

Sieving the Past Through Womanist Eyes

A Study of Select Writings by Alice Walker.

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Abstract

Alice Walker in her fiction examines and questions existing official historiography and discourse which often leave out the stories of marginalized individuals and races. Through her works, she presents an alternative telling of histories both personal and collective. She is particularly interested in the retelling of history through the perspective of women – a concept that embodies her strong belief in what she terms a ‘womanist’ approach. She explores the intricacies of the black woman’s experiences, and how she uses the tools available to her to create and reshape her narrative.

Keywords: Womanist, African-American, historiography, retelling, myths, slavery, counterdiscourse, Blues, revisioning, reinterpretation.

Alice Walker’s commitment to writing is linked to her social and political activism, which gives her work an added significance. In an interview reprinted in *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose*, she states:

I am preoccupied with the spiritual survival, the survival whole of my people. But beyond that, I am committed to exploring the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties, the triumphs of black women.... For me, black women are the most fascinating creations in the world. (250)

She views the role of the black artist as multifaceted, and one of the most crucial responsibilities of the artist is the presentation and representation of history:

The real revolution is always concerned with the least glamorous stuff. With raising a reading level from second grade to third. With *simplifying history and writing it down* (or reciting it) for the old folks. (Italics added. Walker, *Search* 135).

Walker’s preoccupation with history is shared by many other contemporary black women writers, such as Toni Morrison and Maya Angelou, as well as earlier writers like Zora Neale Hurston. Like Toni Morrison’s use of ‘rememory’ⁱ, Walker often alludes to the past in order to gain a better understanding of the present. The past that she delves into in her fiction is both the collective past of the black race, as well as the personal pasts of individual characters. She underlines repeatedly the lasting impact of the past over the present:

It is memory more than anything else, that sours the sweetness of what has been accomplished.... What we cannot forget and never will forgive. (Walker, *Search* 166)

In order to explore the past and its impact on the present, Walker occupies herself with an examination of African-American history. History, as defined by Pierre Noraⁱⁱ, is the method whereby “our hopelessly forgetful modern societies, propelled by change, organize the past”. It is, therefore, subject to modifications and misrepresentations. This is particularly true of African- American history, which is largely dependent upon the oral tradition for its historical records. Again, the oral tradition is one which relies heavily on the memory of the person who transmits the (his) story by word of mouth. Furthermore, early studies on African-American history were mostly done by white scholars, and writers like Walker feel that there were serious misrepresentations in their studies. Through her works, we see a juxtaposition of the traditional, Eurocentric historical discourse and African-American representations of history. As an artist, she presents through her fiction an alternative to the existing official historiography regarding black people.

Walker’s “simplifying” of history is done through the consciousness of her characters, predominantly black women and the experiences that they have undergone. Black women play an important role in the oral tradition because they were most often the storytellers within the family, and in effect, the transmitters of history. The relationship between history and memory is one that is explored in all its complexities by the author through her characters, often resulting in a radically different view of history as opposed to the traditionally accepted version, which often cannot accommodate the history of those who are marginalized along gender or racial lines. It is a history that has been purported by the dominant classes in society, and to quote Gayle Greene and Coppelia Kahn, the limitations of conventional historiography are such that,

What has been designated historically significant has been deemed so according to a valuation of power and activity in the public world. History has been written primarily from the perspective of the authoritative male subject – the single triumphant consciousness- with a view to justifying the politically dominant west – individualism, progress, conquest – i.e., to providing pedigrees for individuals rising classes, nations, cultures and ideologies. As long as the “transmission and experience of power” are its primary focus, as long as war and politics are seen as more significant to the history of humankind than child-rearing, women remain marginalized or invisible. Its androcentric framework...has excluded from its consideration not only women, but the poor, the anonymous, and the illiterate. (Gates Jr. 106)

Walker follows the pattern of traditional black male discourse in her fiction by questioning omissions based on race in the historical narratives, but she goes a step further and persistently challenges this discourse by offering a feminine counter-discourse. Oral discourse, myths, demythologizing existing myths, and folklore constitute part of this alternative history offered by a womanist ideology. While the notion of broadly representing blacks as an oppressed and marginalized race is a preoccupation of male and female black writers alike, it is not completely able to represent the intricacies of black women’s experiences. In the words of Elliot Butler-Evans,

Inscriptions of the feminine in Walker’s novels are marked by their difference from the racial history she invokes. Quite often, they become alternative narratives that disrupt or address, directly or

indirectly, the omissions of the framing historical discourse. The peremptory movement of a feminine-feminist counterdiscourse becomes the dominant textual activity. These historical narratives of women, while contained within the framework of the racial historical narratives, become signifiers of sexual difference. (Gates Jr. 106-7)

In *The Color Purple*, Walker examines in depth the experiences of the black female psyche and forwards an overt womanist discourse. The primary focus is on the perceptions of its female protagonist, Celie, who must confront her fears of her stepfather, of her husband, and of losing her children and her sister Nettie. Abused and raped by her stepfather from a very young age, Celie is perpetually scared of people and situations that have the potential to hurt her. She goes to extraordinary lengths to avoid confrontations at the cost of her own integrity. It reaches a point where she ceases to live as a human being, existing only to please those whom she serves. She denies herself any sense of identity, and becomes meek, subservient and self-effacing in her attempt to please the very people who brutalize her. All this is a result, not of her behavior, but because of who, or what, she is, as articulated by Albert: “You black, you poor, you ugly, you a woman. Goddam, he say, you nothing at all.” (Walker, *Color* 213)

Celie’s suffering is an account of an individual’s trauma, but it is also symptomatic of much more than that:

The Color Purple is not only about the brutalization of one black 14-year old, but concerns a historical discourse of international politics which makes Celie’s suffering possible; the novel shows how the structures of power which oppress her are institutionalized and historicized as ‘natural’....One of the remarkable aspects of Walker’s novel is the way it contextualizes Celie’s suffering in terms of the entire history of Black Americans.(Millard 65)

History, as Celie and Nettie know it, is rewritten for them as they begin to widen their horizons and come into contact with new experiences. Nettie’s travels and extended stay in Africa is an educative one in more ways than one. In Harlem, she learns, for instance, that there are black Americans ‘living in houses that are finer than any white person’s house down home’ (Walker, *Color* 141), and that these black people are knowledgeable about, and proud of, their African descent. She also learns, before she arrives in Africa, that Jesus was not a European white:

Think what it means that Ethiopia is Africa! All the Ethiopians in Africa were colored. It had never occurred to me, though when you read the bible it is perfectly plain if you pay attention only to the words. It is the pictures in the bible that fool you. The pictures that illustrate the words. All of the people are white and so you think that all the people from the bible were white too. But really white people lived somewhere else during those times. That’s why the bible says Jesus had hair like lamb’s wool. Lamb’s wool is not straight, Celie. It isn’t even curly. (Walker, *Color* 113)

Nettie also learns that white people in America come from Europe, that the Egyptians who built the pyramids were colored people, and that black Americans were sold into slavery and came into America in ships. In coming to Africa, Nettie feels as though she has come home to 'the land for which our mothers and fathers cried' (Walker, *Color* 120-21) and despite finding that Africa is not a 'place overrun with savages who didn't wear clothes' (111) as she was taught in school, Nettie does not find Africa to be any kind of Utopia for black people. There are many disturbing parallels between culture and society in Africa and the Southern America states, and the exposition of these parallels is an important part of the novel's structure and ideological freight. 'The Olinkas do not believe girls should be educated... like white people at home who don't want colored people to learn' (132) and the Olinka husband has 'life and death power over the wife'; moreover, they subject women to circumcision: 'the one ritual they do have to celebrate women is so bloody and painful' (161).

Nettie's educative journey has a direct bearing on many key aspects of Celie's life. In Africa, Celie's family history is uncovered when Samuel explains how he came to adopt Celie's children. Perhaps even more importantly from the point of view of Celie's wholeness and healing, her past, or her history, as she knows it, is revised and her sense of identity undergoes a fundamental change. She finds out the truth behind all the lies and guilt that have haunted her:

'My daddy lynch. My mama crazy. All my little half-brothers and sisters no kin to me. My children not my sister and brother. Pa not Pa.' (151)

It undoes the taboo of incest that Celie has lived with, and it offers her a different family lineage in which her real father was an entrepreneur so successful and prosperous that the white merchants found it necessary to wipe him out by lynching him and his brothers. Her mother was a woman who had aspirations that her black neighbors found 'grander than anything they could ever conceive of for black people.' (149). Significantly, her neighbors shunned her 'partly because her attachment to the past is so pitiful' (ibid) and she loses her sanity. This reconstruction of her personal past is an important tool that enables Celie to have self-confidence, to move forward and lay the past to rest. From being a victim, she becomes a successful entrepreneur, starting her own business and becoming whole as a woman.

For Nettie, her journey of self-discovery also involves the demystification of Africa is a perspective that is also shown in other novels such as *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989). This demystification inverts the Black Power/ Arts Movement's philosophy of the 1960s, in which anything African tended to be glorified and Africa itself was seen as the 'homeland' to which its people must return to find themselves, an attitude that had already taken root in 1920s Harlem:

...they give and give and then reach out and give some more, when the name "Africa" is mentioned. They love Africa. They defend it at the drop of a hat... Even the children dredged up their pennies. Please give these to the children of Africa, they said. (114)

The disenchantment with Africa and all it stands for is further explored in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, where the 'cultural' practice of female genital mutilation in Africa is taken up. Walker's choice of the protagonist Tashi, who is a victim of such a horrifying practice, is significant. If Walker strongly condemns the racist acts of white people against American blacks, she is no less forgiving of the treatment the patriarchal society metes out to women in the African context.

Meridian, published in 1976, is set during the Civil Rights Movement, and simultaneously gives an account of the historical events that occurred during this time, as well as the personal reactions of a young black woman to these historical events. The protagonist, Meridian Hill, is actively involved in the Movement, and she is the medium through which history is largely revealed. The violence and political assassinations that marked this period are denoted in a section, which is simply entitled:

MEDGAR EVERS/ JOHN F. KENNEDY/ MALCOLM X/ MARTIN LUTHER KING/ CHE GUEVERA/
PATRICE LUMUMBA/ GEORGE JACKSON/ CYNTHIA WESLEY/ ADDIE MAE COLLINS/ DENISE
MCNAIR/ CAROLE ROBERTSON/ VIOLA LIUZZO.(*Meridian* 21)

In *Meridian*, Walker explores both political and private histories, which in her ideology are inextricably linked. She does this by telling the story of a ten year long love triangle involving Meridian, Truman and Lynne – their misadventures, their ability and inability to love or forgive each other, the dreadful believability of how they flay and feed and comfort by turns. As Meridian's story unfolds, we see her in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement in New York. A group of Black women, veterans of marches and voter- registration campaigns in the South, are recommitting themselves to their cause. The question each must answer is whether they will kill for the revolution. It seems like an easy, necessary question. Anne-Marion, Meridian's friend from their days at a black women's college in Atlanta, presses Meridian to say yes, but Meridian is unable to do so. This issue becomes a central problem in the novel: whether killing in any form is ever justified. She parts ways with Truman and Anne-Marion, who abandon non-violence and, at least in theory, embrace violent militancy in New York, while she continues to work at the grassroots level in the South.

The novel's engagement with history goes deeper when the narrative explores other layers of history through the interspersed stories of slavery, and the even earlier presence of Native Americans in Mississippi. *Meridian* has a tripartite structure which moves from the South ('Meridian'), to New York ('Truman Held') and back again ('Ending'); Lynne, Meridian, and Truman discover that the scars of their time together in the South cannot heal by simply removing themselves physically from a place. The original trauma is confronted by returning there. Part of the healing process is an integration of what can be recognized as feminist (or womanist) and Black Civil Rights positions. It is an integration brought about by Meridian, a philosophy of resistance without resentment. Like so many of her ancestors who are so good at this kind of resistance, Meridian's seeming passivity is in itself a mode of action whereby she leads by example rather than exhortation or authority.

A significant part of Walker's feminine counterdiscourse is a privatized version of historical events, with myth and folklore as alternatives to history. These myths provide alternative historical readings, and the demystification of existing myths serves to challenge and reconstruct conventional versions of history. The mythological dimensions of *Meridian* appear at the very beginning of the novel, in the story of Marilene O'Shay. The townspeople have gathered to watch her body, which her husband has displayed on a circus wagon:

Marilene O'Shay, One of the Twelve Human Wonders of the World: Dead for Twenty-Five Years, Preserved in Life-Like Condition." Below this, a smaller legend was scrawled in red paint on four large stars: "Obedient Daughter" read one, "Devoted Wife" said another. The third was "Adoring Mother" and the fourth was "Gone Wrong." Over the fourth a vertical line of progressively flickering light bulbs moved continually downward like a perpetually cascading tear. (5)

Although the story of Marilene seems insignificant, it assumes symbolic importance later on when her roles as "Obedient Daughter", "Devoted Wife", "Adoring Mother" and someone who has "Gone Wrong" become apt descriptions of Meridian herself, as well as many other young black women. Further, "the racial ambiguity signified by Marilene's skin coloring signifies the cross-cultural oppression of women. Thus Marilene becomes a dialectical metaphor, subsuming the major arguments of the text." (Gates Jr. 118)

Other myths are also inserted in the text. One concerns the myth behind a young abandoned child called Wile Chile who is often seen near Saxon College. Her mysterious and antisocial behavior marks her as the antithesis of society's norms, especially when she becomes pregnant. She becomes a symbol of rebellion for the girls in the college. Another myth is that of the Sojourner Tree in the College campus, and the young slave girl, Louvinie. This myth forcefully underscores the power of narrative. Her art of storytelling proved fatal to one of her young wards and resulted in having her tongue cut out:

Louvinie's tongue was clipped out at the root. Choking on blood, she saw her tongue ground under the heel of Master Saxon. Mutely, she pleaded for it, because she knew the curse of her native land: Without one's tongue in one's mouth or in a special spot of one's choosing, the singer in one's soul was lost forever, to grunt and snort through eternity like a pig.

...In her own cabin she smoked it until it was soft and pliable as leather. On a certain day, when the sun turned briefly black, she buried it under a scrawny magnolia tree on the Saxon plantation. (*Meridian* 33-34).

The tree was later known as The Sojourner, and more myths were added to its history. In short, it became a symbol for female freedom and expression as well as a refuge for non-conformist college students in later years. Ironically, the tree that they love so much is destroyed by the girls themselves in a fit of anger after the first riot in the "impeccable history" of Saxon College. These episodes are digressions from the larger struggles of the Civil Rights Movement, and they deliberately place the personal histories of women in the foreground. Moreover, the silencing of each of these mythical figures is symbolic of the disempowerment of black women.

Along with the validation of myths that are often rejected by official historiography, Walker also presents the demystification of existing myths, such as the myth of Black Matriarchy and romantic love. Meridian, contrary to popular notions advocated by her mother and Truman, is not enthusiastic about being a mother. This deconstruction of motherhood, a theme familiar in feminist ideology, is taken up by the contradictory impulses of Meridian and her mother. Both women see motherhood as something that debilitates their freedom, but the similarity ends there. Mrs. Hill becomes a silent sufferer because she embraces the role of black matriarch, a position reinforced by her religion as also the general social practice. Much as motherhood feels oppressive to her, she would consider it blasphemous to reject her role as a mother. Meridian, undergoing similar feelings of resentment and suffocation, rejects motherhood, but not before her suffering borders on desperation. The conventional portrayal of a happy mother affectionately regarding her baby is defamiliarized in the depiction of Meridian and her baby :

She sat in the rocker Eddie had bought her and stroked her son's back, her fingers eager to scratch him out of her life. ...The thought of murdering her own child eventually frightened her. To suppress it, she conceived, quite consciously, of methods of killing herself. (*Meridian* 63)

Contrary to the assumptions that every woman revels in the role of motherhood, Meridian feels choked by it, and as readers, her position, if somewhat unusual, is one that we are able to come to terms with, and accept. As Eliot Butler-Evans puts it,

This joining of the motherhood myth with fantasies of murder and suicide heighten the argument against a romantic treatment of that institution and compel the reader to view it from a different angle. Thus, when Meridian decides to abandon her child in order to attend college, her mother's view of her as a "monster" for doing so is not sympathetically received by the reader. Inscribed in the text, then, is a historical examination of black women's changing views on motherhood: Mrs. Hill embodies the traditional position, largely self-effacing and destructive; and Meridian represents the emergence of a feminist dialectic. (Gates Jr. 120)

Similarly, glorified images of black revolutionaries and Civil Rights workers are questioned and re-examined. Meridian's earlier perception of Truman Held as a "conquering prince" (*Meridian* 95) rapidly undergoes a change when he is shown to have serious shortcomings. He lacks a sense of responsibility, seen in his casual attitude towards both Lynne and Meridian, two women who love him very much. He seems incapable of seeing women as individuals, for he is fascinated by Lynne's "whiteness" just as he was fascinated by Meridian, whom he called "African woman" (113). The Civil Rights Movement itself is seen through the eyes of these young people, who actually participated and lived through the era. Along with the political struggles, the monotony and drudgery of trying to enlist black voters, and the arrests, the novel gives an account of the private heartaches and traumas faced by the activists within the Movement. Such portrayals would not be found in the official historical records of the Movement, but they were extremely real, nevertheless.

A crucial tool of Walker's womanist rendering of history is to utilize the techniques and themes of blues music, a vital aspect of the black tradition. It is interesting to note how Walker uses the blues techniques of contrast and juxtaposition to articulate discrepancies between appearance and reality, the contradictions and hypocrisies of the white material world. She also uses of blues characters, forms, themes, images and linguistic techniques to convey the multi-faceted nature of black reality. The conjunction with blues music is, of course, no coincidence. She has often credited blues singers such as Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith and Mamie Smith in her work.ⁱⁱⁱ

As the blues singer improvises on the situation and experiences she meets with, so do these characters that Walker presents. Celie, for instance, creates an "audience" or someone to listen to her by writing to an invisible presence that she calls "God" in the letters she writes in her notebook. She uses the linguistic techniques of blues music, directly transcribing her speech in her letters, as opposed to Nettie's somewhat stilted and white-influenced use of language. Zora Neale Hurston had used African American English in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and thereby turned it into an art; Walker does the same, but by making Celie tell her own story, she shows her the art of the oral tradition is also one for "everyday use" and legitimizes it.

Walker's stories celebrate the black woman's tradition of creativity such as her needlework, her quilting, her storytelling and her music, both aesthetically pleasing as well as practically useful. In *The Color Purple*, these two strands of African American women's artistic legacy come together as Celie, the seamstress, and Shug, the blues singer, join forces on their mutually healing and nurturing relationship.

Shug's importance in the novel lies in the fact that she is the one who tells Celie about her 'pleasure button' and the significance of the color purple in the fields. She is able to do this precisely because she is a freer spirit than Celie is. Essentially, Shug is a liberated woman, and it is her art which enables her to be so. For women like Shug, blues singing was a ticket out of the oppressed condition of black women's domestic or sexual or industrial wage labor in the inter-war period. To quote Hortense Spiller, the blues singer

...celebrates, chides, embraces, inquires into, controls her womanhood through the eloquence of form that she both makes use of and brings into being. Black women have learned as much (probably more) that is positive about their sexuality through the practicing activity of the singer as they have from the polemicist. Bessie Smith, for instance. (Vance, 87)

The cultural significance of Shug's occupation thus goes beyond its mere narrative importance, because Shug evokes a whole tradition of women's cultural activity and self-assertion, laying down the laws for sexual and economic independence. In many, she is a mouthpiece for Walker's womanist philosophy. Just as Celie's role in the novel is to assert the value of 'everyday use', this is what she is to Albert: a doorman, nurse, nanny and cook combined. Michele Russel in 'Black Eyed Blues Connections' calls women's blues a 'coded language of resistance'(Hull et al. 202) She also says in another essay:

Blues, first and last, are a familiar, available idiom for black women, even a staple of life. [...] We all know something about blues. Being with us, life is the only training we get to measure their truth. They talk to us, in our own language. They are the expression of a particular social process by which poor

black women have commented on all the major theatrical, practical, and political questions facing us and have created a mass audience who listens to what we say, in that form.(Hull et al. 131)

Ultimately, much of Walker's writing, and especially *The Color Purple*, is a monument, not just to Bessie Smith and Zora Neale Hurston, but to the black victims and survivors of sexual abuse who historically have been silenced in white (and black male) literature, but who have nevertheless expressed their pain in the vernacular of the blues. It is also, crucially, 'a monument in which the Black English of the oral tradition is forever carved in stone'. (Lauret 120)

In *The Temple of My Familiar*, a novel that will not be taken up here, Walker challenges history through memory and interrogates official historiography in several ways, most notably in its assured insistence that the study of ancient female-based religion is not some recent invention or simply a radical feminist idea. Scholarship, as Maria Lauret points out, "is not necessarily true and objective knowledge production, but rather a cultural practice invested with particular ideological interests"(131). As with Celie and Nettie in *The Color Purple*, history is revised and presented in a way opposed to the received knowledge passed on through the white-sanctioned text books that has conditioned the minds of such people like Suwelo and Fanny. Celie's letters are written, as Valerie Babb says, "to undo what writing has done".^{iv}

This revisioning of history by fact and fantasy to offer a counter-history is often done through the oral tradition, the notion of history as storytelling, a practice that is particularly popular in the South . To quote Eudora Welty:

As it happens, we in the South have grown up being narrators. We have lived in a place...where storytelling is a way of life. [...] We heard stories told by relatives and friends. A great many of them were family tales....If we weren't around when something happened, way back, at least we think we know what it was like simply because we've heard it so long. (Stephens 7)

Walker emphasizes on how the written word, appropriated by patriarchal forces, can be misleading and erroneous, history often failing to include the other version, herstory. Storytelling becomes a means of passing on submerged or discredited forms of knowledge, taking on the various forms of fantasizing, narration, entertainment, reminiscing, instruction and practical advice.

This is not to say that Walker discredits all forms of writing, for to do so would be to invalidate her own art. Alongside the validation of orality there are also passages in her novels which emphasize the value of writing - academic as well as creative - because writing is also a way of preserving memory. Thus we see Celie and Nettie writing letters to record their experiences and memories, and Tashi symbolically breaking her silence and writing in huge, childlike letters at the end of *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. 'Scribbling my big letters as if I were a child. It had occurred to me on the plane that never would I be able to write a book about my life, nor even a pamphlet, but that write something I could and would' (*Possessing* 103). Her sign says: 'If you lie about your own pain, you will be killed by those who will claim you enjoy it'. (102)

Like everything else that is characteristic of Walker's writing, even the value of orality does not escape questioning. Particularly in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, the much vaunted African oral tradition is not the medium of passing on a valuable cultural heritage, but the ideological instrument of what amounts to torture. In Olinka, mothers tell their daughters that they should comply with tradition, that to be 'bathed' – as the euphemism for female genital mutilation goes - will make them more valuable for their families, their future husbands and their people.

Maria Lauret observes that here, Walker breaks with two tenets of Afrocentric feminist thought at one stroke: first, that the oral tradition is a source of alternative knowledge which is to be revered, and second, that mothers always have their daughters' best interests at heart (166). This female wisdom (that circumcision is necessary, or even desirable), Walker implies, is indeed, female folly. The fact that it is passed on orally in a tribal context lends it cultural authority against the ideological incursions of the West, but it also means that authority cannot be questioned from within African culture, for to question it equals betrayal of the heritage. As Walter Ong explains in *Orality and Literacy*, oral cultures by their very nature tend to be traditionalist or conservative:

Since in a primary oral culture conceptualized knowledge that is not repeated aloud soon vanishes, oral societies must invest great energy in repeating over and over again what has been learned arduously over the ages. [...] By storing knowledge outside the mind, writing and even more, print, downgrade the figures of the old wise man and the wise old woman, repeaters of the past, in favor of younger discoverers of something new. (41)

Whether the revisiting and recounting of memory and history is presented through the oral tradition or the more formalized written discourse, what is important here is the necessity of recognizing and rediscovering the past, personal, as well as national. Over and over again, Walker implies that the attitude of "national amnesia" that America often adopts with regard to blacks as a race, and the complicity of blacks themselves in their efforts to deal with pain, is a deterrent to self-knowledge and true healing. Frederic Jameson defines post-modernism's "one major theme" as

"...the disappearance of a sense of history, the way in which our entire contemporary social system has little by little begun to lose its capacity to retain its own past, has begun to live in a perpetual present and in a perpetual change that obliterates traditions of the kind which all earlier social formations have had in one way or another to preserve." (Foster 25)

Walker's artistic responsibility of the presentation, representation and preservation of history must be achieved by the acts of remembering and retelling. Pierre Nora states that certain incidents, objects, or people trigger our minds to remember things in the past, and these become *lieux de memoire* (sites of memory)^v. What Walker does, in effect, is create such sites through her characters and the stories they live out. Sites of memory are landmarks of the past invested by an individual or a group with 'symbolic and political significance' as Genevieve Fabre and Richard O'Meally explain (Fabre 22). A site of memory can therefore be a monument, a photograph, a story, a book, a historical figure- indeed, almost anything which generates 'processes of imaginative recollection and the historical consciousness'. The study of material culture, of music (such as the blues), of vernacular language, of religious practices can therefore lead us, as sites of memory, into a forgotten, suppressed or even an unconscious past, but only if such sites are invested by a group or by an individual with

symbolic significance and with the intention to remember. As a critic notes, it may be worthwhile to point out the difference between Morrison and Walker in rewriting African American history here (Lauret 156). For both, sites of memory have a role to play in coming to terms with a traumatic past, but unlike Walker, Morrison's imaginative work in reconstructing the experience of slavery in *Beloved* cannot redeem the trauma of that experience. For Morrison, mourning remains necessary, and *Beloved's* story is therefore 'not a story to pass on', even if, paradoxically, it is passed on in the novel. Walker, on the other hand, seeks to dissolve such traumatic tension by creating a past to serve present needs (ibid).

Another crucial aspect of this revisiting of the past is forgiveness – the asking and granting of forgiveness. Celie then, forgives the wrongs done to her by various oppressors, especially Mr._____/ Albert. It is by relinquishing her fear and anger that she is able to emerge superior to her circumstances and her oppressors, and harmony is finally restored at the end when we see both of them sitting side by side knitting companionably.

Thus, Walker's treatment of history is extremely different from one that focuses on a linear history. What is crucial is that in her womanist writing, it is the women who are at the heart of this revisioning and reinterpretation of memory, history, and the past. Implicitly suggested here also is that women are more inclined to adjusting themselves to and accepting change. With their intuitive knowledge and understanding of things that the logical mind rejects, they are better equipped to chart out an alternative history that will enable them to understand, forgive and reposition themselves in their journey towards a more meaningful, comprehensive existence.

Notes

ⁱ Toni Morrison uses this term to signify the act of remembering or recalling, in her novel, *Beloved* (1987), London: Vintage, 1997. Print.

ⁱⁱ Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire", *Representations* 26 (Spring 1989): 7-24.

ⁱⁱⁱ For a discussion of these women blues artists by Walker, see her essay, "Zora Neale Hurston" in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, 83-92.

^{iv} Valerie Babb, "The Color Purple: Writing to Undo What Writing Has Done". *Phylon* XLVII:2 (June 1986) 107-16. Babb makes interesting observations regarding the power of the written word, and the appropriation and misuse of this tool by those who are in power. She states that throughout history, power has always resided in the hands of those who have control over the written word. Hence, the law against teaching blacks to read

and write during times of Slavery. White people made the decisions as to who should be able to read and write, and in the same way, Celie's father decides who should have the benefit of schooling among her daughters. While Nettie is able to attend school, Celie can barely read and write because she has been made to stay home and help with the chores. This has far-reaching effects on the respective lives of the two sisters.

^ Pierre Nora. "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire". *Representations* 26 (Spring 1989): 7-24.

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