 demonstrate the roots of the African American Women's literary tradition. Zora Neale Hurston, Nella Larsen are some of the other prominent literary figures. African American literature has an established male literary tradition also. Briton Hammon's *A Narrative of the Uncommon Sufferings and Surprising Deliverance of Briton Hammon, A Negro Man, Written by Himself* was published in 1760. Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* was published in 1789. Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* published in 1845, laid the foundation stone for a male tradition in African American literature. William Wells Brown's *Clotel* published in 1853 is considered the first novel written by an African American author. He is said to have written the first play by an African American. Some of the other African American male writers who have established themselves in the male

tradition are Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois, Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin. The 1960's in America was a politically charged period with the Civil Rights movement, Black Power movement and Feminist movement being catalytic to the writing that flowered in the 1970's. The year 1970 witnessed a surge of African American women's writing contesting the African American male literary tradition, with the publication of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and Toni Cade's anthology, *The Black Woman*. As Henry Louis Gates Jr. observes:

This tradition within a tradition is often related to, yet stands independent of the black male tradition and its triangle of influence, Richard Wright, James Baldwin, and Ralph Ellison. (2)

Alice Walker's writing in the aftermath of the Civil Rights movement and the Feminist movement mirrors the concerns of these movements. Born in Eatonton in 1944 to share cropper parents, Alice Walker's life was greatly transformed by a gun accident, which left her blind in one eye at the age of eight. She attended Spelman College in Atlanta for two years. Her visits to Africa and the Soviet Union have influenced her thoughts. She was a caseworker for New York City's Department of Social Sciences and then a voter registration worker in Mississippi. In 1967, she married Melvyn Leventhal a White, Civil Rights lawyer after which she continued her Civil Rights work and writing. She has taught at Tougaloo, Wellesley colleges, instructed in the University of Massachusetts and has edited *Ms.* magazine. After her divorce in 1977, she taught at Yale University. She has many works to her credit and they include her volumes of poetry *Once* (1965), *Revolutionary Petunias* (1973), *Goodnight, Willie Lee, I'll See You in the Morning* (1979) and *Horses Make a Landscape Look More Beautiful* (1984). Her collections of short stories are titled *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down* (1973) and *In Love and Trouble: Stories of*

Black Women (1981). Her novels include *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) and *By the Light of My Father's Smile* (1998). She has also edited a Zora Neale Hurston reader *I Love Myself When I am Laughing ...And Then again When I am Looking Mean and Impressive: A Zora Neale Hurston Reader* (1979). Her nonfiction includes *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983), *Living By the Word: Selected Writings (1973-1987)*, *Warrior Marks: Female Genital Mutilation and the Sexual Blinding of Women* (1993) with Pratima Parmar.

Walker's vision as a writer has been fashioned by literary figures like Jean Toomer, Zora Neale Hurston, Phillis Wheatley, Nella Larsen, Flannery O' Connor and Albert Camus. Her work primarily is concerned and "committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female."¹ When we speculate on Walker's literary output chronologically we notice that her concerns as a writer have enlarged. *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* discusses the life of few families situated in the South, their deprived state and her hope for their progress. *Meridian* depicts the life of a woman who is politically motivated by the Civil Rights' era, her strife and aspirations. In *The Color Purple*, among other issues the theme of tracing roots in Africa is mentioned. *Possessing the Secret of Joy* presents the cruel practice of female genital mutilation in Africa and across the globe. In *The Temple of My Familiar*, she weaves a rich tapestry by challenging time, space, history, relationships and race. There is concern for all the oppressed people of the world: the Maoris, West Indians and Aborigines of Australia. In *By the Light of My Father's Smile*, she connects herself with her Native American ancestry. We notice that with each work, she grows as an artist and her work becomes a vehicle for her ideology and her concept of womanism. Walker's essay titled *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* traces the African American woman's literary ancestry in the

creative outputs of the women in her community like gardening and quilting. Walker claims a literary lineage in the writings of Zora Neale Hurston, Phillis Wheatley and Nella Larsen. It is significant to mention here that Walker designed and taught the first course on Black Women writers at Wellesley College.

Having briefly traced the African American woman's literary tradition and placed Alice Walker in this tradition, I now focus on a survey of Tamil Dalit writing to address Bama's contribution to this literary scenario. Dalit writing in India gained prominence in India in Maharashtra in the 1950's. Ambedkar and Phule are the key figures in the Dalit movement in Maharashtra. Arjun Dangle states:

Ambedkar shaped the tradition of revolutionary thinking of almost a generation of Dalits, who can today hold their heads high. Thanks to him the literary manifestation of this social awareness in Dalit literature. (238)

In Tamilnadu, the writings of Periyar², Ayothee Thasar Pandithar and Rettai Malai Sreenivasan showed concern for the Dalit situation. Daniel, a Srilankan Tamil Dalit novelist is considered the forerunner of Dalit writing in Tamil. His works like *Panjamar (Fifth People)*, *Adimaigal (Slaves)*, *Govindan*, *Kanal (Ember)* and *Thanneer (Water)*, though published in the 1970's and 80's failed to get the attention they deserved. Tamil Dalit women's writing is in its nascent stages and therefore any attempt to trace a literary tradition as in the case of the African American women's writing may face problems. The African American literary tradition has evolved over a period of two hundred years whereas the Dalit writing in India is in its early phase. Dalit critic and writer Raj Gouthaman places Poomani's *Piragu (Afterwards)*, which was published in 1979 as the first Tamil Dalit novel. He observes that in the wake of Ambedkar's centenary celebrations in the 1990's many new Dalit voices began to be heard. Some of the political reasons for Dalit uprising are the Mandal commission's recommendation on reservation

and disappointment in Tamilnadu over the Dravida and Leftist Parties. Published in the 1990's Sivagami's *Pazhayana Kazhidalum (Passing Away of the Old Order)*, (1992) addresses the inherent evils in the Dalit society. *Ananandayi* (1993), Sivagami's next work, is concerned with the subjugation of women belonging to a backward caste just above the Dalits. The 1990's witnessed protest writing from Dalit Christians who vehemently criticized the practice of untouchability in the Roman Catholic Churches. Born as Fatima in 1958 in Puthupatti village in Viruthunagar district in Southern Tamilnadu, Bama wrote *Karukku* (1992), which brought with it the force of a whirlwind to whip the literary world with its quintessentially Dalit theme and language. *Karukku*, which means the searing edges of palmyra leaves, discusses the life of a Dalit Catholic Christian woman in retrospect and focuses on the caste-based atrocities in her village, experiences of untouchability in the catholic convent and the final breaking away from the nunnery. *Sangati* (1994), her next work, when translated means news; bears the news of the plight of girls and women in her rural community. Employing the oral narrative technique, it works like a "told to" story. The reader becomes an active participant, an alert listener to the stories told. *Kisumbukkaran (Mischief Monger)*, (1996), a collection of short stories, raises many issues about Dalit life. Unlike Walker who has a rich female literary tradition, Bama does not have a defined women's literary tradition. She states, "In English feminist writing has made its mark. But we are yet to have such a tradition." She adds, "Until recently women writers in Tamil moulded their writing on the male literary tradition" (Kanal 30). *Kalakkal (Mixture)* (1994), an autobiographical narrative written by Vidivelli also registers the protesting voice of a Catholic Christian woman who denounced life in the convent. It is relevant to note here that the first writing by Baby Kamble, a Dalit woman employs the autobiographical style. A similar trend can be observed in the early writings of oppressed people, the slave narratives of the African

Americans, the writings of women and the Aborigines. Imayam's *Koveru Kazhudaigal (Mules)* (1994) depicts the life and struggles of a Dalit dhobi family. However, this novel was criticized for having portrayed Dalit life in poor light. The exploiter here is from the Dalit community itself. Marku's *Yathirai (Pilgrimage)* (1993) discusses the attitude towards the Dalits in the Roman Catholic Church. Marku, a catholic priest belongs to a backward community, but Raj Gowthaman feels that he has penned *Yathirai* with a Dalit sensibility. Jeyarani's *Bharani* (2001) can also be said to present Dalit sensibility.

Bama feels that the works of Tagore, Kahlil Gibran, Mani, Parthsarthy, Jayakanthan and Akilan have shaped her writing. Some striking similarities between Walker and Bama are that both started to write at a moment of personal crisis: writing as a means of survival. Political and social atmosphere motivated them to write. Both have rejected formal, institutionalized Christianity. Walker says:

Although I am constantly involved, internally, with religious question— and I seem to have spent all my life rebelling against the church and other people's interpretation of what religion is – the truth is probably that I don't believe there is a God, although I would like to believe it. (O'Brien 205)

Bama has an ambivalent attitude towards Christianity. Bama insists that she doesn't wish to imprison Christ in religion. According to Bama:

I have a special love for Christ because of his revolutionary thinking. During his lifetime Christ mingled with the suppressed and marginalized sections of his society. (Kanal 31)

Bama differs from Alice Walker, in the sense that she is situated in a phase Walker herself was in the sixties, that is of trying to grapple with the dilemma of having to find literary mothers for herself. Walker moreover has traversed through the varied political movements in America and her once vehement anger has now toned down to a mature

protest that is expressed in her writings. Bama is actively involved in educating her people by teaching in a rural school. As Bama stresses in her interview with Nair, "My activism does not leap beyond the pages of my book. For me mainly writing was to liberate Dalits, the women and children." (Nair) Bama's political sphere takes on a new dimension because her political space involves her personal activism.

This dissertation is divided into five chapters preceded by a preface. The preface records my personal thoughts about my choice of this area of study. The first chapter titled "African American Women's Writing and Tamil Dalit Women's Writing: An Introduction" presents a chronological survey of the literary traditions in African American women's writing and Tamil, Dalit women's writing. It also introduces the writers, their concerns and ideologies. The second chapter titled " 'The Right to Life': Mute Cry in Society" places the girl from the oppressed class such as African American and the Tamil Dalit in their society. Drawn from the works of Alice Walker and Bama, the issues discussed are the question of education, sexual exploitation and race/caste, class divide. The third chapter titled " 'Poisoned Shadows': Familial Spaces in Society" focuses on the African American and Tamil, Dalit girl in her family. The issues highlighted include the percolation of mainstream beliefs that have led to repression of sexuality of the girl and the denial of private space. It also addresses the notion of silence as protest. The fourth chapter titled "Sisters '*In Love & Trouble*': Mother-Daughter Relationships" considers the mother-daughter relationships in Alice Walker and Bama's fiction. Motherhood is discussed keeping in mind all its complexities. The fifth chapter titled " 'Revolutionary *Petunias*': Flowers of Survival" treats some survivors from Alice Walker and Bama's works by examining their strategies for survival. Alice Walker and Bama are both concerned with the surviving whole of their people. "How did I Get Away with Killing One of the Biggest Lawyers in the State? It was Easy", "The Flowers" and

“The Child who Loved Daughter” are the short fiction I have examined in this dissertation. Since my primary focus is on the survival of the girl, I have not included *The Temple of My Familiar* for my study. I have selected certain essays such as “The Civil Rights Moment: What Good was it?”, “A Name is Sometimes Our Ancestors saying Hi I am With You”, “Brothers and Sisters” and “In Search of My Mothers’ Gardens” which are pertinent to my dissertation. This work probes into two short fiction of Bama namely *Panakkari* and *Dhavani*. It includes both *Karukku* and *Sangati*. I have translated all the quotations from *Sangati*, “Panakkari”, “Dhavani” and some of the criticisms and articles relating to Tamil Dalit studies. Since I had difficulties in getting material to read on adolescence pertaining to African American and Dalit contexts this dissertation draws essentially from the writings, which have extensively dealt with adolescence. Though I refer to notions of womanisms/feminisms in both the contexts, I have tried to adapt these notions of girls, keeping in mind the differences in experiences of girls and women.

Notes

¹ For the definition of womanism, see Walker: xi.

² The first major anti-caste movement in Tamilnadu was the Self-Respect movement launched by Periyar. E.V. Naicker in 1926. In the 1920's a series of legislations were passed. This includes the emancipation of temple girls. Recent feminist research in the context of Tamilnadu talks about the Women's imaginary in the early Dravidian movement. K. Srilata's paper "Translating the Self Respect Movement: Feminist Politics and the Problem of Disciplines," traces the women's writing from the Self-Respect movement. Her forthcoming book titled *The Other Half of the Coconut: Women's Writing Self Respect History*, to be published by Kali for Women is an edited translation of women's writing from the Self-Respect Movement.

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Chapter 2

“The Right to Life”¹: Mute Cry in Society.

This soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers. Certain seeds it will not nurture, certain fruit it will not bear, and when the land kills of its own volition, we acquiesce and say the victim had no right to live. We are wrong of course, but it doesn't matter.

- Morrison 164.

Growing up is a challenging task especially when one belongs to a marginalized class like the African American in the American context or the Dalit in the Indian context. Agencies such as race, caste, class and gender determine and define girlhood. These forces take shape in the larger spheres of society and family. Given the contexts of society and family, the relationships that emerge there also play a vital role in the growth and survival of the girl from the oppressed class. The word society is not an umbrella term that encompasses all races, cultures, castes and creeds. Owing to its plural nature, a society comprises varied communities with inherent power hierarchies. In the rung of power structures, therefore some are privileged whereas some are subjugated. In America, the African American society has suffered much oppression because of the racial prejudice. In India, the Dalits are marginalized because of the varna-based caste system. This chapter attempts to compare African American girlhood with that of Tamil Dalit girlhood by situating them in their respective societies. This chapter will analyse some of the crucial issues that strike us in both cases like the question of education, sexual exploitation and race/caste, class divide as they are represented in the works of Alice Walker and Bama.

In any given society, education is often denied to the marginalized community by the dominant society because education leads to employment and empowerment of the dominated. As Maude White Katz points out, “Education serves the interests of those who

own and control the economic resources of the country—The Establishment. They decide the quantity and the quality of the education, who should get it and how much” (124).

When we turn the pages of history we note that during slavery, African Americans did menial jobs for the White American society. In some states, education was forbidden to the African Americans by law. To the slave literacy was crucial for attaining freedom. Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs discuss the theme of education in their slave narratives. In the year 1954, the Brown Vs Board of Education of Topeka highlighted the injustice rendered to the African Americans by offering, “separate but equal education”(626). It was observed that segregation of children based on race in schools generated a feeling of inferiority and denied equal opportunities to the suppressed group.

The Dalits in India work as scavengers, labourers, and disposers of corpses in burial grounds, cobblers, prostitutes and washer folk. They are relegated to do lowly jobs because education has been denied to them in the past. According to Kancha Ilaiah:

Since our parents have been denied education, which alone could have enabled them to assess their own position realistically, whatever social status the Brahmin, parading as an ayyagaryu, assigned to our parents, they passed on to us. Right from childhood, inspite of the fact that we had such great skills, we remained diffident. Once Brahmanism had unnerved human beings who were much mightier and powerful, the diffidence was passed on from generation to generation. The whole lot of us— the whole Dalitbahujan population—were made to see things upside down. (sic)(2)

I would now focus on the crucial issue of the kind of education made available for the oppressed community, the price paid to be educated and the need to overcome the manipulative dominant society by devising an alternate history. My emphasis is on the girl from these suppressed groups of people and my argument is that owing to her age and

gender she has been further disadvantaged. In support of my standpoint, I place some episodes from the works of Alice Walker and Bama.

Alice Walker's novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* vividly demonstrates the education available for the African Americans. Mrs. Grayson's history lesson to Ruth and her classmates elucidates this. The class is taught its first lesson in history, after the white American school has donated some used history textbooks. Mrs. Grayson excitedly declares "American history was more important than any other kind it is the history of you and I, the proud history of free people!" She further adds "Our history teaches us as Negroes, and what we have done for ourselves"(184). Quite in contradiction to this comforting idea is the history book itself. For its outer cover the book has a pretty city scene on it with blonde round-eyed children. The word London written on one side indicates that the picture depicts a picturesque London scene. The name of the book's previous owner and the White school she studied in are also written. The contents of the inner cover are significant. A drawing called "The tree of the family of man"(185) draws our attention. On the tree are pictured all kinds of people. Positioned at the top are the whites and in the backdrop is a collage of the White man's inventions. Next in the rung is the yellow race followed by the Native Americans. At the bottom of the tree and not yet part of the tree is a black man with fuzzy hair, flat grinning lips, and a bone sticking out of his nose. He is wearing a grass skirt and standing over a pot of boiling water as if he expected at any moment, a visiting missionary. Jacqueline Paine the previous owner of the book had written meticulous notes under each picture, but for the picture of the Black man, she had written "A nigger"(186). The word with its many connotations, displays the contempt and the prejudice of the Whites. Mainstream history has entered the lives of the African Americans through their history books. Ruth vehemently discards it by flinging her history textbook.

In Alice Walker's short story, "The Flowers" Myop² a young girl ventures into the woods on a flower-picking excursion. Her serene world is rudely shaken when she steps onto a skull. She notices the large bones from which she gathers, " he had been a large man" (120). His cracked white teeth indicate the violence that preceded his death. The story climaxes when Myop notices the remains of a noose as she picks a wild rose from a plant near the skull. From her cozy world of flowers and sunshine and warmth, Myop is catapulted into the past. A gory violent history unfolds before her: "Myop laid down her flowers"(120). A sudden knowledge of the past grips her but she is filled neither with remorse nor with vengeance. She pays a solemn homage by placing her bouquet of flowers to the remains of the victim, the remainder of a bygone era, history. However, she is a changed person: "And the summer was over"(120). Alice Walker presents history to the African American girl by situating her before the remains of a lynched victim. Interestingly Myop is equipped with the knowledge of the past not from the annals of history. White American mainstream history³ denied the African American her due representation. The history taught in the schools in America is selective and modified. However, Alice Walker paints an alternative for Myop in the decayed remains of the lynched victim. Pages from the past spring open and Myop sees beyond the lynched victim, an unequal power structure and a racist, sexist society. Myop is like the rose that has blossomed from the remains of a violent past. With this education, she can survive the unequal, unjust history.

If the works discussed above, deal with the kind of education available for the African American girl, Alice Walker's short story "How Did I Get Away With Killing One of the Biggest Lawyers in the State? It Was Easy" explores the price she must pay to be educated. The young narrator of the story is seduced into a sexual relationship with a much older married White lawyer. The bait used to lure her is the promise of education. Enticed by lawyer Bubba's offer, the adolescent narrator consents to have her mother sent to a

mental asylum. When realization occurs, she murders the white lawyer and takes his money. She ceases to succumb to the exploitative system. She reassures herself after the crime: "One of the carrots Bubba always dangled before me was that he was going to send me to college; I didn't see why he shouldn't do it" (26).

When we address the situation of the Dalit girl, we observe that in a society plagued by caste and class prejudices, education⁴ is often denied to her. Bama's story "Panakkari" traces Ramayee's difficulties in getting education, while her parents labour at the landlord's house. Ramayee shoulders the responsibility of taking care of her infant sibling. She attends school with her brother and hopes to get her free midday meal. The teacher reprimands her when her brother soils the classroom. Even this intermittent schooling ends with the demise of her father. She accompanies her mother to the landlord's house, where apart from looking after her sibling she also assists in the household chores. Bama in sketching the character of Ramayee opens our mind's eye to the tragic fate of many a Dalit girl. It is worth noting that Ramayee is not keen on going to school. Perhaps she has witnessed the fate of other Dalit girls and thus can foresee her own future. The observation, "Eight year old Ramayee detested going to school" is pregnant with meaning (24). A recent report on rural education in Andhra Pradesh revealed that girls were provided primary education only. When probed it was found that sexual harassment, rape and lack of hygiene in the state-run schools, discouraged girls from going to school. (Bose 18)

Bama's story "Dhavani" focuses on Chellakilli's desire for education that leads to her exploitation and death. Irullappan's master offers to educate Chellakilli if he sends her to his daughter's house. The manipulative employer is aware of Irullappan's dreams and therefore suggests that if educated Chellakilli can become a teacher. Irullappan is elated at the idea that his daughter will be able to educate others. When he dares to educate his daughter by the only way he can, he is shattered by her unexpected death.

Alice Walker discusses the issue of education by presenting the harsh realities of the biased education available to the African American girl and highlights the heavy price she must pay to be educated. From her works, we can infer that she stresses the need to discard mainstream history that is thrust on the marginalized groups. Bama projects the handicap of poverty of rural Dalit families that obstruct the girl from getting educated. She examines the corruption involved in the educational system. She sees it as a ploy to deter her people from improving their suppressed state.

Prejudice based on caste has led to instances where there are separate schools in the same campus, one for the rich, elitist upper caste Christians and non-Christians and the other for the poor and Christian Dalits. If the building is common, there are cases of segregating the Dalits from the other students in schools⁵ in rural areas. In *Karukku*, Bama highlights the discriminatory practices she braved at school because of her caste and class background. She observes:

The warden sister of our hostel could not abide low-caste or poor children. She would get hold of us and scold us for no rhyme or reason. If a girl tended to be on the plump side, she would get it even more. ‘These people get nothing to eat at home; they come here and they grow fat’, she’d say publicly. (17)

Seeking inspiration from her brother Bama overcomes her difficulties by mastering the lessons. By sheer hard work, she gains recognition. However, she suffers humiliation each time the Dalit students are asked to identify themselves for statistical data. She shrinks into a cocoon of shame. Later when she tops the list of Dalit students in the SSLC examinations, Bama swells with pride and self-respect. This recognition awakens Bama’s spirit of questioning injustice. Larger questions like, “Why, is it impossible for the Harijan to study or what?”(19) are raised in her. Parallels can be drawn in Kumud Pawde and

Shantabai Kamble's autobiographies that record a similar struggle for education. Kumud Pawde discusses the difficulties she underwent to become a Sanskrit scholar. Shanta Bai Kamble writes about the dilemma she faced in her own family circle when she wanted to continue her education. The thrust of my argument is that education is not available to the girl from a marginalized community.

Owing to their peripheral position within the marginalised societies, the young girls often face sexual exploitation. From the days of slavery, African American women have been abused sexually. Adolescent girls were more vulnerable to sexual overtures of White slave masters. Harriet Jacobs discusses the fear she had as a thirteen year old for Dr Flint, her master. Jezebel, the sexually aggressive woman is a stereotype created by the White society to justify the sexual exploitation of African American women. Alice Walker's concern for the poor African American girl is evident in her story "How Did I Get Away with Killing One of the Biggest Lawyers in the State? It was Easy". She focuses on the ring of insecurity that surrounds the African American girl by discussing issues like broken families, overworked mothers and poverty. It shocks us when the narrator reveals:

It was nothing for a girl or a woman to be raped. I was raped myself, when I was twelve, and my mamma never knew, and I never told anybody. For what could they do? It was just a boy passing through, somebody's cousin from the North. (23)

The penultimate line of this observation is significant. Even at a young age, the narrator is aware of the web of powerlessness that has trapped her. She chooses to remain silent because she is aware that by discussing the sexual abuse she would draw more attention on herself. Quite resigned to her life, she brushes off her bitter experience. This is followed by exploitation by the White lawyer. Her first visit to the lawyer's home lands her in trouble. The White man pursues her the next day and rapes her in his office. However, he

persuades her to believe that she had desired him also. Enticed by his offer to send her to college, and enticed by his gifts the narrator agrees to satisfy his sexual appetite. He manipulates her into believing that he loves her. This story vividly portrays that the White man's attitude towards the African American woman has not changed since slavery. For the White man the African American girl or woman is an object that satisfies his sexual hunger.

During the past, the African American man's sexuality was seen as a threat and therefore viewed with suspicion by the Whites. The remains of the lynched victim in Walker's story "The Flowers" poses the question of the cause that led to the lynching. I digress here to draw upon Ida. B. Wells⁶, a noted anti-lynch activist, who protested against the lynching of three Black men known to her in Memphis. Ida charged in her paper that the motives for lynching were purely economic. She stated that the men were lynched because they were successful in their business and lynching was a vital part of racial oppression. However, in my opinion, the threat of the Black man's sexuality might have also induced the White man to carry out lynching. Relevant here is Jean Toomer's story "Blood Burning Moon", where the African American is lynched because of sexual jealousy. The theme of sexual exploitation is further explained in Alice Walker's novel *Meridian*. The half White man George Dexter lures adolescent Meridian Hill into his funeral home with petty gifts for an exploratory feel of her body. He places his bulging wallet within her sight when he indulges in this activity. Their economically deprived state often drives the African American girls to give in to the White man's demand. In Dexter's absence, his assistant pursues her. For her benefit, he stages a show of seduction with another young African American girl. These initiations propel Meridian into an intimate relationship with Eddie resulting in her pregnancy.

African American men sexually abuse African American girls and women⁷. As bell hooks observes:

While black parents admonished daughters not to submit to sexual assaults by white men, they were not encouraging them to reject similar approaches from black men. This is just another indication of the way in which the pervasive concern black people have about racism allows them to conveniently ignore the reality of sexist oppression. They have not been willing to acknowledge that while racism caused white men to make black women targets. It was and is sexism that causes all men to think that they can verbally and physically assault women sexually with impunity. (68-69)

Alice Walker depicts poignantly the assault of Celie in *The Color Purple* by pa, the father figure in her life. Meridian Hill escapes the threat of rape by a senior professor in college. Walker voices her anger against the sexist attitude of the African American men in the poem, "He Said Come" as:

He said come
 Let me exploit you;
 Somebody must do it
 And wouldn't you
 Prefer a Brother?
 Come, show me your
 Face,
 All scarred with tears;
 Unburden your heart-
 Before the opportunity
 Passes Away. (*Alice Walker: Her Blue Body* 213)

In the Indian society, the Dalit girl is doubly oppressed because of her peripheral position within the marginalized community. A. Marx argues that in the history of India more Dalit women have been “sold into slavery”(44) and “forced into prostitution”(44). According to him even in contemporary society, the Dalit women are more sexually harassed in police stations when compared to their upper caste counterparts. The plight of the Dalit woman is poignantly depicted in Sharmila Rege's observation:

In case of the lower caste women the fact that their labour outside their family is crucial for the survival of the family, leads to the lack of stringent controls on their labour, mobility and sexuality and this renders them “impure” or “lacking in virtue”. In several instances the rape of Dalit women may not be considered as rape at all because of the customary access that the upper caste men have had to Dalit women's sexuality. In almost all regional languages in India the word “rape” is equivalent to the phrase “stealing the honour of” and since lower caste women by the virtue of their double oppression have no “honour” to speak of the right to redressal is often denied. (29-30)

Bama's work places before us the sexual exploitation of the Dalit girls⁸. In her story “Dhavani”, Bama reveals the ill-treatment meted out to Chellakili in the hands of her employer. At the bus stop, we are made aware of the possible sexual abuse of Chellakili by her employer. Though Bama does not state these things explicitly, she employs the technique of introducing a conversation between the villagers. Thus along with Irulappan, we are also informed of the happenings. The observation, “Her sons and his friends used to misbehave with Chellakili. Though she was aware of this, she overlooked it”(67), speaks volumes about the exploitative society. Bama's use of the symbol of dhavani announces the attainment of puberty of the girl. It is that vulnerable stage when a girl is both a girl and a

woman. Therefore, the red dhavani that is sent with Chellakili's belongings allude to the possibility that she might have been sexually assaulted. The wearing of the dhavani celebrates the growth and maturity of the body. It also prepares the girl psychologically to come to terms with her new self. The ceremonious draping of the dhavani is performed by the mother- figure of the family. However, her employer sends Chellakili's dhavani. The symbol of the dhavani thus carries two-fold meaning of Chellakili's possible attainment of puberty and sexual abuse. In Iyayar's *Koveru Kaluthaigal*, a similar fate befalls Mariamma, who is raped by a backward caste man when she is on the errand of collecting soiled clothes. In Jeya Shanthi's novel *Parani*, Kalimuthu, a Devar-caste man, molests Shenpagam, a Dalit labourer. It is significant that initially a Dalit man threatens Shenpagam of rape but Kalimuthu intervenes and declares his right over her. Therefore, we find that the woman's body is perceived as a space to be invaded and colonized.

A parallel can be drawn between the situation in America and India. Rape and sexual assault of girls and women of the oppressed communities in both the contexts stem from man's need to project his power. Walker's fiction depicts sexual assault explicitly and there is a resounding tone of anger. Bama refers to rape subtly and much is left unsaid. It is for the reader to interpret meanings into the lacunae.

Race/caste, class hierarchies are crucial themes handled by both Alice Walker and Bama. This divide manifests itself in systems like share cropping⁹, legal, educational and the medical care in the African American society. Jim Crow laws, segregated schools and lynchings were adopted to maintain the race hierarchy. The principles of National Association for the Advancement of Colored People incorporated in May 1911 demand:

1. To abolish legal injustice against Negroes.
2. To stamp out race discriminations.
3. To prevent lynchings, burnings and torturings of black people.

4. To assure every citizen of color the common rights of American citizenship.

5. To compel equal accommodations in railroad travel, irrespective of color.

6. To secure for colored children an equal opportunity to public school education through a fair apportionment of public education funds. (435)

However, the diseased hands of racial prejudice have soiled every occupation in America. Owing to her race, gender and age the African American girl suffers from multiple handicaps. Maya Angelou captures the quagmire that traps her as “ [...] she is caught in the tripartite cross fire of masculine prejudice, White illogical hate and Black lack of power” (231).

In Walker's novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, five-year-old Daphne confronts the society in the shape of her father's white boss. As she poisons the cotton crops:

[...] she trembled and vomited and looked beaten down like a tiny asthmatic old lady; but she did not complain to her father, as afraid of him as she was of the white boss who occasionally deigned to drive by with friends to watch the lone picaninny, so tired she barely saw them, poisoning his cotton. (54)

The little child becomes the spectacle of interest for the White man. The haunting image of the White man reminds us of the days of slavery.

Walker views the legal system available for the African American in the same novel. When Brownfield applies for the custody of Ruth, it is a white judge, who renders the verdict. The judge overlooks Brownfield's criminal record to pass a verdict favourable to him. Grange's attempts to remind the judge of his son's past life are silenced. We know that the judge is repaying a favour to Brownfield, who had once procured African American women for him. Walker questions the authority of the White man to decide the fate of an

African American girl. Can there be justice in a white man's verdict? As Ruth observes, "He was smiling in that way a southern white man smiles when they control everything--birth, life and death. Ruth hated him forever. She had been given in all speedy 'justice' to a father who had never wanted her, by a man who knew nothing about them [sic]" (245). In her short story, "How Did I Get Away with the Killing of the Biggest Lawyer in the State? It was Easy", Walker discusses the manipulative nature of the White lawyer who was able to clear the obstacles in his way by using the legal system. Bubba, the White lawyer convinces the African American girl that her mother is neurotic. A signature of consent from the girl is sufficient for him to send the mother to a mental asylum.

The kind of education available to the African American girl is explored in Walker's novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*. Ruth's history book is from the White school with White American history. Her classmates ostracize Ruth in school. In her, they see a murderer's daughter, a little vamp who has managed to lure her grandfather from his wife. Education is being denied to the African American girls; Ruth discovers the limited opportunities¹⁰ available to her. She can become a domestic help¹¹, or marry a war veteran like Walt, whom Russel had married. In *Meridian*, Walker presents an African American society, which has internalized White American moral values. Adolescent Meridian Hill is unable to confide in her mother. Her sexual escapades with Eddie, her schoolmate leaves her pregnant. Meridian resents motherhood and marriage that society has forced on her. When Eddie deserts her at seventeen she is "a drop out from school, a deserted wife, a mother, a daughter-in-law" (75-76). The medical care for the African Americans also does not escape prejudice. In *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, Daphne's fear for the whites seeks release in violent convulsions. When Mem tries to draw the attention of the indifferent nurse to Daphne who is writhing in pain, she is a picture of helplessness. This

increases Daphne's fear of the White people, “ her fear encompassed the world and included darkness, buildings, ancient trees, and flowers with animal names” (119).

The issue of caste divides surfaces itself subtly¹² or overtly in Bama's works. In the opening chapter of *Karukku*, Bama traces the geographical details of her village. What begins as an innocent exercise culminates in situating the Dalit's status in the village. She observes that to the east of the village lies the cemetery and that the Dalits live next to that. Their living next to the cemetery signifies that they are treated like the dead. The unseen boundary line between the upper-caste and the Dalit is thus maintained. BBC's veteran broadcaster Mark Tully documents the demarcation of caste-based geography in Thatchoor, a catholic village near Chennai as, “ The upper caste Christians live on one side of the Church. Their religious processions do not pass the Dalit homes and they even worship and are buried separately.”(BBC Reports on Thatchoor) The Dalits are denied a history and an identity because of their marginalized position in the society. By writing about herself and her caste, Bama asserts her identity and presents “the voice of a deviant subalternity committed to writing its own history.”(Guha 12) She uses the double-edged lacerating Palmyra leaves to highlight the atrocities caused by the caste and class divide. When Bama returns from school, the Naicker women ask her for her street's name. This is one of the subtler methods employed to find out her caste. To the Naickers the word “Cheri”¹³ is synonymous with the Dalit. Partha Chatterjee argues that caste is associated with the body and is the “reproduction of the human species through procreation within endogamous caste groups which ensures the permanence of ascribed marks of caste purity and pollution.” (203) He reiterates that the pollution caused when physical contact of the defiling objects occur, it can be removed by certain methods of cleansing. The Brahmin therefore, must avoid performing labour that would defile his purity. Chatterjee further explains that the Brahmins and the other upper castes need the “labouring bodies of the impure castes be

reproduced that they can be subordinated to the need to maintain the bodies of the pure castes in their state of purity”(203). This pollution—purity paradigm manifests itself in the inhuman practice of untouchability. When Bama witnesses the evil of untouchability; she feels the need to assert her identity. As she watches a Dalit elder handing over a packet of sweets by holding onto the string, she longs to grab the packet and pollute it with her Dalit hands. To young Bama, this incident initially provokes laughter, but on retrospection, she is angered by the malicious expression of caste system.

It is the inter-caste fights between the Dalit and the Chaliyaars that awaken her to the horror of caste and class divide. Against the warning of her mother, Bama steals in to the scene and watches her people being beaten up ruthlessly by the police. The police atrocities follow the complaints made by the Chaliyaars. The Dalit headman who had taken refuge in Bama's house also is not spared: “This was the first time that I had ever seen the police beating up a person they had seized. If one policeman slapped the headman's face the others followed suit, slapping him in the very same spot”(34). In this case, the police are found supporting the upper caste people¹⁴. Bama's story “Dhavani” also exposes the corruption in the system. Chellakili's body is cremated immediately without the much needed post-mortem.

In *Karukku* Bama describes her long grinding days when she accompanies her grandmother to harvest, clean and shell groundnuts. For a petty sum of money, they must tolerate the verbal abuse of the Naickers. She states, “All the time I went to work for the Naickers, I knew I should not touch their goods or clothes. I should never come close to where they were, I should always stand away to one side. These were their rules”(46). The Nadars exploited the Dalits during their bartering sessions. In “Dhavani,” Irulappan's master asks him to send his daughter Chellakili to his daughter's house. Though the promise of education is made, we know that in his dependent, marginalized position, Irulappan

cannot turn down his master's offer. This explains his inability to accompany his daughter on her visit or pay her a visit during her eight-month stay at his master's house. When Chellakili dies, Irulappan is offered monetary compensation to silence him. The offer of money answers many unanswered questions. It is significant that the guilt that the employer escapes from is thrust on Irulappan. He blames himself for sending Chellakili to his master's house. Irulappan's helplessness and frustration reaches the pinnacle when he hangs himself with his daughter's dhavani in his master's courtyard.

Caste hierarchy takes another ugly turn when it enters the church¹⁵. Christianity in India is a more recent phenomenon when compared to America. In India, many Dalits converted to Christianity to escape the varna-based caste discrimination. However, even after conversion, Christians carry out the cultural values and caste practices of Hindus. This leads to discrimination in the name of caste within the church. Iyothee Thass reflects on castesim in Christianity as, "Those who proclaim that Christ was born to redeem one and all but use Christ's name in vain by calling themselves as caste Christians and some others as casteless Christians must notify others as to who will be redeemed by Christ."¹⁶ (688)

The presence of caste discrimination is more evident with the practitioners of Roman Catholic faith and this raises the issue of the identity crisis within the church. The Dalit Christians face subjugation in many forms. In Tamil Nadu, their residences are situated away from the higher caste Christians. In Kerala, they are the landless labourers who work for the Syrian Christians. There is no inter-caste marriage among these Christians. It is unfortunate that Dalit Christians are referred to as "rice" Christians by the upper caste converts. The upper caste converts are of the opinion that the Dalits convert to Christianity in order to overcome economic deprivation and untouchability. It cannot be denied that Dalits converted to Christianity to gain better acceptance in society. The contemporary situation exposes that in many villages the Dalit Christians live separately,

worship in different church buildings and have separate cemeteries. The Dalit Christians have lost the constitutional safe guards meant for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. As S. M. Michael remarks, “ In fact, a dalit Christian today is thrice discriminated against-- by the state, the church and by the non-dalit Christians”(3243). He argues that for a Dalit Christian the “Dalit identity” overshadows the “Christian identity”,

In *Karukku*, Bama states that the evils of caste and class have soiled the church as well. The church authorities have instilled “ bhakthi” or belief with “ bayam” or fear. Her daily catechism classes and “pusai” mark Bama’s girlhood. She braves the physical discomforts of hunger and chill at dawn to participate in the church activities. If she missed a day, she would be punished. Religion becomes a routine activity of memorizing scriptures and prayers. It is significant that the church, which is the sanctuary of peace and love, evokes fear in Bama. When Bama commits petty offences, she visualizes a jubilant devil and a glum guardian angel.

However, a seed of revolt can be traced to Bama's girlhood, when she disobeys the “sisters” and bites the host. The sacrilegious act of hers does not harm her, as she had feared: “ I told myself that the sisters had spoken empty words.” (74). She systematically disrupts the quiet acceptance of ceremonious worship by this discovery. However, she opts to remain silent. For the growth of her self, this silence is very crucial. She knows that from then on she must make discoveries for herself. Interestingly, Bama compares blind faith to the teeth and bones she had once collected, while assisting in the laying of the foundation for a new church. She realizes that she is the new church that must discard the old bones of blind faith. Thus, by discussing the various systems that operate to exploit the Dalit, Bama highlights the caste and the class divides.

In this chapter, I have attempted to place the girl in the larger unit of the society, of which the family and the individual members are smaller units. It must be stated that these

units are not watertight compartments and that we can observe a two-way osmosis. The values of the society take root in the family and are manifested in the relationships. It is by battling with these imbibed notions that the girl learns to survive. As my chapter demonstrates, the oppressive forces that shape the girl from a marginalized society are myriad and varied.

Notes.

¹ This title is borrowed from Walker's thought-provoking poem "The Right to Live: What Can the White Man Say to the Black Woman?" See Walker 442- 48. This poem lucidly describes the many injustices meted out to the Black woman and her children in White American society.

² Walker's choice of the name Myop for the young girl is interesting. Pertinent here is Henry Louis Jr.'s observation; see Gates, Henry Louis xiv. In his introduction to Anna Julia Cooper's seminal work, *A Voice from the South*, he states, "The myopic sight of the darkened eye can be restored when the full range of the black woman's voices, with its own special timbres and shadings, remains mute no longer." Walker uses the name Myop to highlight the myopic vision of White American history.

³ Lorde presents an episode where she was ignorant of Crispus Atticus, an African American, the first to have died in the American Revolution. She observes, "I had been taught by some of the most highly considered historians in the country. Yet I never once heard the name mentioned of the first man to fall in the American Revolution nor have been told that he was a Negro. What did that mean about the history I had learned?" See Lorde 133.

⁴ The issue of education for the scheduled castes has a turbulent past. In 1990, when the Janata Dal Prime minister V.P. Singh announced, "an additional 27% reservations for the backward classes, it sparked off violent protests from upper caste students. The subsequent agitation and countrywide turmoil, eventually led to the ouster of Singh's government. The Supreme Court also stayed Singh's order after some upper caste students burnt themselves to oppose the move." In 1992, the Supreme Court "upheld the Singh's government and asked the then Congress government to reserve 27% of government jobs for socially and economically backward groups." See Iype.

⁵ The report of segregating dalit students from other students by forcing them to sit, eat and play separately in a village named Anaipalayam in Tamil Nadu stands as a proof to caste discrimination in schools. See Thangavel 20.

⁶ See Lerner for a detailed discussion on Ida B. Wells.

⁷ For a sampling of materials that present such experiences, see Angelou, Morrison and McMillan. Young Maya is molested by her mother's boy friend, an African American. Morrison discusses the rape of Pecola by her father. McMillan depicts the rape attempt of Frieda by a boy from her own community.

⁸ Applicable here is the tragic death of Chitra. Chitra, a 16-year-old Dalit girl from Gangavaram, a small village near Thiruvannamalai was abducted and raped by Neethipathy, a propertied Gownder in March 2000. A case was filed and the enquiry was on. After she escaped him, she died by immolating herself in May 2001. Reports reveal that she was threatened by Neethipathy to withdraw her complaint. This is one of the few cases of rape of a Dalit girl that has been reported. See Vidiyal 16-17.

⁹ For an idea of the cruelty of the system of sharecropping, and the plight of Frankie whose life is caught in the web of share cropping, See Smith.

¹⁰ For a study on African American adolescent girls, see Olsen 6. During the study a girl is said to have claimed, "Getting a job would be my biggest challenge as a black female."

¹¹ See Minus 29-34. This story discusses Corrie's anxiety when she approaches a white woman for work.

¹² For a discussion of caste discrimination, see Illiah 2.

¹³ For an argument on caste divide, see Vidiyelli 173. Vidiyelli's friends refuse to visit her home because it is situated in the "Cheri" or the slums.

¹⁴ For an article on a caste fight between the Naickers and the Dalits and the police atrocities that followed, see Yaakkan 12-13.

¹⁵ For an autobiographical work, that discusses casteism in church and convents see Vidiyelli 36. Vidiyelli the writer like Bama, has denounced nunnery, unlike Bama is married and is involved in activism among Dalits.

¹⁶ Iyothee Thass, a Tamil Buddhist parayar pioneered the Buddhist revival in the early twentieth century. He vehemently criticises caste Christians and according to him, complete Christians are those who have denounced caste. See Thass 688.

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Chapter 3

“Poisoned Shadows”¹: Familial Spaces in Society

In the larger sphere of a given society, the family is an integral part, which in many ways acts as the microcosm of the larger unit. Values and ideas inherent in the society seep into the family and thus influence the thinking and behaviour of the members of the family. Therefore, interactions within the family are framed by societal compulsions. As I have observed in my earlier chapter, a society consists of many layers of hierarchy. The ideas of dominant and privileged communities often enter the space of the marginalized people. The complexity of the African American families can be traced back to its African heritage. Joyce Ladner observes, “A striking feature of pre-colonial African society was the importance that was attached to the family unit. The extended family was highly structured with clearly designated roles for its male and female members” (19). Later slavery devastated the family structure, as marriages between slaves were not legitimized and parental rights over children were not permitted. During post-bellum days, there was a stress on the fabric of the family. John Hope Franklin observes, “The strong family tradition among blacks thus survived the slave system, then legal segregation, discrimination, and enforced poverty, and finally, they had to contend with racially hostile governmental and societal practices, policies, and attitudes” (25). He quotes from *A Policy Framework for Racial Justice*, which states that,

Since the 1960s, rapid urbanization, and ghettoization, has had a devastating impact on many black families. As large number of blacks migrated to large

cities from rural areas, black males have often been unable to find work, and government policies and other social forces further sapped family strength. (25, 26)

However, bell hooks argues that, “many black women find the family the least oppressive institution” (37). She elaborates that unlike White bourgeois women, the black women despite the prevalent sexism find self-esteem in the family unit. Given the extended nature of African American families, she says that there is sustenance and nurturing in family units. Owing to their marginalized position in society, Black families often battle with cultural notions of the dominant society. The peripheral position occupied by the African American girl within her family makes her more vulnerable to these ideas. In the African American context White American, mainstream beliefs of puritanical Christianity and patriarchy have percolated into the African American family. Societal forces that enter the realms of the family thus mould the African American girl. In the context of India, the caste system permeates into the family. It is the outcome of belief in, “Reincarnation and Karma.” The four castes eventually became three thousand castes with the untouchables at the bottom. Ambedkar remarks in his seminal work, “Annihilation of Caste” on the division of castes, as follows:

It is also a division of labourers. Civilized society undoubtedly needs division of labour. But in no civilized society is division of labour accompanied by this unnatural division of labourers into watertight compartments. Caste system is not merely a division of labourers which is quite different from division of labour—it is an

heirarchy in which the divisions of labourers are graded one above the other (sic). (47)

This hierarchy is thrust on the members of the family and the girl occupies the lowest position in the rung of power. Certain notions that are associated with the upper caste family influence the Dalit family also. Preferring the boy to the girl, instilling notions of chastity in the girl and training the girl to perform gender specific roles are some of the mainstream ideas that have entered the Dalit family. They play a vital role in the life of a Dalit girl.

In the African American literary scenario, Alice Walker expresses her concern about the African American girl who grows up in a family, which is torn by societal pressures. She explores White American mainstream beliefs that have been internalized by the African American family. These beliefs have led to repression of sexuality of the girl and denial of space in private and public spheres. Often the girl comprehends the world around her in silence. These silences are profoundly more meaningful than speech to her. As she grows into a woman, she recoils into her silent recesses to mark her protest. Likewise, silence becomes an effective tool to combat troubles. In the context of Tamil Dalit literature, Bama questions certain upper caste mainstream ideas that have entered the Dalit family. Adapting these ideas and enforcing them on the girl can be traumatic for her. Bama's works deal with this enigma of coming to terms with notions and beliefs that are thrust on the girl by the dominant caste.

Alice Walker explores the psychological colonization that torments her people in works like "The Civil Rights Movement: What Good was It? ", *Meridian*, *By the Light of My Father's Smile* and "The Child Who Loved Daughter". This occurs due to the blind

acceptance of Christianity and patriarchal values. It is slavery that introduced African Americans to Christianity. The White churches in the South, “helped reinforce the slave system by providing ethical, religious, and biblical rationales for human bondage and by behaving in paternalistic ways.” (Newman and Sawyer 26). Through misappropriation of the Scriptures and religious practices², they were convinced that as a race they were to denounce the pleasures of this world. Therefore, the African American girl grows up in rigid homes that stifle her with Christian values of propriety, prudery³ and self-sacrifice. Discussion and expression of sexuality was considered taboo. The African Americans labeled the normal curious girl “womanish” if she displayed any explicit sexuality but overlooked male expressions of sexuality. It is pertinent to note that Alice Walker coins the term “womanist” which refers to being “Responsible”, “Serious” and “In charge” (Mothers’ Gardens xi) and has a positive connotation. I feel that the African American girl is being sexually repressed as a feeble attempt to shield her from White American and African American exploitation. This is a method the family adopts to protect her from a sexist society. The sheer helplessness of shrouded sexuality is underscored in *Meridian*. Both Meridian and her mother are caught in the quagmire of repressed sexuality. To Mrs. Hill, religion is a mode of escapism. Therefore, she makes artificial flowers and prayer pillows. The scope of these symbols widens when they are seen in the context of the girl. The flowers being artificial are lacking in both life and fragrance. The pillows being too small are merely ornamental. The White man’s religion has robbed the African American families of their naturalness and their sense of purpose. This idea takes on a new dimension in Walker’s novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, which is rightly dedicated to the “Blameless Vulva”. The focus is on the cruel practice of female circumcision⁴ that

mutilates the girl both physically and psychologically. The plight of Dura, Tashi's sister who bleeds to death after cliterodictomy flashes before our mind's eye. It is significant that despite knowing Dura's fate Tashi allows herself to be mutilated. This act speaks volumes of the internalization of patriarchal values. Tashi offers herself to the Olinka knife of tradition to be accepted by her people and to get the scar that would give her the Olinka walk in which "the feet appear to slide forward and are rarely raised above the ground"(66—67). The girl who used to steal hours of uninhibited pleasure with Adam, after the circumcision suffers from:

Cramps caused by the near impossibility of flow passing through so tiny an aperture as M'Lissa had left after fastening together the raw sides of Tashi's vagina with a couple of thorns and inserting a straw so that in healing the traumatized flesh might not grow together. (65)

It is moving to know that M'Lissa herself was badly mutilated in her childhood. It is important to note that this purification ceremony is for the girls only⁵. However, later her service to her community is applauded and she is considered a national monument. It is significant that patriarchy employs a woman to traumatize another. The haunting image of the small figure of a girl touching her genitals holds our attention. Like the Africans, the African American family considered overt expression of female sensuality as taboo. Therefore, Alice Walker presents the larger audience of women who proudly display the naked bottoms of their daughters. This is a protest against a taboo that was thrust on them by patriarchy. There is an attempt to shatter the taboo by displaying the prohibited. The resistance to an act that mars girlhood comes from the infant girls. An attempt is seen to universalize this issue of mutilation in the guise of sexual repression.

Alice Walker's essay "Brothers and Sisters" analyses the unfair treatment meted out to her sister. She discusses the alarm with which her sister's puberty is handled. When the family takes pride in the escapades of the sons, the girl is strictly supervised. She is told not to get pregnant because it is a sin to abort. It is rather painful that in order to avoid embarrassment during her menstrual cycle, she has strange fits. The African American girl is often seen as a symbol of sex⁶, by the White American society. However, it is sad that African American families themselves feel threatened by their girls. This idea acquires new meaning in Walker's novel *By the Light of My Father's Smile*. Her father sees six years old Maggie's interest in boys as sluttish ness. Later she is brutally beaten by him because of her relationship with Mannuelito. Robinson believes that Maggie is a "tramp"(33) and Susannah his younger daughter an angel. By lashing Maggie with a belt, he maims her of her sexual need. Maggie abuses herself by developing an enormous appetite for food. She inflicts pain on herself by piercing her nipples to hang chains and her labia to bear a crucifix. It seems as though she is on a pilgrimage of compulsive celibacy. She will never know what it is to love again. Susannah, the mute witness to her sister's abuse eventually is the one who tries varied relationships. It is significant that Robinson, the father is an anthropologist in the guise of a priest. He has donned the role of a missionary to have the church fund his research of the Mundo tribe. From an atheist he is transformed into a fanatic priest, who crucifies his daughter to meet his standards. However, Robinson himself is known for his voracious sexual appetite. Walker has a thought provoking title for this novel, which she borrows from a Mundo song. She highlights the healthy attitude of the Mundo tribe, which accepts the sexual need of the girl. To the Mundo girl the crescent moon is her smiling, loving father. This is pertinent to Maggie because she desperately sings the Mundo song "por la luz [. .

.J”(233) to get her father’s approval of her love for Manuelito. She craves for her father’s approval of her needs and desires. Woven into the novel is the story of young Pauline, who later becomes Susannah’s companion. Her family deceives her into an exploitative relationship with Winston to meet their financial needs. Her youth draws Winston to her and her family, “saw a use to which he could be put”(112). They have internalized the white man’s notions of the African American girl and thus her sexuality is abused. In Alice Walker’s short story “The Child Who Favored Daughter”, the African American girl infuriates her father by loving a white married man. Having lost a sister to a white married man’s lust, her father is upset to see history repeat itself. His gruesome act of killing his daughter by chopping off her breasts and feeding the dogs with them is shocking. We can sense the man’s sexual jealousy of his sister’s and his daughter’s love life. In both the cases, it is evident that he is sexually attracted to them but they seek white men. The African American man often feels threatened by the presence of the White man who could lure his women away. Spirituality is seen as a way of taming the sexual desires of the girl and “no amount of churchgoing changed her ways”(43). However, when religion cannot tie her down, she is killed.

In the context of Tamil Dalit writing, Imayam captures the insecurity that haunts the Dalit girl in the poem “The Rattle and the Cow that Exchanged Hands,” as:

When I was born
 Mother wept, saying
 “A row of worries,
 Endless trouble.”
 “The first- born should be a girl,

The family will shine.

Good luck, it was, a Friday birth

What for, the clamour for a male?"

When first brother was born,

I amused him with a rattle

For the second and the third

I turned into a rattle

As first brother got out to play

I went with mother, to fetch water.

When last brother got out

I cooked rice.

I became a woman

Last brother came with me

When I went to ease myself

Second brother came with me

When I went to fetch water.

First brother came with me

When I went to work

Mother slept next to me

Her arm on my body at night⁷. (37-38)

Bama handles the notion of repressing quality of gender oppression. It is in the family that the girl identifies her marginalized position as being poor, Dalit and a girl. In Bama's short story "Dhavani", the young Chellakili's family is helpless after they lose her. All the decisions in her life are made without consulting her. Bama deals with the gender oppression within the Dalit family in detail in her novel *Sangati*. Fatima, the narrator complains about the gender bias the Dalit girl suffers. It is in upper caste societies that the birth of a girl is unwelcome because of the many monetary demands on the girl's parents and people. The Dalit family imbibes this upper caste/class notion⁸ of the girl also. Therefore, Vellaiamma, the narrator's grandmother feeds her grandsons better than she feeds her granddaughters. She believes that they would take care of her in old age. Fatima observes that male babies are breast fed longer, as boys they are treated better and enjoy more play time. However, the Dalit girl's days are marked by hard labour. The narrator lists forms of gender oppression: "We shouldn't talk or laugh loudly; no lying down on our backs, we should walk with our heads bent, our eyes on our big toe" (32). Even the games the girl plays is not devoid of patriarchal interference. The life of Jeyarani, who shoulders the burden of running the family during her mother's many pregnancies, is moving. She understands the plight of her mother, who conceives each time her father makes a visit. She holds the broken family together, apart from supporting her mother. Thus in these instances we note that the Dalit girl's life is not free from gender oppression, upper caste values and patriarchal attitudes.

When there is invasion of private space, what happens to the girl from an oppressed community? Her family is a recipient of mainstream race/caste ideas and beliefs and she is not spared of the values that invade her daily life. The enigma of living as somebody you

are not is vividly portrayed in Alice Walker's essay titled "The Civil Rights Movement: What Good Was It?". Walker recalls the havoc White, mainstream soap operas caused in her home: "I remained listless throughout her stories, tales of pregnancy, abortion, hypocrisy and alcoholism. All these men and women were white and lived in houses with servants, patios where liquor was served four times a day to 'relax' them" (123). She watched her very capable mother escape into this illusive world of television, only to fall back with a thud to her real life which was the very reverse of what she had started to internalize. Walker observes that: "Black was not a color on my mother; it was a shield that made her invisible"(123). In *By the Light of My Father's Smile*, we find that pastor Robinson is totally lost in his black cassock, that he is intolerant to Maggie's relationship with a Mundo boy. He whips her to realization and the belt he lashes her with is symbolic of the forceful invasion of his daughter's private life. In these cases, invasion of the girl's mindscape is focused. The confusion caused when this invasion occurs at the physical level is the concern of Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple*. When the father figure in her life sexually abuses Celie, she is greatly traumatized. However, in order to protect her sister from him, she gives in to his desires. This novel explores the exploitation of the girl that takes place within the family. This takes on a different angle, after her marriage to Albert. It is significant that he marries her to tend to his children. The moments of intimacy Celie shares with Albert are also for his pleasure only. Threaded into the warp and weave of the novel is the candid revelation that Sophia makes to Celie, "All my life I had to fight. I had to fight my daddy. I had to fight my brothers. I had to fight my cousins and my uncles. A girl child ain't safe in a family of men"(42). This concisely puts the life of the African American girl in her family. Thus, we observe that the invasion of the girl's private space

be it mental or physical leaves her crippling. A parallel can be drawn to Pecola's rape in *The Bluest Eye* and her unfruitful pregnancy that push her to insanity. In her madness, Pecola finds her personal space. Pertinent here is the space that Harriet Jacobs in *The Incidents from the Life of a Slave Girl* creates for herself in the dark, narrow attic of her grandmother's house. By extrapolating this notion of space, it is interesting that she allows the space of her womb to bear a White man's children.

Having observed the issue of invasion of private space of African American girls, I will now focus on identical situations in Bama's fiction. Bama's short story "Panakkari" depicts the life of Rasathi, who has no time or space for herself. She is deprived of school or play time. The only space that seems to concern her is the space of her stomach. She foregoes classes at school to take care of her infant sibling. Eventually after her father's untimely demise, she resigns herself to the life of a maid at her master's house. A similarity can be drawn from Jeyarani in Bama's novel *Sangati*, who also has a deprived girlhood with her needs fading in the backdrop. It is customary in many households to allocate some separate place for the girl who has just attained puberty. This space is given to help her cope mentally and physically with the changes in herself. Fatima, the narrator of *Sangati* observes that Mariamma, her cousin was denied this privilege. As a poor Dalit, the fourteen days ceremonious space is also denied to her. Battling with an irresponsible father and many younger siblings leaves her with no time for herself. Later when Mariamma is wrongly accused of adultery by the upper caste Kumarasamy, she is denied public space. She is silenced and the village court finds her guilty⁹ because an upper caste man makes the allegation. She is not allowed to defend herself and as a solution, she is married off to

Manikkam. Her irresponsible father supports this verdict. In *Karukku*, Bama records the space she makes for herself in the narrow confines of her bathroom.

Having dealt with the case of invasion of space of the girl from marginalized communities, I will now address the notion of silence as a mode of protest. Silence can be both militant and subversive. In a written text, the presence of silences can lead to debates of the dynamics of silences and silencing. This notion of silence gains wider scope when we address the silences of women and the oppressed groups in literature. When we address silences in patriarchal families, we note that the girl may not vocally register her disapproval or protest. It is often through meaningful silences that she rejects intrusion into her private space. In Walker's novel *By the Light of My Father's Smile*, when Maggie is being severely punished, Susannah, the younger girl joins her mother in her frustration in not being of help to Maggie. Fully aware of the torment that Robinson was putting their daughter through and unable to support her is a complex situation for a mother to be in. However, later Langley, Maggie's mother sends her message of disapproval to her husband through her silence. He observes, "My wife was quiet"(20). In *The Color Purple*, the invasion of Celie is followed by her silence. It is evident that to be part of her own family she must remain silent. The novel opens with a threat "You better not never tell nobody but God. I'd kill your mammy"(1). Unlike Maggi's mother, Celie's silence¹⁰ is not self-imposed. However, Celie gives in to "pa" 's desires and remains mute in order to survive. It is significant that Celie cannot be totally silenced. We hear her deeply hurt voice in her letters to God and her voice gains new strength after her relationship with Shug. In her girlhood, Celie confronts and comprehends the world around her: her family in silence. In *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, the very significant mass protest that the women stage is done

in silence. There is no shouting of slogans or singing of songs in protest. Amidst the threatening presence of patriarchal authority, the women storm the scene by calmly acting out what they had desired, “It is a protest and celebration the men threatening there do not even recognize”(280). The women hold their red be-ribboned, closely swaddled babies and as Tashi passes, they let the “bottom wrappings fall”(280). Though this is not a family situation in the strictest sense, I would suggest that Alice Walker has attempted to leap beyond the boundary of the immediate family to envision a more holistic view of the world as a family. An attempt is made to address the oppression and silencing of the girl at a universal plane.

In the context of Dalit writing, we notice that silence is often militant in nature. In Bama’s *Karukku*, we find that it is in silence that she protests as a girl. As a Dalit Christian girl she notices that religion has been used by the upper caste Christians to enslave her people. She has been instructed not to touch or bite the “host” given during the Holy Communion. She breaks this rule by touching it and notices that nothing untoward happens. She observes, “But I couldn’t say that to anyone else”(74). It is significant that she does not reveal this even to her family. Her mother is a devout Christian, who believed in the Christian virtues of tolerance and self-sacrifice. Bama describes the prayers the family had every evening as, “hunger would tear at our insides”(78). She realises that under such circumstances she cannot reveal her findings to her family. However, the silent protest she stages in her mental landscape as a child takes on a larger scope when she decides to quit the convent and nunnery. I feel that seeds of protest against conventional religious practices are sown in her girlhood itself. This occurs in the sphere of her family in silence. In *Sangati*, it is Mariamma’s silent acceptance of her fate at the village court that instigates

Fatima's desire to rebel against societal norms. Thus, we note that silent protests acquire newer meanings in the context of the family of the marginalized class.

In Alice Walker's works, the percolation of mainstream ideas is vehemently criticized and a character's withdrawal into silence is presented as a mode of escape, as in the case of Celie or Maggie's mother. It is a tool of protest against sexist patriarchy. Bama rejects the influence of upper caste thinking on Dalit life. In silence, she contemplates and her silence is productive because it is followed by realization and action.

When we observe both the writers, we notice that their handling of the above mentioned concerns differ. Alice Walker vehemently condemns the filtering of ideas of the mainstream society into the African American family. She draws inspiration from specific experiences from her life and attempts to universalise the experience of women as a whole. Despite the fact that she criticizes the African American families for adopting puritanical, Christian values she is equally critical of her African ancestors for maiming the naturalness of their girls. She is forthright in expressing her anguish at the physical abuse that the African American girl undergoes in her own family. She draws sharp pictures that present the harsh realities that the African American girl faces. Bama on the other hand, discusses precise problems relating to the Dalit girl belonging to the deprived section of the society. She makes no effort to universalise experiences but tries to question her society for internalising upper caste values and instilling them in the girl. Bama deliberately leaves gaps in her writing for the reader to draw meaning.

In this chapter, I have attempted to draw comparisons of family situations in which the girl from an oppressed class grows from the fiction of Walker and Bama. Owing to the gap of cultural, "herstorical" differences, I cannot draw parallels that are perfect in every

way. However, acknowledging these differences, similarities like interference of the mainstream culture that influence the functioning of the family in the periphery and the scope of silence as a protest can be traced.

Notes

¹ This title is inspired by Illa Murugu's poem titled "Poisoned Shadows". This poem clearly depicts the divide brought by caste. The poem describes the dilemma of an upper caste person who is invited for a wedding at a Dalit home. The special treatment he is given makes him feel uncomfortable. He blames the "The Poisoned Shadows" of their "forefathers" that had caused a rift that is difficult to bridge. See, Murugu, Illa: 35-36.

² For episodes that depict slave ministry, see Brown: 69.

³ For an example of the Christian values enforced in African American homes, see Hurston: 19. Young Isie is told, "You'se too oomanish jumpin' up in everybody's face dat pass." She is told, "not to sit with her knees separated, or whistle, play with boys or cross her legs" (sic).

⁴ For a detailed discussion on the cruel practice of female circumcision, see Kaplan and Shawn. The article says, "A girl, sometimes as young as an infant, has all or part of her external genitalia removed. That can mean excision of the clitoris and the labia minora. Then the surgeon—who typically isn't a doctor—scrapes the sides of the labia majora and stitches together the vulva with thread or all while the girls are awake and held down. The purpose, dating to ancient Egypt: to ensure virginity and eliminate sexual sensation, and thereby make women marriageable."

⁵ For an account of the painful purification ceremony of Lalitha, see Kannabiran and Lalitha. As Lalitha was a Brahmin woman who had lost her caste, her "inner tongue"(uvula) was burnt with a hot golden wire at her parents' home.

⁶ For an episode that vividly describes the attitude of African American society towards a sexually promiscuous woman, see Morrison. Sula "knew they despised her and believed that they framed their hatred as disgust for the easy way she lay with men."

⁷ For further understanding of the idea, see Imayam: 37-38 and Walker, *The Color Purple*: 12. The last stanza of the poem reads as, "I have handed her over like a clean cow to its master." The mother advises her daughter that though men desire "chastity queens" for wives, they take other's wives to be morally weak women. The reference to the "cow" in the poem reminds us of Albert asking pa if the cow promised to him is being sent.

⁸ For a thought-provoking revelation on this experience, see Viramma, Racine and Jean-Luc Racine: 133. *Viramma* records the herstory of Viramma as told by her. She observes: "So you see why people are afraid to have daughters. It leads to a lot of expenditure that's for sure."

⁹ For a relevant comparison, see Jeya Shanthi's *Parani*. The novel narrates the story of a Dalit girl Shenpagum who is raped by Kalimuthu, a Devar caste man. However, Madan, a

Dalit man takes the responsibility for a bribe. When the village court asks her to marry Madan Shenpagam refuses to marry Madan or Kalimuthu. The Dalit woman's body is perceived as a space, which can be exploited by both the upper caste man and the Dalit man.

¹⁰ For more on silence after invasion of private space, see Angelou. As young Maya's space is invaded, she withdraws into silence.

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Chapter 4

Sisters “In Love & Trouble”¹: Mother-Daughter Relationships.

Lord, thank you for the women in my family. They have given me so much. But most of all, thank you for my mother- she brought me here today.

- Lewis 63.

In order to survive whole in a marginalized community, the relationships that the girl develops are very crucial. In my reading of women's writing of oppressed people like the African American and the Tamil Dalit communities, I feel that the girl learns her survival strategies from her mother, grandmother and the extended family of women-mothers² in her community. At times these lessons of survival are overt but more often they come in the guise of subtle actions of the mother. The mother's life itself becomes a lesson for the girl. In the case of the African American society, slavery in the past disrupted family life. Later economic needs drove the men North in search of better opportunities. Due to these circumstances, the women folk learnt to fend for themselves as well as their families. Thus the mother and daughter learn to depend on each other. It is through this bonding that they weather many difficulties. Alladi Uma describes thus the relationship shared by the African American mother and daughter:

She especially welcomes the birth of a baby girl. Here she differs from the Indian woman, who through her extraordinary adoration for her son seems to perpetuate male supremacy. The Black woman, aware of her man's exploitative relationship with her, is unenthusiastic about the birth of a son. For her femininity represents respectability, dependability. The

daughter is somebody she can trust, someone with whom she can feel safe. (15)

Patricia Hill Collins proposes four themes that are specific to African American motherhood. They are the centrality of women in African American extended families, mothers as providers, other mothers as social activists and motherhood as “a symbol of power” (51). Assigning power to motherhood is an internalization of Euro-centric view of Black motherhood as mummies and matriarchs. The fiction of Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Louise Meriwether, Zora Neale Hurston³ question this notion of power associated with Black motherhood. In the context of Tamil Dalit writing by women that discusses rural Dalit life, we find that the women in the family and community guide the girl to survive against exploitations within the family and community and that of the upper caste/class society. This chapter addresses the crucial lessons the girls belonging to marginalised communities learn from their mothers, mother like figures and explores their strategies of survival. The relationship between mothers and daughters can be sustaining and protective or stormy and perturbed. But often an agitated relationship mellows down into mature understanding. I propose to address this complex relationship between mothers and daughters as a crucial post-umbilical bond that acts as a shield of protection. This protection may be in the form of acts of subtle suggestion or overt acts of sound advice. The girl on observing the lives of mothers in her community either chooses to live like them or devises her life as different from them.

Alice Walker captures these moments shared by the mother and daughter in her works like *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, *Meridian*, *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, *By the Light of My Father's Smile*, “The Civil Right's Movement: What Good Was It?”, “Looking to the Side and Back”, “A Name is Sometimes Our Ancestors Saying Hi Iam

With You” and “How Did I Get Away with Killing One of the Biggest Lawyers in the State? It was Easy”. The relationship that Mem and her daughters share in Alice Walker’s novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* is determined by a mutual need to protect each other. When Brownfield hurls violent physical and verbal abuses on Mem or his daughters, they share the same desire of seeing him dead. Mem feels that they “ought to jump on him and kill him dead [...]” (78). Daphne sickened by her father’s thoughtless, uncouth and crude behaviour revels in drawing mental pictures of gluttonous Brownfield swelling up with food to burst and die⁴. While Brownfield has allowed his spirit to be amputated, Mem and her daughters continue to aspire for a better life for themselves. Walker employs the image of the comfortable house that Mem wishes for her daughters, to underscore the happy home that is denied to them. Mem knows that given the circumstances, she can only long for a better house and not a home. Therefore, when Brownfield chooses to be drunk and unemployed Mem works hard to feed and fend for her daughters. Like the Ten Commandments that God gave Moses in the Old Testament, Mem lays out ten conditions to Brownfield at gunpoint. Her concern for her daughters’ well being is evident when she threatens him with dire consequences if he ever lays his hands on their daughters. The daughters also empathize with their mother. Daphne tries to understand Brownfield’s frustrations and “the struggle Brownfield had forced upon Mem”(111). On the ill-fated night before Christmas, Daphne quickly grasps the gravity of the situation and braves into the chill night to ward off her mother. Thus, we note her futile efforts to protect her mother. In *The Color Purple*, Celie gives in to her stepfather’s desires so that he is “good to her” (2) mama. Like Daphne, she dons the role of a mother to protect her sister Nettie. Walker’s story “How Did I Get Away with Killing One of the Biggest Lawyers in the State? It was Easy” traces a thought-provoking mother-daughter relationship. When the

young narrator gets involved in a relationship with a married White man and tells her mother that he loves her, the mother reacts violently. In a fit of passion, the helpless woman beats her daughter but she is later thrown into convulsions. The mother reveals that the White lawyer Bubba's father is actively involved in propaganda against integrated schools. By disclosing this information, the mother hopes to protect her daughter but this desperate attempt only makes the daughter hate her mother. The girl recognizes her mother's efforts to rescue her from the White man's clutches only after she sends her to a mental asylum. It is after her mother's death that she kills the manipulative lawyer to avenge her mother's death. Walker draws parallels of this mutually protective mother-daughter relationship in the African Olinka tribe in her work *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. M'Lissa, the traditional circumciser bears the mark of her mother's "disobedience" (217). She recalls the mental turmoil that her mother who was also a tsunga had undergone before circumcising her daughter. The mother ventures into the forest to kiss a smiling statuette that was touching her genitals. This act of her mother bears testimony to the inner conflict that was tormenting her. When circumcising M'Lissa, her mother tries to preserve her womanliness by leaving a part of her vulva untouched. This attempt by the mother to save her daughter from complete mutilation meets with the disapproval of the witch doctor who is less merciful with his knife. However, having been scarred beyond repair and numbed with pain, M' Lissa turns out to be the unfeeling tsunga she grows to be. In *By the Light of My Father's Smile*, Walker presents a helplessly protesting mother in Langley. She feels betrayed when her husband forgets the promise he had made to her and beats her eldest daughter. Langley protests by not allowing her husband into their bedroom and by breaking her favourite crystal vase. She expresses her failure at not protecting Maggie from

her husband's belt and her act of destroying violently her precious possessions indicate her disapproval of her husband's behaviour.

Not all mother-daughter relationships are warm and nurturing like the relationship between Meridian and her mother, Mrs. Hill that is layered with complexity. In girlhood, Meridian is radically different from her mother on her views on motherhood. Unlike her mother who sacrificed a career to become a wife and a mother, Meridian opts out of motherhood for education. But later she uses her mother's letters as wallpaper. Though physically distanced from her mother, the letters pasted on the wall at eye level give her a feeling of proximity with her mother. The metaphor of the letters for Mrs. Hill is significant because the letters begin with verses from the Bible and are written in an admonishing manner. *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* posits a complicated mother-daughter relationship in Josie and Lorene. Lorene's association with Josie is marked not with admiration but with anger and antagonism. Dark and hairy Lorene envies her yellow-skinned mother. Josie's male friends find Lorene "the fastest thing"(43) after her mother and it is not surprising that Brownfield has a relationship with both of them. Relevant here is Toni Morrison's *Sula* portrays an intricate relationship between Eva and Hannah. Hannah's question "Mamma, did u ever love me" (65) throws Eva into a fit of anger. In this context Patricia Hill Collins remarks:

For too many Black mothers, the demands of providing for children are so demanding that affection often must wait until the basic needs of physical survival are satisfied (55)

Having considered the mother-daughter relationships in the fiction of Walker, I now address Bama's works that explore the relationship between mothers and daughters in works like *Sangati*, *Karukku* and "Dhavani". Velaiamma, Fatima's grandmother tells her

that at her birth her mother was concerned because of her dark complexion. She was worried because Fatima's sister was fair skinned. Thus, we notice the mother's anxiety that dreads the disapproval that Fatima would have to face in a society smitten by the colour bug. A thirteen-year-old Fatima hears her grandmother's words of caution when she accompanies her to pick firewood: "A woman mustn't venture out alone this side. If the upper caste men see her, she is finished" (*Sangati*, 7). This is sound advice to Fatima who stands at the threshold of her youth. Velaamma apart from cautioning Fatima reiterates the need for solidarity among women. Fatima understands that during work she should be in the company of women. Velaamma also insists that Fatima wear a "dhavani" to school, says that Lurdu Rasu, Fatima's teacher has asked her to do so. It is significant that though Velaamma takes his advice she is irritated that the male teacher instead of teaching has been observing Fatima's physical growth. As an older woman in the community, she is able to foresee the consequences. Velaamma teaches Fatima to remain within the circle of protection and question injustice. When Fatima complains that women and girls are denied access to cinema halls Velaamma feels that though this is unfair, this is required to protect the Dalit girls. There is the dichotomy of revolt and acceptance in her actions. This is further demonstrated when Mariamma is accused in the village court of committing adultery with the upper caste landlord, Kumarasamy. To avoid a caste war, the male members of her community silence Mariamma. Velaamma feels that Mariamma should have settled the matter on her own. She knows that it is impossible for a Dalit girl to get justice in the village court, where upper caste men dominate. Therefore, Velaamma is upset that Mariamma did not react violently to her abuser by kicking him in his groin. She feels that by doing so she could have sorted things out. Pertinent here is eleven-year-old Jeyarani's empathy for her mother, who is impregnated during each visit of her estranged

husband. During her mother's pregnancy, Jeyarani works at the matchbox factory to meet the additional expenditure. In *Karukku*, Bama recalls the caste violence that broke out during the absence of her mother and grandmother. As Bama witnesses the police brutalities that follow the clash, the blood shed for the sake of caste horrifies her. When the women of the house return they chide her for risking her life. However, for Bama this crucial moment opens her mind's eye and she registers the marginalized position of her people and her own peripheral location in the scheme of life. In the anxiety of the women in her family, she realizes the gravity of the danger she has escaped: "The very sound of the boots was frightening. Each step felt as if the boot was treading on my chest and pressing down. I wanted to cry out aloud" (*Karukku* 32). Bama recalls that her mother sought divine help to protect her family, the image of her mother pleading to God on their behalf remains in her mind. In Bama's story "Dhavani", Chellakili's mother Arulayi is against sending her daughter to the landlord's house. While her husband is enticed by the promise of education, she is not convinced. She observes: "Let us not survive by sending a child to work. Let her share our gruel and stay with us" (*Kisumbukkaran* 62-63). Arulayi's womanly wisdom tells her that the offer of education for a Dalit girl is too good to be true. Her premonition that she may lose her daughter comes true and she is inconsolable. When we analyze the means of survival adopted by the girl from oppressed communities, we can observe that the life of mothers and grandmothers serve as lessons for her. She can either tread their path or choose a different one. In her remarkable essay, "The Civil Rights Movement: What Good was It?" Walker discusses the white soap operas that were a daily feature of their life. She recalls as to how they invaded their private space leaving her very puzzled. Walker regrets the fact that her mother had sold her soul and spirit to the "Beautiful White people"(123). Walker seeks inspiration from Martin Luther King Jr. who

inspired her soul and made her take control of her life. Unlike her mother who allowed herself to be steered away by White soap operas, Walker uses the same medium of television to redefine her position. In portraying the relationship between Meridian and her mother Mrs. Hill, Walker presents a daughter who wishes to live her life in her own terms and not allow herself to be cowed down by pressure. Mrs. Hill had married in order to feel respected but had felt deprived after the birth of her children. She regretted motherhood and Meridian felt guilty for “stealing her mother’s serenity, for shattering her emerging self[...].” (*Meridian* 51). During her adolescent years, Mrs. Hill asks Meridian to “be sweet” to her boyfriends. Meridian misunderstands her mother and this leads to her pregnancy followed by marriage in high school. However, when Meridian attempts to reconstruct her life by giving up her child for adoption and pursuing her education, her mother becomes her worst critic. For a woman who never enjoyed being with children, Mrs. Hill calls Meridian a “monster”(89) because of her attitude towards motherhood. Meridian does not visualize her life as a “sacrifice”(77) and does not wish to waste her life in the penance of making paper flowers and small prayer pillows.

In *Karukku*, young Bama observes the unequal treatment given to both her grandmothers who laboured in the Naicker’s fields. She hopes that her grandmother would refuse the unwanted food given to her by the drain. The Naicker woman tips the stale food into her vessel from a distance, “Her vessel it seemed, must not touch Patti’s; it would be polluted”(14). Bama questions the system of untouchability that has permitted this injustice nevertheless; her grandmother has internalized her marginal position. Though there is love and admiration for the grandmother, Bama resents the submissive nature of her grandmother. The mothers and grandmothers are not ideal figures but human figures. As poet Madduri Nagesh Babu’s poem states, “My mother never sang a lullaby for me/

Her voice was long ago choked with hunger”(47). When a relationship grows against the odds of a hostile society we cannot expect an idealised motherhood. Bama’s mother’s devotion for God is ruled by fear. She fears God, the church and its authorities. However, Bama overcomes this fear and replaces it with the love for God. Her girlhood experiences enable her to leave the convent. With her transformed view of religion, Bama differs from her mother and her grand mother.

In *Sangati*, Bama’s grandmother reiterates the superiority of men over women through her stories and songs. Velaamma narrates the relationship of Thiruvalluvar⁵, the Tamil poet and his wife Vasuki, perceived as the epitome of chastity and devotion to illustrate the subordinate position of the woman in marriage. The song about a pregnant woman who is beaten up by her husband for eating before him further stresses the same idea of the submissive role the wife plays in marriage. However, Bama questions the meek acceptance of male superiority. Unlike Velaamma, who could not prevent the torture of her daughter by her husband, Bama feels that women should put an end to this evil. Bama has the radical view that when a marriage is based on unequal terms, the woman must not be part of it. Velaamma’s stories about the spirits that haunted Dalit women make Bama conclude that these stories are concocted to push women to a subservient position. Dalit women are an easy prey to these stories because of their repressed state. Overworked and exploited both in the family and in society, these women give vent to their mental agony in their spirit-possessed⁶ state. Thus, we find that Bama redefines herself by observing the life of mother figures in her society.

Alice Walker finds inspiration in the lives and works of her foremothers. This is evident in her pride of her name, which she discusses in the essay “A Name is Sometimes Our Ancestors Saying Hi Iam With You”. The name Alice means truth and it is also the

name of Sojourner Truth, a remarkable African American woman who voiced the need of the women in her society at the “Ohio Women’s Convention”. The name Walker also refers to the one who sojourns. By calling herself Walker, she pays homage to her slave ancestor who traveled on foot. Pertinent here is Walker’s essay “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens,” which traces creative outputs of women in quilting and gardening. Applying this paradigm to women’s writing Walker seeks inspiration from literary mothers⁷ like Lucy Terry, Phillis Wheateley, Frances Harper, Zora Neale Hurston and Nella Larsen.

In *Karukku*, Bama admires the courage and resilience of the women in her community who subvert the power of the upper caste/class people. The women devise plans to rescue their men from the clutches of the corrupt police. The narrative of the father who attended his son’s funeral in disguise with the help of the women is an alternate “herstory”. A striking similarity of activism by women can be noticed in the “Telangana struggle” against the feudal regime. Bama seeks inspiration from her mother who had braved hunger and poverty to provide for her children. During her father’s absence, her mother looked after them “by picking up some coolie work”(Karukku 62). Her mother pawns her earrings to educate Bama. Though Bama has an ambiguous attitude towards this act, we cannot deny that Bama owes her higher education to her mother. Giving away the only piece of jewellery in order to send her daughter to high school is a sacrifice worth mentioning, especially because Bama was not her only child. In *Sangati*, Fatima acknowledges the ability of Velaamma who raised her children in the absence of their father. It is interesting to note that Velaamma’s opinion about motherhood is diametrically opposed to that of Alice Walker’s mother. In her essay “One Child of One’s Own”, Walker’s mother insists that she have more children after Rebecca. However, Velaamma views giving birth to many children as an additional burden on women.

It is crucial at this point to address the difference in the mother's attitude towards sons and daughters in African American and Tamil Dalit families. Circumstances have turned the African American families into matrilineal setups. Therefore, the mother welcomes the arrival of a daughter to whom she can entrust the responsibility of the family. The eldest daughter often plays the role of the mother to her younger siblings. The Dalit families on the other hand have internalized the larger patriarchal structure. Therefore, a lot of importance is given to sons. We find Fatima observing, "boys were brought up with more care" (*Sangati* 1). Uma Chakravarti traces Dayananda's views on the role of women. According to him, women played a vital role in the maintenance of the Aryan race by "procreation of a special breed of men" (56). Thus, we find that patriarchal practices have entered the sphere of race and influenced the thinking of Indian women⁸. The ideas of the dominant culture have percolated into Dalit life also.

In this chapter, I have addressed the mother-daughter relationships in oppressed communities that thrive despite the limitations imposed on them by patriarchy. We notice that trapped in their state of powerlessness, the relationship survives by nurturing and protecting the other. I have also looked at some complicated relationships. But despite everything, it is significant that it survives emotional, social, economic and psychological compulsions set within the framework of patriarchy. The strategies of survival may work in two ways, the girl either learns to emulate her mother or decides to define her life as different from her mother's life.

Notes

¹ The idea for this title is borrowed from Walker's title for her collection of short stories titled *In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women*. The relationship between African American men and women is said to be a blend of happiness and sorrow. It is otherwise called the blue relationship. This quality can be applied to the mother-daughter relationships also.

² For some examples of women-mothers in African American literature, see Angelou and Marshall. Angelou presents a mother figure in Maya's teacher Bertha Flowers, who draws Maya out of her muteness after her traumatic rape. Marshall posits a vibrant mother community in Silla Boyce's kitchen to young Seline.

³ For a sampling of materials that present Black women questioning the notion of Euro-centric view of power associated with Black mothers see Walker, Morrison, Meriweather and Hurston. Mrs. Hill, Mem of *Meridian* and *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, Pauline of *The Bluest Eye*, Henrietta of *Daddy was a Number Runner* and Janie's grandmother in *Their Eyes were Watching God* contest this notion of super strong African American mothers.

⁴ For a parallel desire in a girl who wishes her father dead, see McMillan. Frieda wishes that her father would either die or divorce her mother by her thirteenth birthday.

⁵ For arguments on Thiruvalluvar's parentage, see Geetha and Rajadurai: 2094. This article draws upon Ayothithas Pandithar, a Dalit intellectual of late nineteenth century who has reviewed the parentage of Thiruvalluvar. According to him, the myth regarding Thiruvalluvar's birth to a Brahmin father and pariah mother was an attempt to manipulate his "valluvan" origins and deny his Buddhist "sensibility."

⁶ For a detailed account on the issue of Dalit women being possessed with spirits, see Kunasekaran: 196 and Geetha: 18-20. Kunasekaran's essay puts forth the idea that Dalit women in their spirit- possessed state are feared and respected by their spouses. They are allowed to question their spouses on their marital failings. In their possessed state Dalit women enjoy a near Goddess status. Geetha's article on women and religion discusses the theme elaborately.

⁷ See Lorde, who probes the cosmology of her Black grandmothers to place herself.

⁸ For an interesting example in Tamil Dalit fiction see, Sivagami: 46-53. This story portrays the preference the son gets over the daughters in a family. It is significant that in this story the son gets his support from his mother.

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Chapter 5

“Revolutionary Petunias”¹: Flowers of Survival.

Rebellious Living

Against the Elemental Crush

A song of Color

For Deserving Eyes,

Blooming Gloriously

For its Self

Revolutionary Petunia. (Walker, *Revolutionary Petunias* 70)

Having placed the African American/ Dalit girl in her family and society and analysed the mother-daughter relationships that emerge in the earlier chapters of this study, this concluding chapter addresses the notion of survival of the girl. In the previous chapters, I have discussed the strategies of survival in some cases and this chapter explores the survival of some girls in Alice Walker and Bama's works more elaborately. As I had observed the oppressive forces the girl from the subjugated community must overcome in society are denial of education, sexual exploitation and race, caste/class bias. She is overworked physically and often suffers from malnutrition. She must battle against superstitions and myths that surround her. Within the circle of her family, she feels the threatening presence of mainstream ideas and notions seeping into her private space. The members of her own family silence her. The girl survives with the life-sustaining relationship she shares with her mother and mother figures in her community. This chapter addresses some of the strategies adopted by people from subordinated communities to

survive. It depicts those who have survived whole by drawing from their life as depicted in the works of Alice Walker and Bama.

The notion of survival carries with it many layers of meaning. In the context of the African Americans, one of the modes of survival was “passing off”. A light complexion was prerequisite to pass off into the White man’s territory. In the past during the days of slavery the White man’s union with the African American woman produced a race of light-skinned people. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the “one drop rule” gained recognition for segregating the Whites from the light-skinned African Americans. In order to escape the invisibility of being an African American, the light complexioned resorted to the strategy of masquerade. “Passing off” as White is accompanied with fear and guilt. Judy Scales-Trent naming her life as a “disguise” traces her conflicting emotions as, “I feel enormous guilt at my whole-ness, at feeling potent, at my joy in life”(18). She elaborates that passing off as another also involves disowning or negating your identity and trading in the politics of taking sides and preferring one above the other. The complexity of “passing off” also requires the distancing of one’s self from the community she belongs to. Therefore, the success that ensues bears the stain of masquerading as someone else. James Weldon Johnson’s novel *An Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* poignantly portrays the guilt and pain of living as another. He candidly rejects the material benefits that passing the colour line had brought. In Nella Larsen’s *Passing* Claire escapes the cruelty of her aunt and father by passing off as a White woman.

Giving vent to their creative urges by quilting, gardening and story telling was a mode of surviving the trauma of repression. Alice Walker discusses the undying spirit of her mother, who in dire poverty and deprivation chose to plant a petunia bush. The fact that the petunia bush never died bears significance. This eventually becomes Walker’s symbol for her resilience. She recalls

with nostalgia, “Because of her creativity with flowers even my memories of poverty are seen through a screen of blossom— sunflowers, petunias, roses, dahlias, forsythia, spirea, delphiniums, verbena...and on and on.” (*Mothers’ Gardens* 241) I would argue that it is her mother’s courage, whose gardens bore testimony of her creativity, that inspired Walker to endure all odds and survive by writing. It is her undying spirit that makes her be “preoccupied with the spiritual, the survival whole of my people” (192).

Religion helped many African Americans to forget their immediate worries. They transformed the suffocating slave gospel into a more lively worship. Though Walker does not approve of organized religion and gospel, she does highlight the vivacious and energetic nature of Black churches in *Meridian* and *The Color Purple*. Shug’s gospel rejects the idea of a patriarchal church and a “He” God. This idea gains more impact in *The Temple of My Familiar*. The Black Power movements witnessed the conversion of many African Americans to Islam. Malcolm X’s autobiography vividly describes his choice of Islam over Christianity. However, Walker questions the rigid laws that Islam forces upon women in her story “Rose Lily”. The young woman marries the Muslim African American in order to take care of her family.

Meek acceptance in silence is a crucial method to survive the oppressor. Slave history makes it evident that the African Americans were vulnerable to their slave owners. Josephine Carson explains “chattel” as :

meaning to live and die as mere bone and muscle, meaning to survive as a good body, a breeder, a worker. Chattel is something, not someone. The soul took exile in secret inside the naked somethingness. In Black woman modesty was spiritual: to survive, the body succumbed to its survivors. (2)

Walker's mother waiting to receive supply of relief food and Henrietta Coffin of Louise Meriweather's novel *Daddy was a Number Runner* are women who survive by submission. They are aware of their powerless position and survive by accepting the harsh realities of life. Richard Wright narrates a thought-provoking incident when his mother punished him for not escaping an attack by the Whites. Her question, "How come yuh didn't hide?"(557) jolts him into realisation of his disenfranchised position. She tells him "never to fight [...]"(558) because she is aware that in a system that supported Jim Crow laws aggressiveness would get him no where.

Alice Walker's works posit a gamut of girl characters. Some of the more memorable survivors are Ruth of *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, Celie of *The Color Purple* and Susannah of *By the Light of My Father's Smile*. Ruth is more fortunate than her sisters Daphne and Ornette because she draws the attention of her grandfather Grange from the day of her birth. From her childhood, Ruth is more resilient, practical and mature than her sisters. After their brief stint at a more comfortable house, Daphne and Ornette are disappointed at the shabby "J.L.'s place". However, Ruth reconciles herself to the misery by seeking solace in nature. Despite the putrid smells of "various odors of sweat, hog slop and discomforts" that haunted their house, she seeks the fragrance of life in "the cool greenness of the ferns and water lilies that grew beside the crayfish-inhabited spring" (109). The nature that she exhibits at a tender age demonstrates her ability to see and seek beyond the pain and poverty that engulf her. When Brownfield assaults Mem, a four-year-old Ruth abuses her father and quickly takes shelter under a blanket to escape the hard blows. Unlike Daphne and Ornette, she doesn't live in illusions of her sickly brother becoming a doctor. To her he looked "more like a Possum than a child"(110) and she could not imagine him growing up into anything.

Having dealt with Ruth's early years that left an imprint on her later life, I will now address the core issue of my argument, the strategies that Ruth follows to escape the oppression in her family and society. Ruth confronts the exploitative White American society in the suffocating "J.L.'s place". Alice Walker employs the metaphor of the dilapidated house to portray the life made available to the African Americans. However, Ruth breathes life into such a place and thus learns her first lesson of survival. After Mem's death, Ruth's life at her grandfather Grange's house is not devoid of tension. Josie, Grange's wife, resents the proximity Ruth shares with him. Grange tries to inculcate in Ruth a sense of her position as an African American girl in a White dominated society. While dancing with him, she glimpses into a distant homeland she had not known before. Grange disallows Ruth from talking to white children because they are "evil", "blue eyed devils" and her "natural enemy"(138). Ruth does not accept Grange's explanation that the White people killed her father and mother. To Grange's suspicion that his White neighbours are plotting to rob him of his land, Ruth observes that when she grows up she would find out for herself. Grange admires Ruth's need to discover for herself and observes: "I never seen such a gal as you for looking underneath revealed truth" (182). Nevertheless, at school Ruth learns of the exploitative White society in Mrs. Grayson's history class, which I have demonstrated in my second chapter on society. She becomes a "curiosity" (188) because of the stigma attached to the murder of her mother by her father and society labels her as Grange's new mistress. Unlike Grange who believes that Ruth can survive only if she leaves America, Ruth feels that the Civil Right's Movement that had begun to take root can bring about a welcome change. Her belief is reinforced when she meets Quincy, who is planning to run for the mayor's election. Ruth is not very disheartened to learn about Quincy's marriage but wills herself to venture out and find the man she wants to live with. Like her namesake in the Old Testament

whom Boaz blessed for having ventured out of her homeland, Ruth also feels the need to move on. At this point of her life, Ruth fulfills what Grange had desired for her. Grange had wished that “Each day” for Ruth “must be past, present and future, with dancing and wine-making and drinking and as few regrets as possible. Her future must be the day she lived in”(214). Grange wanted Ruth to survive whole (214). Thus, we can notice that Ruth gets educated for the life ahead of her with her own experiences that she interprets with the help of her grandfather. Alice Walker hopes for a better future for Ruth that could be less discriminating after the Civil Rights Movement. In Ruth’s survival, there is hope that the wide chasm of race that divides the American society would lessen.

Ruth overcomes the oppressions within the family like the filtering of White American beliefs and incest with the guidance of Grange. Unlike many African American families that had internalised White American Christian virtues like prudery and propriety, Grange criticized the hypocrisy of the Christian African Americans who ill-treated their wives and children on Saturday nights. Therefore, Grange narrates with relish the funny incidents that made him declare that he had accepted God. However, Grange believes in the Hebrews’ exodus and hopes that someday Ruth would find her land of promise. Though Grange chides Ruth for being womanish, he acknowledges her growth into a young woman both physically and psychologically. Therefore, he is quick to recognize her resemblance to Mem in her youth and Brownfield’s sudden interest in her. Brownfield’s concern for Ruth is thought-provoking because as a baby Brownfield had never “touched her”. When Grange realizes that the fence that surrounds their house cannot prevent the violation of Ruth’s private space by her father, he puts an end to Brownfield’s life. I would state that the relationship of Grange and Ruth mimics the mother- daughter relationship because it is both protective and life-sustaining.

Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple* presents a survivor in Celie. *The Color Purple* depicts an African American society that has internalised White American views of African American women as whores and mammies and thus Celie bears the brunt of her step father's frustrations. Pa denies Celie of education because he finds her "too dumb to keep going to school"(11). At a tender age, Celie marries Albert who chooses her primarily to take care of his other children and for the cow offered to him as a dowry. The cow is symbolic of Celie herself because of her utility around the house. Albert uses Celie and never thinks of her feelings or desires. However, after Shug's arrival Celie recognizes her needs as a woman. From a girl whom "pa" abused and Albert treated with indifference, Celie begins to voice her wants. The novel's opening lines of threat begin to fade into oblivion, as Celie after her friendship with Shug blossoms and she emerges from her imposed state of silence. Alice Walker threads the lives of racially oppressed women in her portrayal of Sofia and Mary Agnes. The White mayor arrests Sofia for turning down his wife's offer to work in their house and the guard rapes Mary Agnes when she tries to help Sofia. These incidents make Celie understand that she is not the only one to have suffered and that she has sisters who can share her pain. Alice Walker acknowledges the creative spirit of her ancestral mothers who gave vent to their creativity by quilt making and gardening in her provoking essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens". In *The Color Purple*, Celie survives by making pants, employing her creative skill and making herself financially independent. The colourful pants she designs makes her life more productive and trousers being an attire that we usually associate with outdoors declare that Celie has come out of her closeted life. Celie ensures that Albert or "pa" does not disrupt her private space any more and she ventures into the public sphere with her tailoring enterprise. It is significant that Celie's attitude towards religion takes on a different dimension after she becomes a more out-

going person. When the novel opens, Celie forces herself to confide in God through letters, since “pa” threatens her with dire consequences if she disclosed his abuse to anyone. After Shug enters her life, Celie has a confidante in Shug and she observes that: “[...] the God I been praying and writing to is a man. And act just like all the other mens [sic] I know. Trifling, forgetful and lowdown” (199). She loses interest in a God who is white and male. Celie’s letters to her sister Nettie mark another change in her. It is significant that Celie rejects heterosexual relationships and explores a physical relationship with Shug. Pertinent here is the abuse that “pa” and Albert imposed on her as a girl. These bitter, adolescent experiences prompt her to opt for a lesbian relationship with Shug. Alice Walker posits the option of alternative sexual preference that helps Celie survive. This is a deviation from the Christian faith that the African American families follow in this novel and it signals a protest against the constraints that religion makes on female sexuality. Thus, the novel depicts Celie as a woman who overcomes familial and societal oppressions and survives whole by building fruitful relationships with Shug, Albert and Nettie’s family.

Alice Walker’s novel *By the Light of My Father’s Smile*, among other issues presents the survival of Suzannah. Robert, the anthropologist turned priest finds that his daughter Magdalene’s natural curiosity about boys disgusting. He lashes her after he learns of her relationship with Manuelito. Suzannah, his younger daughter and Langley, his wife are mute witnesses to this gory punishment. This barbaric act makes Magdalene seek diversion in gluttony. I had delved more elaborately in her resorting to self-abuse in my third chapter. Suzannah resents her father’s idea of her as an angel. She revolts by trying various relationships that include a marriage and a lesbian relationship. In Christianity, the angel is symbolic of purity, sacredness and virtuousness. It can also mean lacking in humanness, colour and life. It is

interesting that after Magdelina's death Suzannah finds peace. Suzannah reads the letter her late sister had written to her and learns to forgive her father. She envisions peace entering her room as "a dark skinned man holding a bouquet of peacock feathers" (188). The bright coloured peacock plumes symbolize the welcome change that has occurred to her hitherto drab life. It is significant that this angel is not clad in white but carries with him the colours of life. She felt "herself complete the process of becoming an adult. She was grown up. She could handle her own life"(189). Thus, we can note that by forgiving Suzannah survives her agony-filled past.

Having identified the predicament that arises out of the question of identity in the African American context, when we consider the context of Dalit life, we note that often there is a dilemma of identity crisis in society. Bama discusses this in *Karukku*. Since upper caste mainstream society defines itself by defining "the other", the Dalits like the African Americans are labelled as "ugly", "sluggish" and "unintelligent". Therefore, Dalits are often confronted with the crisis of having to identify themselves. At the convent, Bama is asked if she is a Nadar, which is an inter-mediary caste. It is assumed that a Dalit cannot be smart. However, Bama chooses not to "pass off" as another caste. Like the light complexioned African Americans, the Dalits are often made to undergo the colour test. Lakshmi, the protagonist of Chandra Sekara Rao's story "Blackness" raises this issue of whiteness being beautiful and the notion of beauty associated with the upper caste. In order to overcome the battle with her fair skin Lakshmi prefers to call her pale. Arjun Dangle depicts the enigma of trying to live as another in Waghmare's train journey. Waghmare, an officer who has been promoted in the reserved category adapts himself to the life of the mainstream bourgeoisie and distances himself from his community. He avoids his co-passenger, a subordinate and his aunt who are fellow Dalits. He prefers to assimilate with the mainstream society to asserting his Dalit identity².

Hinduism, which enforces the varna system, cripples Dalit life. According to Babasaheb Ambedkar, Hinduism is not a “missionary religion” because “the caste system grew up among the Hindus” (54). In order to break the shackles of caste the Dalits opted for conversion to other liberating religions like Islam³, Christianity⁴, Sikhism and Buddhism⁵. However, Dalits insist that they carry the burden of untouchability after the conversion to other faiths too. But, it cannot be denied that on principle as religions they do not advocate untouchability. When M.G.Ramachandran was the chief minister of Tamil Nadu, he issued an order that Dalit Christians were not eligible for constitutional remedies. During the period of M.Karunanidhi this order gained strength as a law that prohibited constitutional reservations for Dalit Christians who renounced Christianity to become Hindus. This has been criticized as a ploy to stop conversions from Hinduism to other religions. Kizhazapatti, a village was in news recently because of the Dalits conversion⁶ to Islam. Discrimination based on caste and dire poverty led to this recent decision to conversion in Tamil Nadu.

In the context of African American conversions from Christianity to Islam, Alice Walker is critical of the claim that Islam liberates women. Similarly, Shajahana, a Muslim poet, criticizes the oppression that practitioners of Islam impose on women. Her insightful poem titled “Beware” poignantly portrays the injustice that the Muslim woman must confront in her own society. Shahjahana questions the “purdah” system that turn women into “mummies”, the thrice uttered “talak”(101) that denies the woman any choice. The image of the poet wanting to tear open the “cage-like purdah” (102) is in contrast to the liberation that Islam is supposed to provide. Therefore, writers like Alice Walker and Shajahana are critical of the power politics within the sphere of religion that relegates women to a suppressed state.

During her conversation with me, Bama pointed out the fact that, “A Black woman is allowed to work in the White homes. But the Dalit woman cannot enter a house belonging to an upper caste person.” Such is the oppression that a Dalit must endure. Joseph Macwan portrays the plight of the Dalit woman in his story, “A Divo for the Family,” that records the trials of Pashi and Ashima. The story discusses Pashi, a young widow with a child, who must brave all adversities to feed the family. At work, she forgets her newborn baby only to realize that he has died. However, she cannot grieve because there is work to be completed. When Bama’s grandmother accepts the stale food that is placed near the drainage without protest, we understand that she could survive by submissiveness. However, her life becomes a lesson for Bama.

Having speculated upon the survivors and the notions of survival in Alice Walker’s fiction, I propose to make observations in Bama’s works *Karukku* and *Sangati*, both of which record the survival of their protagonists. Since I have dealt with the oppressive forces that Bama faced in her family and society in detail in my earlier chapters, I would be highlighting her strategies of survival in this chapter. In *Karukku* Bama observes that society has denied educational opportunities to the Dalits. She breaks free from the shackles of poverty and unemployment by educating herself. Her choice of profession as a teacher affirms her conviction to educate the underprivileged. She witnesses the subjugation of poor, Dalit children in the convent. The Parayars, people from her caste perform all the menial jobs like cleaning the lavatories, sweeping and swabbing the school compound. She advises her people that they must stop behaving like slaves to the Naickers and Nadars, two of the moneyed communities in the village. At the convent, she refuses to pass off as a Nadar and reveals her identity as a Dalit with pride. She encourages her people to assert their identity and perform

their duty with dignity. A method of escaping the yoke of untouchability licensed by Hinduism is by conversion into more liberating religions like Christianity, Islam and Buddhism. However, Bama underscores the fact that the 'stigma' of untouchability does not disappear after conversion. Bama, a Dalit Catholic Christian faces much discrimination in the church and convent. Bama's grievances are against the institutions and practitioners of Christianity, the church, the convent, the priests and nuns and not the religion itself. She lucidly states that:

I learnt that God has always shown the greatest compassion for the oppressed. And Jesus too, associated himself mainly with the poor. Yet no body had stressed this nor pointed it out. All those people who had taught us, had taught us only that God is loving, kind, gentle, one who forgives sinner, patient, tender, humble, obedient. Nobody had ever insisted that God is just, righteous, is angered by injustices, opposes falsehood, never countenances inequality. There is a great deal of difference between this Jesus and the Jesus who is made to be known through daily pieties. (90)

Bama focuses on the trials she had to overcome owing to her gender. She candidly declares that rural society does not treat an unemployed, unmarried woman with due respect. It is significant that Bama compares her plight to that of a bird whose wings have been clipped off. She feels that though she is free to fly, she is unable to do so. Her life at the convent, removed from reality, has crippled her. Yet, what strikes us is Bama's desire to live a "meaningful life", "weeping real tears" than "live with a fraudulent smile" (104). I feel that this comes closest to what Alice Walker describes as surviving whole. In *Sangati*, Bama's portrayal of Fatima as a girl who matures from a mute witness to societal atrocities to a contemplating, questioning young

woman is significant. Fatima challenges, overcomes and survives each of the oppressions I had discussed in the earlier chapters. As the novel ends, she is an educated, employed independent person who unlike many educated, privileged, urban Dalits has not forgotten her roots. Fatima stresses the need to recreate Dalit girlhood by education, empowerment, self-dignity, fearlessness and independence. She observes:

Our girls must be brought up bearing the above factors in mind. Girls should not be brought up differently from boys. The freedom the boys enjoy must be made available to girls also. If the girls are brought up in this manner their real strength and power will emerge. (150)

Fatima makes the valid observation that unless the Dalit men restrain from subjugating their women they cannot build a larger society without the prejudices of inequality and untouchability. Fatima believes that as a people surviving whole is possible only if internal oppressions are put an end to. Fatima suggests remedial measures to her people such as taking pride in their identity, following Dalit community customs, realizing that black is beautiful and empowering themselves by education and employment.

Having compared the representation and notion of survival in Alice Walker and Bama's works, I will now discuss the scope of such a comparative study. I feel that when we are presented with two seemingly like situations it is only but natural to compare. However, in such a comparison we notice both parallels of similarity and discords of differences. The differences are due to cultural reasons. This comparison becomes pertinent in the larger context of globalisation and the recent "World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Tolerance"(WCAR) in Durban because these works echo the voice of the oppressed

people. This dissertation may present a more elaborate analysis of the survival of the African American girl because Alice Walker who started her writing career in the 1970's has penned many works unlike Bama who started to write in the 1990's and has three books to her credit. However, I feel that her works such as *Karukku* and *Sangati* deal essentially with the survival of girls. I believe that a work like this will benefit if we can explore the works of more African American women writers and Dalit women writers from other states. Such a study will posit a whole range of concerns and interests and will present a more holistic picture of both the writings.

Notes

¹ This title is borrowed from Walker's poem titled "The Nature of this Flower is to Bloom" which deals with the notion of survival.

² See Sivakami's story, "Oru Rrailin Neenda Payanam," ("The Long Journey of the Train") 23-31. which portrays Jeya who is befriended by an upper caste woman Kamini during her train journey. This woman assumes that Jeya must be an upper caste. Jeya eats the sweets offered by Kamini and informs her that she is a Dalit much to the discomfort of the other.

³ For an article that throws light on the politics of conversion, see Raj 32-33. This article bears report of the Dalits of Koothirampakkam village, who keep threatening to convert to Islam from Hinduism. It is reported that every threat to conversion draws the attention of the concerned officers temporarily. But sadly, no permanent solution to their woes has been achieved.

⁴ Rani, K. Suneetha's unpublished essay titled "Christianity and Two Contexts: A Study of *Saguna* and *Antarani Vasantham*," presents an interesting argument on conversion. The difference between Dalit converts, upper caste converts, and the alienation they suffer is lucidly described.

⁵ On the mass conversion of ten lakh Dalits to Buddhism on fourth of November 2001, see Bindra 17- 18. Udit Raj, Chairman, All India Confederation of SC/ST Organisation led this mass conversion. Bindra observes: "The crowd, the rally, the purpose and perhaps the ideology were reminiscent of an event on Oct 14, 1956 when dalit leader and maker of the Indian Constitution, B.R. Ambedkar, embraced Buddhism to break the shackles of caste system."

⁶ For a criticism on the issue of conversions see Anand, T. R. According to him, the "Varna system which is purely a division of responsibilities had and continues to have a heavy bias towards spiritual evolution." He argues that categorizing Dalits and tribals as a "bloc" different from Hinduism is a way of leading them to think that they don't belong anywhere and thus converting them to other religions.

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