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Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*

Dr. Seema Suri

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1.1 Introduction

Written by African-American novelist, poet, and activist Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (1982) is by far her most influential and well-known work. It won both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award in 1983, making Alice Walker the first African-American woman to do so. This study material includes a brief biography of Alice Walker, a detailed study-guide, and discussion of some important aspects of the novel. Students are advised to read the novel before going through this study-material. The major objectives of this unit are to;



- familiarize you with the author's contribution to women's writing;
- draw your attention to the novel's epistolary style;
- acquaint you with Walker's theory of 'Womanism'; and
- point out the recurring motifs and symbols in the novel.

In this study-material, references to the novel are to the following edition: Alice Walker. *The Color Purple*. London, Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2014.

1.2 About the Author

Alice Malsenior Walker was born February 9, 1944 in Eatonton, Georgia, U.S. Her parents, Willie Lee and Minnie Lee Grant Walker worked as sharecroppers on a plantation owned by a white man. In the rural South, sharecropping was usually practiced by formerly enslaved people. Alice was the youngest of eight children and a bright student. In an unfortunate accident when she was eight years old, she was injured in the right eye with a plastic bullet from a BB gun, fired by her brother while they were playing cowboys and Indians. The family was too poor to afford medical treatment and it was not until six years later that the scar tissue was removed. Though the loss of her eyesight in one eye turned her into a solitary and withdrawn person it, in her own words, "illuminated life more than darkened it" (Walker, *In Search* 27).

Her father was poor but ensured that his children went to school, although they were segregated at the time: with separate toilets and drinking fountains for Black students. In 1961, Alice got a scholarship to study at Spelman College in Atlanta; the oldest liberal arts college for Black women at the time. Dissatisfied with the quality of education there, Walker shifted to Sarah Lawrence College in New York in 1963. She spent a summer in Kenya as an exchange student, and after an affair with a fellow student, she got pregnant. Though it was illegal at the time, she could get an abortion, but what followed was a period of despair, during which she wrote a short story "To Hell with Dying," that was selected by the poet Langston Hughes, to be published in *The Best Short Stories by Negro Writers* (1965) and poems, that were later published in her first collection of poetry *Once* (1968).

While in New York City, she became involved with the Civil Rights Movement, working with the Welfare Department of the city. In 1965, she shifted to Mississippi, where she was the writer in residence and teacher of Black Studies at Jackson State University. It was there that she met and married fellow activist Melvyn R. Leventhal; a white Jewish civil rights lawyer. Theirs was the first inter-racial marriage in the state, inviting the ire of white supremacist organizations like the Ku-Klux Klan and not enjoying the support



of their families. Soon after, Walker published her first novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970), about three generations of a poor Black sharecropper's family in rural Georgia. In 1973, she wrote her second volume of poetry, *Revolutionary Petunias and Other Poems*, and a collection of short stories, *In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women*. Back in New York, she joined *Ms.* magazine as an editor and her second novel *Meridian* (1976) was published soon after her divorce. Walker wanted to move to a quiet place to write *The Color Purple* so she got herself a one room cottage in Booneville, near San Francisco. With the publication of this novel, Alice Walker cemented her reputation as one of the foremost voices of Black women's literature.

In 1982, she also published a collection of essays, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose*. Two other novels, *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989) and *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992) were followed by collections of poetry, short stories, a memoir, and a picture book. Alice Walker has written across a variety of genres and about her work as an activist. Her experiences with the group Women for Women International are documented in *Overcoming Speechlessness: A Poet Encounters the Horror in Rwanda, Eastern Congo and Palestine/Israel* (2010). Her poetry collection *The World Will Follow Joy: Turning Madness into Flowers* (2013) offers a spiritual alternative to violence in the world around us. Alice Walker continues to write and publish at a prolific rate.

1.3 Historical Background

Set between 1909 and 1947, Alice Walker's novel is about two sisters from a Black rural community in Georgia—close to the place where she herself was born. Georgia is one of those Southern states in the US, where slavery flourished on the cotton, indigo, and tobacco plantations. Even after President Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, abolishing slavery, race relations remained troubled. In the South, Jim Crow laws, which institutionalized racial segregation in public spaces, and denial of voting rights, ensured that formerly enslaved Black people remained poor, illiterate, and oppressed. Race riots and lynchings were common. However, in the novel, the racial conflict and violence is referenced indirectly; through the story of the lynching of Celie's father by a white mob, narrated by her step-father to Reverend Samuel. It is only through the character of Sofia Butler that the deeply entrenched racism of the time is brought to the fore.

In many interviews and essays, Walker has pointed out that she has drawn upon the lives of women in her family to depict the oppression faced by Black women within their own community and their struggle to overcome it. Celie's narrative is concerned with her domestic travails.



However, through Nettie's letters, the author attempts to give a panoramic view of colonialism, and its impact on the continent of Africa. The plundering of natural resources, exploitation of indigenous populations, and the impact on the local environment; are some of the aspects that Nettie writes about. Walker questions the Eurocentric view of Africa as a dark continent and challenges notions of racial superiority of whites. The efforts of the Christian missionaries to convert the African tribe and make them more 'civilized' are subjected to scrutiny.

1.4 Study Guide

The novel's structure is unconventional. Instead of chapters, it comprises ninety letters, written by two sisters, Celie and Nettie. Their narrative voices take the place of a third-person omniscient narrator. You must have noticed that the letters are undated and unnumbered in the novel. However, in this study material, the letters have been numbered for ease of reference. The novel begins with a dedication:

*To the Spirit:
Without whose assistance
Neither this book
Nor I
Would have been
Written*

At the end of the novel, Walker thanks her readers and signs off as "A.W., author and medium" (262). In a novel that seeks to celebrate the spiritual, the author acknowledges her debt to the 'Spirit.' In the epigraph following the dedication, she includes lyrics from Stevie Wonder's song, "Like You Do" (1980):

Show me how to do it like you
Show me how to do it.

– Stevie Wonder

It is sung by a little Black boy Keita, who pleads with his sister, Aisha to teach him how to dance. Keita wants to enter a dance competition but his mother won't permit him as he's too young, but Keita dances and the audience applauds. Keeping the plot of the novel in mind, it is evident that the voice seeking instruction foreshadows that of Celie's. Alice Walker believed that Stevie Wonder was more of a spiritual singer than a pop singer.

After the epigraph, is the only line that is spoken directly by a character:



You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy. (3)

It is the voice of Celie's Pa, threatening her into coercion. With no one else to talk to, Celie writes to God.

Letters 1–5: Celie's letters to God

In her first letter to God, Celie is just fourteen years old; sick, pregnant, and confused. She writes about overhearing her Pa making sexual advances and her mother resisting. We learn that when Celie's mother was away, visiting her sister, her Pa had raped her. She has to do all the work around the house as her mother is sick, but she notices that Celie is pregnant. Afraid to tell her the truth, Celie says the baby is God's. Her Pa takes the baby away and tells her it's dead. Her mother dies soon after and Celie has another baby, a boy this time. Again, her Pa tells her it's dead but Celie is certain he has sold it off. She notices her Pa watching Nettie and is sure God will help her take care of her sister.

A few years later, their Pa marries a young girl, May Ellen, barely Celie's age and Nettie has a suitor—a widower she refers to as Mr—, who says he has three children. At first Celie asks Nettie to focus on her studies but, fearing that her Pa might violate her, she asks her to marry Mr—. Celie herself is incapable of child bearing now, as she has stopped menstruating.

In her first letter, Celie writes with a child's honesty and bewilderment about a taboo subject—incest. It is easy to understand why some readers might feel uncomfortable with her revelations. Note how she crosses out and chooses words that indicate her sense of a self that encompasses a past:

I am fourteen year old. ~~I am~~ always have been a good girl. (3)

Writing to God is the first step that she takes towards finding her own voice. Note how brief her first few letters are, barely a stanza each.

- i) How old is Celie when she starts writing to God?
- ii) Why is her mother always ill?
- iii) Why does Celie want Nettie to marry Mr—?

Letters 6–8: Celie's letters to God

Mr—comes to ask for Nettie's hand in marriage but Celie's Pa declines, saying he wants to make Nettie a school teacher, but Celie knows he wants to keep Nettie for himself. He also objects to the fact that Mr—'s wife was killed by her lover and he is rumored to be having an affair with Shug Avery. Celie is intrigued by the mention of Shug's name and her step-mother manages to get hold of a picture of Shug that falls out of Mr—'s wallet. Celie is immediately enamored of Shug, and keeps the picture. Even before Shug



appears, Celie is captivated by her beauty and glamour, calling her “the most beautiful woman I ever saw” (8).

Pa tries to convince Mr—to marry Celie, telling him that she will make a better wife. A few months later Mr—, finding it difficult to care for his children on his own, comes to have another look at Celie. Pa offers him a cow if he marries her. Note how he describes her to Mr—; “She ain’t fresh tho, but I specs your know that. She spoiled. Twice” (9). Mr—examines Celie as if she’s a slave.

Celie recalls how she was taken out of school the first time she got pregnant. Nettie asked their teacher Addie Beasley to intervene and convince their Pa to send Celie back to school but she left the moment she saw Celie’s condition.

- i) Why doesn’t Celie’s Pa want Mr—to marry Nettie?
- ii) Why does Mr—eventually agree to marry Celie?
- iii) How does Celie get hold of Shug Avery’s picture?

Letters 9–16: Celie’s letters to God

Celie gets married to Mr—and spends her wedding day running away from his eldest son Harpo, who hits her on the head with a stone. She finds out that Mr—has four children, not three, as claimed earlier. Burdened with housework and four demanding children, Celie bears her situation, thinking of Shug Avery.

One day, out with Mr—, she notices a colored lady with a little girl. Celie immediately recognizes her daughter Olivia, whose name she had embroidered on her diapers before she was taken away from her at two months old. Celie follows them into a store and chats with the woman, who is Corrine, and learns that the little girl is called Olivia and is six years old. She manages to extract the name of the woman’s husband and helps her buy some fabric.

Nettie runs away from home and comes to live with Celie. She helps Celie study and watching her struggle to look after Mr—’s children, she urges her to put up a fight. Mr—tries to flirt with Nettie but she is unresponsive. Feeling rejected, he orders Celie to ask her sister to leave. Celie is helpless and tells Nettie to go to the home of Corrine; the woman she met on the street, as she seemed rich.

Mr—’s sisters Kate and Carrie come to visit. They tell Celie about his first wife, Annie Julia. According to them, she wasn’t a good housekeeper and “too black” (21). They tell Celie how Mr—was so engrossed with Shug that he neglected his wife. Kate feels concerned for Celie and takes her shopping for new clothes. She also tries to make Harpo help Celie with the housework but he complains to Mr—and Kate leaves the house,



crying. Before going away she tells Celie: “I can’t do it for you. You got to fight them yourself” (22). Harpo confides in Celie about being in love with a fifteen-year-old girl, Sofia Butler. He is only seventeen but wants to marry her.

Celie finds flyers announcing “The Queen Honeybee is back in town” in Mr—’s trunk, with pictures of Shug Avery, who will be singing at the Lucky Star (26). Again, Celie is struck by her beauty. Suddenly, Mr—starts to primp and preen before the mirror. She doesn’t have the courage to ask but knows that he’s going to be with Shug when he disappears on weekends. Celie knows that he is in love, sitting on the porch and staring into space, while she and Harpo work hard in the fields.

- i) Why does Celie believe that the little girl she sees in the street is her daughter Olivia?
- ii) Why is Nettie forced to leave Celie’s home?
- iii) What do Kate and Carrie tell Celie about Mr—’s first wife?
- iv) Describe Shug’s picture on the flyers Celie finds.

Letters 17–21: Celie’s letters to God

Harpo has begun to help Celie in the fields and confides in her that his girlfriend Sofia Butler is pregnant, but her father won’t allow her to marry him as he objects to the scandal surrounding his mother’s death. On Celie’s advice, Harpo invites Sofia home but Mr—insults her. He hints that Harpo might not be the real father of her baby and taunts her that her own father has thrown her out. Sofia is a strong girl and retaliates by saying that she is not interested in marrying Harpo, dependent as he is on his father. Moreover, her sister and her husband are happy to support her. Harpo remains silent and Sofia leaves.

However, after the birth of his child, Harpo marries Sofia and brings her home. They start living in a shed on the land adjoining Mr—’s home and Celie makes some curtains for them. Harpo works hard in the fields as Mr—has begun to pay him for his labor.

Three years and two children later, Harpo complains about Sofia to Celie. He is unhappy with her frequent trips to visit her sisters without seeking his permission. “Nothing can do better than a good sound beating,” Mr—tells him (35). Celie resents Sofia’s seemingly pitying looks and blurts out, “Beat her” (36). Next time she sees Harpo, his face is all bruised and when asked, he makes up some story about being kicked by a mule. One day Celie hears noises from Harpo and Sofia’s shed and peeps in to see them “fighting like two mens” (37). Sofia gives as good as she gets. Next day, Sofia leaves for her sister’s home.

Celie is wracked by guilt and has trouble sleeping. She knows she has sinned against Sofia’s spirit. Sofia brings back the curtains Celie made for her and accuses her of egging



Harpo on. Celie admits that it was because she was jealous of her strength. Sofia becomes sad and tells Celie how, all her life, she has had to fight brothers, cousins, and uncles. She is defiant and says that she will kill Harpo rather than let him beat her. Sofia says that Celie reminds her of her mother, who was always “under my daddy foot” (39). But Sofia and her sisters always stuck together. She wants to know what Celie does when she’s angry. When Celie says that she doesn’t do anything and resigns herself to the situation, Sofia asks her “to bash Mr—head open” (40). Feeling at peace with herself, Celie suggests they make a quilt out of the curtains Sofia has brought back.

Like Nettie and Kate before her, Sofia too tries to incite Celie to fight Mr—, but she remains passive. There are suggestions of the prevalence of sexual abuse of young girls within families but for Sofia, the answer is to fight back.

- i) Why does Sofia’s father refuse to give Harpo permission to marry her?
- ii) Why did Harpo’s mother Annie Julia get shot and by whom?
- iii) Why is Harpo unhappy with Sofia?
- iv) Describe Sofia’s childhood, as told to Celie.

Letters 22–27: Celie writes to God

Celie writes about the service she renders for her church, doing sundry chores. The preacher calls her “Sister Celie,” admiring her for her faith in God. Celie hears that Shug Avery is very ill, down with some kind of “nasty woman disease” and that no one, including her family, is coming forward to help her (42). In church, the preacher speaks of Shug as an example of a fallen woman: “slut, hussy, heifer, and streetcleaner” (42). Mr—listens quietly but as soon as they reach home, he leaves in his wagon. He returns five days later, bringing Shug back with him and introduces her as an old family friend.

Shug is ill and barely able to walk but dressed like a star. She is put up in the guest room and Celie can overhear her bullying Mr—, whom she calls Albert. Celie is thrilled to have Shug Avery in the house. She cooks for her, combs her hair, and even bathes her. Till this point, Celie’s fascination for Shug seemed that of a young woman’s obsession with a glamorous celebrity. But one can sense the overtly sexual nature of her attraction when she bathes Shug. Soon Shug begins to recover and sing again. Mr—’s father comes to visit them, as does his brother Tobias: one to express his disapproval, the other out of curiosity. Shug tries to help Sofia and Celie sew the quilt.

- i) Describe how Celie helps out in the church?
- ii) Describe Shug Avery’s appearance when she comes to Celie’s house?
- iii) How does Celie help Shug get better?



Letters 28–32: Celie writes to God

Shug gives Sofia and Celie a yellow dress of hers, to use in making their quilt. The yellow patches of cloth Celie sews in, shine like stars.

Sofia tells Celie about Harpo's unnatural appetite and his sudden love for housework. She works around the house like a man, repairing the roof dressed in a pair of Harpo's pants while Harpo begins to look like a pregnant woman. One night, Celie hears him weeping. He is still fixated on Sofia not listening to him, disregarding his wishes: "The wife spouse to mind" (61).

Celie tries to make Harpo understand that Sofia is a good wife and loves him. When Celie talks to Sofia, she confesses that she doesn't enjoy sleeping with him anymore and is tired of him. She concludes: "He don't want a wife, he want a dog" (62). Celie thinks about her own marriage, devoid of romance and sexual pleasure. Shug is the only one who attracts her, something that Mr—fails to do.

Sofia leaves to go and stay with her sister Odessa, as her husband Jack is fighting in the war and she is alone. Sofia's sisters come to take her and her five children away. Celie is overawed by the strong women. Harpo doesn't try to stop her and soon turns their shed into a juke joint. He tells Celie that Sofia's never coming back. Celie observes how his personality changes again. From a man who was happy to change his babies' diapers, he now behaves like a carefree bachelor.

In these letters, pay attention to Celie's descriptions of Harpo and Sofia, who don't like to perform tasks traditionally assigned to men and women. While Sofia is happy to work like a man and fight like a man, Harpo too is content to be a caregiver for his children. But with his father's example before him, he is unable to overcome his conditioning. He develops an eating disorder; no doubt brought upon by his anxiety.

Juke joints, like the one Harpo opens and where Shug sings, were recreational spaces for poor Black sharecroppers and plantation workers. In the South, in the segregation era, juke joints were the only places where Black workers could go to drink, dance, and gamble. They cropped up in the rural areas and were mostly set up in small shacks.

- i) What does Sofia tell Celie about her feelings for Harpo?
- ii) Why is Celie impressed with Sofia's sisters?
- iii) What does Harpo do to his shed after Sofia leaves?

Letters 33–44: Celie's letters to God

Harpo's juke joint isn't attracting many customers, so he asks Shug to sing there. Celie is thrilled at the opportunity to hear Shug sing and goes, in spite of Mr—'s objections.



There, Shug sings a song by well-known blues singer, Bessie Smith: “A Good Man is Hard to Find” (1917). It’s an oblique reference to Albert. Shug is dressed like a true performer, in a tight red dress. The men love her and come in droves to listen to her, but Celie feels unattractive in her churchgoing clothes. She watches with pain as Shug and Albert exchange loving glances and is overcome with conflicting emotions: “confuse” (70). Suddenly, Celie hears Shug sing a song that she has named after her, “Miss Celie’s song” and she sings along (70).

Soon Shug starts to sing at Harpo’s juke joint every weekend. When she announces that it is time for her to leave, Celie is disturbed. She tells Shug that Mr—hasn’t been hitting her since she came. Taken aback, Shug comforts Celie and assures her that she won’t leave till she makes Mr—stop beating her. After this, Mr—starts sleeping in Shug’s room.

Shug doesn’t seem to care about appearances, but asks Celie if she minds. She doesn’t reply but asks Shug if she’s not worried about getting pregnant. Shug says that she uses contraceptives: “Naw, not with my sponge and all” (73). She tells Celie that she has a “passion” for Albert, in spite of knowing that he’s a weak man and a bully. She enjoys the sexual part of their relationship whereas for Celie, it is something that she simply endures. Shug is amused and guides Celie through an understanding and awareness of her own body—to view it without shame.

One day Sofia visits the juke joint with her boyfriend, Buster Broadnax. She tells Celie that she has another child now. When Mr—and Harpo taunt her for coming there, she retorts that it’s her home. Harpo asks Sofia for a dance but his girlfriend, a mixed-race girl whom he calls Squeak, is jealous when she sees them dancing together. She butts in and slaps Sofia. Enraged, Sofia hits back and knocks out two of Squeak’s teeth. Sofia leaves and Harpo comforts his girlfriend.

Harpo gets to know, from Sofia’s sister, that she has landed up in jail. Sofia was out with her boyfriend and children when she was approached by the white mayor’s wife to work as her maid. “Hell no” replied Sofia (80). The mayor slapped her and, as expected, she punched him. The police took her away and put her in jail. Harpo is upset at the news and even Squeak cries. When Celie is allowed to meet Sofia in jail, she finds her all battered up and tends to her. She is living in sub-human conditions and made to do laundry in prison.

Everyone wonders how to get Sofia out of jail as they feel that she won’t be able to survive the twelve years’ sentence meted out to her. They look for any possible connections to the warden. It turns out that Squeak and her two siblings are the illegitimate children of Jimmy Hodges, brother of the white warden, Bubber Hodges; whereas their mother is Black. They draw up an elaborate plan to send Squeak to the warden, to convince him



to take Sofia out of prison and send her to work as a maid at the mayor's house. To appeal to the warden's sense of kinship, they dress her up like a white woman. But the consequences of their strategy are disastrous. Squeak is raped by her 'uncle' and returns distraught. At that moment, she tells Harpo to call her by her real name, Mary Agnes.

Celie's letters show how Sofia's resistance to racism comes at a tragic cost. She is beaten up and jailed for not humbly submitting to the request made by the mayor's wife, as expected of a Black woman. Like Celie, Squeak is also the victim of incestuous rape; the warden rapes her, well aware of their relationship. A few months later, Squeak starts to sing. It is almost as if she has found her own voice in song, just as Celie did through her letters. Mary Agnes even writes her own lyrics, about being identified by her color and being called yellow-skinned.

Following Squeak's violation by the warden, Sofia is sent to work as a maid at the mayor's home, to look after his two young children, Billy and Eleanor Jane. The little girl is the only one who is kind to Sofia. Living with the mayor's family and observing them closely, Sofia reaches the conclusion that the whites are an inferior race: "backward" and "clumsy" (95). She tells Celie about Miss Millie's shoddy attempts at learning to drive.

- i) What does Shug Avery sing on the first day at Harpo's juke joint?
- ii) Why is Sofia put in jail?
- iii) What do we learn about Squeak's family?

Letters 45–51: Celie's letters to God

Shug writes to Celie, announcing that she will arrive on Christmas and has a surprise. She turns up in a new Packard and introduces everyone to her husband, Grady. Both Celie and Mr—are crestfallen, and Celie feels an immediate dislike for the man. She observes how Shug's husband Grady freely spends her money. Shug is a rich woman now, singing all over the country, with a house in Memphis. She tells Celie how she met Grady when he came to repair her car and married him. She admits that her passion for Albert subsided once she got to know that he beat Celie.

Shug wants to know about Celie's married life. Celie tells her that the beatings have now come down to "a slap now and then" but the sex is still unsatisfactory (101). Unaware that Celie was repeatedly raped by her Pa, Shug asks her if she enjoyed sleeping with the father of her children. For the first time, Celie shares with Shug, or anyone else for that matter, the circumstances surrounding her rape; how her Pa came to her to get his hair cut and ended up forcing himself on her. Overcoming her shame, she narrates her ordeal; how her Pa made her mother believe that Celie had a boyfriend who made her pregnant. Celie cries and Shug kisses her. They end up sleeping together.



Shug hears Mary Agnes sing and encourages her to perform in public, add a sexual flavor to her songs, and dress provocatively to entice her audience.

Shug asks Celie all sorts of questions about Nettie. A few days later, she drops a letter from Nettie into her lap. She had noticed Mr—take a letter from the mailbox, with foreign looking stamps on it, and keep it in his pocket; so, she took it from there. This is the first time that Celie hears from her sister in all these years. Nettie writes how she has been sending letters to Celie but never got any replies. She tells Celie that her children Olivia and Adam are with her, and that they are all coming home soon.

Celie feels murderous and wants to kill Mr—but Shug prevents her. She talks to Celie about her own past; how she loved Albert and had three children with him. However, Albert did not marry her because his father objected, and he was too weak to stand up to him. Shug's own mother disapproved of her amoral lifestyle, and the preacher at her church came with some ladies to try and reform her, but she was unrepentant. Shug opens up about her life; telling Celie how her parents turned her out after her third baby was born and she went to live with her mother's wild sister in Memphis.

Shug recalls how Albert would laugh a lot and loved dancing but has now been reduced to a man who hides his wife's letters. She regrets how mean she was to Albert's wife, Annie Julia; flaunting her affair with Albert and keeping him away from his wife and children. She doesn't regret not marrying him, but looking back at her relationship with Albert, Shug concludes that it was "nothing but bodies" (112).

Sure that Mr—has hidden other letters from Nettie in a safe place, Celie and Shug search and find a big bundle of her letters in Mr—'s trunk. As they are undated, Shug helps Celie put them in chronological order, based on the dates on the postmarks.

In these letters of Celie's, many narrative gaps are filled up. Celie describes how her Pa raped her when she was a young girl. Shug and Celie become lovers and Shug's love for Celie is what leads her to find Nettie's letters. We see a different dimension of Shug's personality. Behind the rich and successful blues singer is a woman who carries her own cross; the pain of being let down by the man she loved and disowned by her own parents.

- i) Describe Shug's husband, Grady.
- ii) What advice does Shug give to Mary Agnes?
- iii) How does Celie get Nettie's first letter?
- iv) Discuss Shug's relationship with her parents.

Letters 52–58: Nettie's letters to Celie

The first fifty-one letters in the novel were Celie's letters to God. From this point onwards there is an additional narrative voice, that of Nettie's. Celie's letters were in the



African-American folk dialect but Nettie writes in standard English. Unlike Celie, Nettie signs all her letters: “Your loving sister.” It is important to remember, while reading Nettie’s letters, that Celie gets them decades after they were mailed to her.

The time line moves back to the day Nettie left Celie’s home, as told by Celie in Letter 11. Nettie writes how Albert followed her and tried to molest her. When she resisted, he threatened to keep the sisters apart. Somehow, Nettie runs away and finds the Reverend Samuel’s house, as guided by Celie. There, little Olivia opens the door and Nettie immediately recognizes her as Celie’s daughter.

The Reverend Samuel and Corrine employ Nettie to help them look after their children and teach them. Samuel and his wife Corrine are members of the African and American Missionary Society and are going to Africa. They take Nettie with them, as a last-minute replacement for someone who backs out. Nettie is excited to accompany them and starts reading about Africa.

Nettie writes how she was upset when Celie didn’t reply to her letters and asked Reverend Samuel to check on her sister, but he was reluctant to interfere in her domestic problems. Nettie shares her recently acquired knowledge about Africa with Celie. She is convinced that it is their mission to work for “the uplift of black people everywhere” (122). Before leaving for Africa, they all visit New York City. Nettie’s letters describe an America before the Civil Rights Movement, where they travel to New York on a train, with separate sections for Black and white people. Coming from the rural South, Nettie is dazzled by Harlem; the rich Black community and their modern lifestyle, their cars, indoor toilets, and electric lights.¹ In New York, they learn the dialect of the Olinka tribe and are treated with special respect by the Black community.

Three weeks after sailing from America, they reach England, where Nettie reads about the origin and history of slavery. She visits a museum there and is amazed at the artefacts on display—all brought back by missionaries. Nettie also mentions reading books by the well-known Black historian, J. A. Rogers, whose writings give her a better understanding of the damage done by colonization in Africa.² With Nettie’s letters, the landscape of the novel expands. From the domestic travails of Celie there is a shift to a wider world.

Not only is Nettie’s diction different from Celie’s, she is educated and has a desire to learn about the world around her. She sincerely believes in the noble work that she is going to do in Africa. After England, their ship stops at Dakar, Senegal. Their last stop and final destination is Monrovia, capital of Liberia, where she comments upon the absence of colored representatives in the President’s cabinet. Nettie also visits a cocoa plantation owned by the Dutch, and sees colored people working hard.



- i) What happens to Nettie after she leaves Celie's house?
- ii) Why is Nettie impressed with the people of Harlem?
- iii) What does Nettie see in the museum in London?

Letters 59–61: Celie writes to God

Celie has to pause reading Nettie's letters because Mr—and Grady are back home. She feels an uncharacteristic rage at Albert and wants to kill him but Shug, knowing how Celie can be stopped, reminds her of the biblical injunction: "Thou Shalt Not Kill," asking her to stay calm for Nettie's sake (129). Celie pleads with Shug to make Mr—let her sleep in Shug's room. Shug senses that Celie is numb so she suggests they stitch some pants for her. They decide to ask Odessa for an old pair of her husband Jack's pants as his army uniform would have strong fabric. Celie feels a new found confidence, knowing that her sister is alive.

Nettie writes about how they reach Olinka, four days after trudging through the forest. The villagers have never seen Black missionaries before and welcome them by organizing a feast and presenting them with a canopy made out of roofleaf. At the feast, they are told a tale about how the roofleaf became an object of worship for the Olinka. Nettie's account of the Olinka villagers introduces us to their customs and religious beliefs. Theirs is a pagan form of worship, different from the Christianity that the missionaries have come to preach.

- i) How does Shug divert Celie's anger at Mr—?
- ii) Why do the Olinka villagers worship the roofleaf?

Letters 62–67: Nettie's letters to Celie

Nettie's letters create an illusion of narrative continuity, but you must remember that Celie is reading them decades after they were sent to her.

Nettie describes her life in the Olinka village, where her day is spent teaching the younger children. Olivia is the only girl in the class because the Olinka don't believe in educating their women. Olivia makes friends with a bright young girl Tashi and teaches her all that she has learnt when they are alone, upsetting Tashi's mother Catherine. When Nettie talks of the advantages of educating girls, citing her own example, Catherine retorts that she is no more than "the missionary's drudge" (141). The Olinka are polygamous and assume that Nettie is also Samuel's wife. She notices that Corrine seems disturbed by this, as she asks Nettie to tell Olivia and Adam not to call her "Mama Nettie" (142).

Nettie describes her hut, which is round but without windows. She doesn't feel comfortable hanging the visual icons of Christianity that she has brought with her: pictures of



Christ, the Virgin Mary, or the Crucifixion. Instead, she decorates her walls with beautiful platters and pieces of woven, dyed fabric, created by the villagers.

Tashi's parents come to Nettie to express their displeasure at Tashi and Olivia spending so much time together. Tashi has begun to resemble an aunt of hers, who refused to marry and was sold off to a trader as she could "no longer fit into village life" (145). They fear their daughter will become like American women and a misfit in the village. However, Olivia and Adam are happy in Tashi's company as she is rooted in her culture and always has stories to tell. When Tashi's father dies, her mother Catherine remains close to his other wives. They all work together, laugh, and look after each other's children. Corrine and Samuel are baffled by the camaraderie that exists between the wives in the village community. Samuel finds it confusing, as it is contrary to "the bible's directive of one husband and one wife" (150).

Nettie tells Celie that, five years after they have been there, construction of a road begins outside the village. The Olinka spend a lot of time watching the workers. The road reaches the border of the village and, convinced that it has been built for them, the villagers organize a feast for the workers. However, to their dismay, work on the road resumes the next day; right through the middle of the village. The workers bring guns, prepared for any possible resistance. They dig up Catherine's fields and go on to demolish the church, the school, and Nettie's hut. The village chief travels all the way to the coast to meet the governor and comes back with the news that their village and the surrounding land now belong to a rubber manufacturer in England, and it will be levelled to make way for rubber trees. The Olinka will now have to pay rent to live on their ancestral lands and pay a tax to use the spring water. They resign themselves to their fate.

The villagers build a new church and school and slowly the women, in spite of their husbands' objections, start sending their girls to school. Corrine falls ill and summons Nettie to ask her when she first met Samuel, as she suspects that Olivia and Adam are her and Samuel's children. Like everyone else, she too has noticed the striking resemblance between Nettie and the children. Even after both Samuel and Nettie assure her that they met the first time Nettie showed up at their door, Corrine is not convinced, and examines her for physical marks of childbirth.

After talking to Samuel, Nettie is surprised to learn that he also believes that Olivia and Adam are her illegitimate children and, out of kindness, he brought her along to Africa. Nettie doesn't tell him the truth but asks him how he got hold of Olivia and Adam. Instead of replying directly, Samuel narrates a story about a prosperous Black farmer who owned a store. Other white farmers were jealous of his prosperity and they burned his store. The farmer and his two brothers, who worked at the store, were hanged—rem-



iniscient of lynchings in the South. This traumatized the farmer's wife and affected her mental health. She had a two-year-old daughter at the time of her husband's death, and the other daughter was born soon after. The woman soon remarried but never regained her health and died some years later. But, as told to Samuel by her second husband—a friend of his—she delivered a baby girl two years before she died, then a baby boy. On both occasions, the friend showed up at his door with the babies, saying his wife was too ill to look after them. Samuel gladly accepted them as he and his wife were childless and he believed their prayers had been answered.

When Nettie showed up at his door, Samuel assumed that she was the real mother of the children, and his friend the father (159). By now it becomes apparent to the reader that Alphonso is the man who brought Olivia and Adam to Samuel, and that the prosperous Black farmer and his wife are Celie's and Nettie's parents. This makes Alphonso their stepfather. As Nettie announces dramatically: "Pa is not our pa" (159).

In these letters, Nettie documents the arrival of the British plantation owners. They have bought the village and the Olinka lose their ancestral lands and traditional livelihoods. The missionaries face a lot of resistance from the villagers and some, like Tashi's father, are hostile. They believe in the superiority of their culture as far as the position of women is concerned. Samuel's revelations are dramatic; filling up many gaps in the plot of the novel.

- i) Describe some of the customs of the Olinka.
- ii) Why does Corrine think that Olivia and Adam are Nettie's children?
- iii) What happens after the road begins to be built through the village?
- iv) Why is Celie's father killed by other white farmers?

Letters 68–69: Celie's letter to God, and then Nettie

In a very brief letter, Celie expresses her shock at this unsettling information, that the man she thought was her Pa is not her real father. The shame and the stigma of incest that she has been carrying around seem to have been futile. The pain of learning about her real father adds to her agony. Seeing her state, Shug decides that she will take Celie with her to Memphis.

It is important to note that from Letter 69 onwards, excluding the last letter of the novel, Celie's letters are addressed to Nettie, not God. Overcome with a desire to meet her Pa, she and Shug drive to his home. For the first time, Celie notices the abundance of color and variety of flowers on the drive there. It is as if she has suddenly become receptive to the beauty surrounding her former home. The house is freshly painted in yellow and green. Alphonso is now married to a very young girl, Daisy. His second wife May Ellen has left with her children.



Celie's appearance doesn't seem to perturb Alphonso, even when she tells him that she has come to know that he is not their real father. He defends himself, saying that he didn't want to traumatize Celie and Nettie, who were little girls when he married their mother. Sensing that Shug is aware of how he raped his step-daughter, he quickly changes the subject. He boasts of how well he manages the store that belonged to Celie's father. All Celie is interested in is getting the location of her father's grave but he doesn't know. He hasn't even bothered to get a headstone for Celie's mother. At the cemetery for colored people, Shug and Celie find an old horseshoe and stick it in the ground to mark the spot. Shug reaffirms her love for Celie: "Us each other's people now" (165).

- i) Why does Alphonso feel he can manage white people better than Celie's father did?
- ii) Who is Daisy? What happened to May Ellen, Alphonso's second wife?
- iii) Does Celie find her father's grave?

Letters 70–72: Nettie's letters to God

Nettie tells Samuel and Corrine that Olivia and Adam are her sister Celie's children, but Corrine is not convinced with her explanation that the only reason she landed up at their door was because Celie had sent her. Corrine is too ill to remember meeting Celie so many years ago but Nettie keeps trying. Suddenly, she fishes out a patchwork quilt from Corrine's trunk; made out of squares of cloth cut out from old garments and points to a piece of cloth patterned with birds—cut out from a dress Olivia was wearing when Nettie first saw her. Corrine remembers the meeting with Celie and how she had been struck by her resemblance to Olivia. She weeps and dies soon after, uttering the words: "I believe" (169). She is buried according to Olinka custom.

In her next letter, Nettie brings up the subject of menstruation, euphemistically referred to as "friend" (170). The Olinka believe that menstruating women should withdraw from the world and "not even be seen" (170). Nettie expresses her loneliness and wonders how her sister is doing.

- i) How is Nettie able to convince Corrine that Olivia and Adam are her sister Celie's children?
- ii) What are the Olinka's beliefs about menstruation?

Letters 73–74: Celie writes to Nettie

Agonized by her sister's revelations, Celie loses her faith in God, feeling abandoned after a lifetime of devotion. She's convinced that it's because God is a man. When Shug asks her to describe God, she replies: "He big and old and tall and gray bearded and white. He wear white robes and go barefooted" (175). Shug points out that this is the God from



the “white folks’ white bible” (175). She says she herself lost interest in God the moment she realized that God was the white man’s creation. Like a spiritual guru, Shug guides Celie through a redefinition of what God means to her. She believes that God has no gender and refers to God as “It” (176). God is many things to many people, an overall feeling of “being part of everything, not separate at all” (176). She asks Celie to throw out God and man and conjure up “flowers, wind, water, a big rock” (178). Shug believes that a human’s duty is to appreciate God’s creations and replace worship with admiration because it “pisses god off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don’t notice it” (177).

Celie tells Nettie about Sofia’s return to her sister Odessa’s home. While she was in jail, her sister and Squeak had looked after her children. Now grown up, the children are distant with her. One day when the entire family is having dinner, Shug announces that she is returning to Memphis and taking Celie with her. Mr—is furious but Celie, for the first time, answers back, calling him “a lowdown dog” (180). In front of everyone, she blames Mr—for keeping Nettie away from her. When Mr—tries to slap her, she jabs a knife into his hand. She accuses him of being an irresponsible father and worthless husband. Celie also hits out at Harpo for his treatment of Sofia. Shug tells everyone that she is also taking Mary Agnes with her, to help her establish her singing career. Mary Agnes asks Sofia to look after her daughter Suzie-Q while she’s away. In between, Sofia reveals that her youngest daughter Henrietta is not Harpo’s. We can assume that her boyfriend Buster Broadnax is the father.

Letter 73 is important as it marks a significant point in Celie’s development. After helping her discover her sexuality, Shug points out a more authentic spiritual path for Celie to follow. Not only does Celie need to break away from her husband’s domination, she has to seek salvation in nature. There is little doubt that Shug is a mouthpiece for Alice Walker’s spiritual philosophy. This aspect of the novel is discussed in detail in a later section. Shug mentors Mary Agnes as well, taking her along to Memphis.

- i) How does Celie visualize God?
- ii) Briefly outline Shug’s spiritual beliefs, as explained to Celie.
- iii) Why does Shug take Mary Agnes with her to Memphis?

Letters 75–79: Celie’s letters to Nettie

On the drive to Memphis, Celie watches Grady pay too much attention to Squeak. She broods over the scene before leaving; how Mr—taunted her, saying that all she was good enough for was to be “Shug’s maid,” and recalls how she cursed Mr—in return (186).



Shug's house in Memphis is lavish and exotic at the same time. With pink walls, it has statues of elephants and turtles all around; reminiscent of her African heritage. For the first time in her life, Celie has someone looking after her and cooking elaborate meals for her. When Shug is away touring, Celie cooks and stitches pants while Grady gardens. Shug likes the pants Celie makes for her and suggests she make a pair for Jack, Odessa's husband. She does and soon everyone around her wants a pair: Squeak, Odessa, and Shug's band members. Shug supports Celie by giving her money to buy raw material and offering her dining room as a workshop. They start advertising for the pants and Celie designs one for Nettie.

For the first time, Celie tastes joy and contentment. She employs two twin sisters, Darlene and Jerene, to come to help her in her workshop. Darlene tries to correct the rustic elements in Celie's language, but she is disinterested, as she is comfortable speaking her folk dialect. It's proof of her growing self-assurance that she is not willing to change.

Celie goes to attend the funeral of Sofia's mother. As she approaches her old home, she hears Sofia and Harpo arguing. Sofia wants to be a pall bearer for her mother's coffin but Harpo thinks it isn't appropriate for a woman to do so. At the funeral she sees Mr—but turns her face away. However, he comes up to her and is civil with her, talking about his granddaughter Henrietta's illness. Sofia tells Celie how he broke down after she left him and Harpo nursed him back to health. It is Harpo who convinced him to send the rest of Nettie's letters to Celie.

At the house, Sofia and Harpo tell her about Squeak's visit and her odd behavior. Celie tells them it's because she smokes too much reefer, which makes the mind confused. Grady grows it in Shug's backyard. Celie herself smokes it now and offers some to Harpo and Sofia: "I smoke when I want to talk to God" (199).³ They all hear a humming sound.

These letters show Celie achieving economic independence with the establishment of her "Folkspants Unlimited" (193). With Shug's help she learns the rudiments of business; how to focus on designing, employing other people to help her, the importance of advertising, and a unique brand name.

In Letter 79, a new Mr—emerges on the scene. Physically cleaner and courteous, he also seems to have undergone a transformation. It seems as if Celie's curse has had its effect and it is not until he does the right thing by sending her Nettie's remaining letters that he is at peace with himself.

- i) Describe Shug's house in Memphis.
- ii) What kind of pants does Celie sew?
- iii) In what way has Mr—changed, as described by Sofia?



Letters 80–81: Nettie's letters to Celie

Nettie writes about how they have been driven out of their village, which is now the headquarters of the rubber plantation. The villagers have been relocated to barracks in a barren stretch of land and are forced to pay for water, which they store in big, plastic containers. The roofleaf trees have been uprooted to create space for rubber tress so, deprived of their traditional building material, the Olinka villagers have to cover their roofs with corrugated tin. Feeling defeated, many of them run away to join the *mbeles*—insurgents who live deep in the forest.

Nettie and Samuel soon run out of money and decide to travel to England to seek financial assistance for their missionary work. In a seemingly unrelated incident, Nettie writes in detail about another missionary they meet on the ship; a sixty-five-year-old white woman named Doris Baines, who narrates her life story to them.

Dories Baines is from a rich family in England. When her parents tried to arrange her marriage to a suitable man, she felt nothing but contempt for Englishmen, calling them “Bloody mushrooms” (207). It is then that it struck her that becoming a missionary would ensure that she remained independent and unencumbered. So, she pretended to be genuinely interested in “heathens,” managing to fool everyone around her, even the Missionary Society that sent her to Africa. There she started to write, achieving fame and success as “Jared Hunt,” her pen name. She built a hospital, a school, and college in the village of Akwee in exchange for being left alone. Like Samuel and Corrine, she is also travelling to England to try and put an end to encroachments in her village.

In London, Samuel is disappointed with the bishop's response to the problems of the Olinka, as he sidesteps the issue and questions the propriety of Nettie remaining in Africa after Corrine's death. They decide to stay on in London for a few weeks and while Olivia and Adam are out sightseeing, they talk. Samuel tells Nettie about how he met Corrine. Samuel's Aunt Althea and Corrine's Aunt Theodosia, both worked as missionaries in the Belgian Congo, sharing many incredible and amusing adventures together; being chased by wild animals, battling natives, and building a school. Amused by their stories, Samuel and Corrine created comic books based on them, with irreverent titles like: “A MAP OF AFRICA: A GUIDE TO NATIVE INDIFFERENCE TO THE HOLY WORD” (211). For them, the Africans in these tales of their aunts were “bumbling, inept savages” (211). Samuel tells Nettie about Corrine's mixed racial ancestry; she had Cherokee blood.⁴ He is sure that he and Corrine would have laughed at what he had become: “TWENTY YEARS A FOOL OF THE WEST” (213).

Samuel goes on to narrate another incident from his youth. At a gathering of young people at Aunt Theodosia's home she was telling everyone, with pride, about the medal she received from King Leopold of Belgium, when a young Harvard scholar named Du-



Boyce interrupted to remind her that the same king, who conferred a medal on her for being an “exemplary missionary,” had ordered the hands of those African workers, who didn’t work properly on the plantations to be cut off.⁵

Samuel feels embittered at being disregarded and unacknowledged by those same compatriots he went to help; some of whom were guilty of selling their fellow countrymen and were beneficiaries of the slave trade. He is a broken man and Nettie tries to comfort him, confessing her love for him. They marry in a simple ceremony and Nettie tells Olivia and Adam about their mother Celie, whom they will be meeting soon. Olivia tells Nettie how Adam and Tashi fought before they left for England because Tashi wanted to undergo the ritual scarification of her face. It is her way of affirming her Olinka identity.

When they return to the village, they give the disappointing news of their failure to get assistance from the Missionary Society to the people and Samuel and Corrine try to help the villagers as much as they can. Tashi is hiding herself because she has undergone both; the “facial scarification and the rite of female circumcision” (218).⁶

In this long letter of Nettie’s, we are introduced to four minor characters in her narrative: Doris Baines, Aunt Althea, Aunt Theodosia, and Edward DuBoyce. They are mentioned in a seemingly casual manner, but the irony of their life-stories is inescapable. Collectively, they serve the purpose of undermining the narrative of missionary work as a noble enterprise. (This is discussed in detail in a later section.) Doris Baines is openly unapologetic about her missionary work being a camouflage for her real interests. The two aunts have noble intentions but are innocent of how they are unwittingly furthering colonial interests. It is only DuBoyce who sees the political expediency underlying their spiritual mission, holding up a mirror for the aunts.

- i) What are some of the unsettling changes in the Olinka village after the arrival of the plantation workers?
- ii) Why do Nettie and Samuel go to London? What happens there?
- iii) Write a few lines on:
 - Doris Baines
 - Aunt Althea and Aunt Theodosia
 - Edward DuBoyce
- iv) Why did Adam and Tashi fight before Adam went to London?

Letters 82–85: Celie’s letters to Nettie

Celie receives a phone call from Daisy, Alphonso’s young wife, informing her that he’s dead. When his will was read out, it was discovered that his house and store belonged to



Celie's mother, and now belong to Celie and Nettie. At first Celie is reluctant to accept the property but Shug, who is more practical, convinces her to take it as it belonged to her parents and is rightfully hers. Celie is excited and they go to her house, where Shug lights incense sticks to drive away the negativity, saying: "That dog of a stepdaddy just a bad odor passing through" (221). Celie's reversal of fortunes resembles the plot of a fairy-tale. Not only does she make a success of her business, she inherits a house and a store; firmly consolidating her social status.

Celie begins the next letter with the abrupt news: "Shug love somebody else" (223). She is disturbed and blames herself for staying away from Memphis to redecorate her new home and leaving Shug alone. When Celie visits her at Memphis, Shug confesses her newfound love for Germaine, a nineteen-year-old flutist she hired to play in her band. She raves about the boy and asks Celie to give her time to indulge her passion. Shug tells Celie that she still feels attracted to men, begging her to have this "last fling" (226). She reminds Celie how she had accepted her husband Grady but Celie is too hurt to speak, and returns home. Grady has left Shug for Mary Agnes and they are in Panama.

Celie forms an unlikely friendship with Albert. She tells Nettie how Mr— is a changed man. He is cleaner, organized, and appreciates the sights and sounds of nature. He invites Celie and Sofia to admire his collection of sea-shells and listen to the sounds of the ocean in them. He has become a caring grandfather, cooking yam dishes for Henrietta. Albert expresses his regret for his treatment of Celie and appreciates her work. One day he hands her a telegram from the U.S. Department of Defence, informing her that the ship Nettie was sailing in, with her family, has been hit by German mines and sunk. All the letters Celie sent to Nettie are returned, unopened. Celie is devastated by the news of Nettie's possible death.

- i) What does Celie inherit from her parents?
- ii) How does Shug meet Germaine?
- iii) What changes does Celie observe in Albert?

Letter 86: Nettie's letter to Celie

Nettie tells Celie that Tashi and her mother Catherine have run deep into the forest to join the *mbeles*. After their fields are uprooted and they are deprived of their traditional food, the Olinka start to fall ill. For generations, eating yam had helped protect them from malaria. You must have noticed the connection between Henrietta's illness and the Olinka's maladies. For both, their traditional food, yam is the cure.

Nettie tells Celie how she has begun to view God differently now. In Letter 54, Celie had written to Nettie about her rediscovery of God. In what is a clear parallel to Celie's



spiritual awakening, Nettie arrives at the realization that God is neither Christ nor the roofleaf. She talks about how she and Samuel plan to start a new church in America on their return there, where “each person’s spirit is encouraged to seek God directly” (233). Nettie stops writing abruptly as she has to go look for Adam, who is missing.

- i) Why do the Olinka villagers start to fall ill?
- ii) What do Nettie and Samuel plan to do on their return to America?

Letter 87: Celie’s letter to Nettie

This letter of Celie’s is many pages long, unlike her early letters. Celie examines herself in the mirror and is filled with self-disgust. Mr—is the only person Celie talks to now, about many things; the past, Shug, and her children.

Celie writes about Sofia’s awkward relationship with Eleanor Jane, the mayor’s daughter. Although she is not working at the mayor’s house any more, Eleanor Jane persists in burdening Sofia with her life; bringing her fiancé Stanley Earl and later her baby boy, Reynold Stanley Earl to meet her. She is peeved at Sofia’s cold response and tells her that her undemonstrativeness is “something unnatural,” unlike other colored servants (240). Sofia points out that it is fear that makes colored servants say they love their white masters.

Celie feels comfortable enough with Mr—to tell him that her step-father is the father of her children. They often talk about Shug, who keeps sending Celie postcards from all over the country. She is now in Arizona, living with her son James, who is a schoolteacher in an Indian reservation, known there as the “black white man” (243). Shug writes about wanting to visit her parents’ graves to put flowers there. Though they could never accept her they looked after her children and Shug feels gratitude for that.

Celie cannot bring herself to hate Mr—for the simple reason that he loved Shug and she loved him. She feels a sense of calm; understanding that Shug has a right to live her life the way she wants to. Both Mr—and Celie talk about their common love for Shug. Mr—becomes contemplative and looks back with regret at how he treated Annie Julia, his first wife. He tells Celie about his dominating father, who wouldn’t allow him to marry Shug. Mr—feels sorry that Shug has left Celie and comforts her.

Albert starts taking an interest in Celie’s work. She teaches him how to sew pockets on pants and cannot help reflecting on the unlikely picture they make: “sewing and talking and smoking our pipes” (297).

Celie shares with Mr—what Nettie has told her about the Olinka’s beliefs about the first man, Adam. To them Adam is not the first white man but the first white baby they didn’t kill. According to their myth of creation, white men were the albinos born to Black people in their village. The white race’s oppression of colored people is understood as



a sort of revenge for being thrown out of the village. The Olinka believe that this cycle of oppression will continue till people learn to “accept everybody else as a child of God” (250). In this letter, Celie shares her knowledge about the Olinka’s retelling of the Christian myth of creation, as communicated by Nettie. Celie tells Mr—how Adam was renamed Omatangu, which means “un-naked man” (250). His renaming signifies his break with the Christian myth of origin.

- i) Why does Eleanor Jane think that Sofia is unlike other colored servants?
- ii) What do Celie and Albert talk about?
- iii) Summarize the Olinka’s myth of creation.

Letter 88: Nettie’s letter to Celie

Adam returns home after spending a few weeks with the *mbeles* in the great rift valley, where they have established a self-governed city. There he saw hundreds of warriors being prepared to fight the white plantation owners. He has brought Tashi back with him and wants to marry her. When Samuel and Corrine tell them that they are all returning to America, Tashi feels concerned about the racial prejudice she may encounter because of the scars on her face. To reassure her of his love, Adam gets his own face scarified. They all leave for America the day after the wedding of Tashi and Adam.

- i) What does Adam see in the great rift valley?
- ii) Why is Tashi reluctant to go to America?
- iii) How does Adam reassure her?

Letter 89: Celie’s letter to Nettie

Shug tries to get some information about Nettie’s family, but realizes that colored people don’t matter, especially in the middle of a war. Sofia now works as a clerk at Celie’s store while Harpo is happy to look after their children. Eleanor Jane helps by cooking yam dishes for Henrietta. She has found out why Sofia was sent to work as a maid in their house and, overriding her family’s objections, she comes to help Henrietta.

Mr—and Celie talk about many things. Albert tells her how despair and dejection at not being allowed to marry Shug and his children being a huge disappointment to him, made him think about the meaning of existence. He concludes that there is no definitive answer. For now, he is content to have the love of his family. He even asks Celie if she will marry him again but she declines. She gets a letter from Shug, announcing her arrival, and she feels a sense of calm; as if she has moved beyond her emotional dependence on Shug. Shug comes and Celie shows her around her house; now painted in vibrant colors, like purple and yellow. For the first time, Celie refers to Mr—by his real name, Albert.



- i) Where does Sofia work and what does she do there?
- ii) What important life lessons has Mr—learnt?
- iii) Describe Celie's house.

Letter 90: Celie's letter to "Dear God, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God."

This last letter of Celie's begins with exuberance and an all-encompassing love for the universe, reflecting Celie's spiritual state. Celie has planned a family reunion at her house on the Fourth of July. Suddenly she sees a car drive up; with a man, a woman and two young people. Albert recognizes Nettie and the sisters have an emotional reunion, getting to know each other's families. Mary Agnes, who has now left Grady, has come to pick up her daughter Suzie-Q.

Harpo remarks that while Americans are busy celebrating their independence from the British, they are "celebrating each other" (261). His words echo a great speech by the ex-slave Frederic Douglass, "The Meaning of the Fourth of July for the American Negro" delivered in New York, on 5 July, 1850: "I am not included within the pale of this glorious anniversary . . . This fourth of July is yours, not mine. You may rejoice, but I must mourn." Their Black identity is asserted as separate from the dominant American one.

- i) Comment on the salutation of this last letter.
- ii) Why, according to Harpo, do they always have a family reunion on the Fourth of July?

1.5 Early Responses to the Novel

Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) won both the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the National Book Award in 1983. The critical response to the novel, after its first publication, was diverse and since then it has remained sharply polarized. The editor of *Ms.* magazine, Gloria Steinem, herself a well-known feminist, praised the novel for its characterization and authentic language. She says that the absence of "condescending apostrophes and quotation marks to indicate misspellings and incorrect words" indicates Walker's respect, both for her poor characters in the novel and her readers (1982). Mel Watkins, in *The New York Times Book Review* lauded the "authenticity of its folk idiom" and its memorable female characters (1985). However, he admitted that the depiction of Black men, its utopian and unrealistic ending, and melodramatic plot twists and turns were unacceptable. Another critic, Maryemma Graham found the sudden shift in Celie's fortunes, based on "mere personality change" unrealistic (1983). Author bell hooks felt that, in *The Color Purple*,



“fantasy triumphs over imagination” and that Celie’s struggle is in no way representative of that of Black women (1988).

However, the harshest criticism of the novel came from Trudier Harris. In her essay “On *The Color Purple*, Stereotypes, and Silence” she has censured what she calls the “hasty canonization” of the novel by the media (1984). Steven C. Weisenburger has also listed the numerous narrative inconsistencies in the novel, but suggests that our focus should not be on Walker’s narrative art but her vision (1989).

Most readers felt and still feel discomfited by its stark depiction of incest, same-sex love, and, sometimes, crude language. It has featured regularly on the list of banned books because of this. In 1985, when Steven Spielberg directed a film based on *The Color Purple*, he did not go beyond showing Celie and Shug kiss on the screen. He said: “there would have been too much on that one taboo.” Jennifer Wilson writes how, in 1985, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, picketed the film in Hollywood theatres, carrying signs that read, “Are White Producers Destroying Black Men?” You would be amused to learn that the same organization sent a protest letter to the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences for not awarding any Oscars to the movie, although it received eleven nominations. They felt it was a racial snub. In addition to Spielberg’s 1985 film, which women in the rural South came to watch in big groups, the novel has been adapted into Broadway musicals. It is now firmly entrenched in popular American culture. *The Color Purple* is an essential part of reading lists of courses on feminist literature and continues to be the subject of intense critical debate.

1.6 Form and Narrative Style

In *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker dispenses with the conventional, omniscient third person narrator, nor does she divide the novel into chapters. Instead, she uses the epistolary form and the novel comprises ninety letters, written by two sisters, Celie and Nettie, over a period of around forty years, from 1909–1948.

The first fifty-one letters are written by Celie to God. She starts writing when she is barely fourteen years old, to communicate her anguish. Repeatedly raped by her Pa, she gives birth to two children who are taken away from her. Threatened by the man she thinks is her father, Celie silently endures sexual exploitation. She is married to a widower with four children and is at the receiving end of his physical abuse. Her sister Nettie, who runs away from home, is not allowed to live with her.

Not knowing what has happened to her younger sister, Celie cannot write to her. It is only many years later, in Letter 49, that Shug gets hold of a letter from Nettie and



passes it on to Celie. They search and find many other letters from her in Mr—’s trunk. Letters 52–58 and at other places, Nettie’s letters are reproduced. These letters comprise a narrative within a narrative in the novel, and they help fill many gaps in the plot. For instance, the reader gets to know what happened to Nettie after she left Celie’s home. Nettie went to Africa and wrote letters to Celie but Mr—hid them.

From Letter 69 onwards, Celie addresses her letters to her sister Nettie. Shaken by Nettie’s revelation that her Pa is not her real father but her stepfather, Celie loses her faith in God. Though she never receives any replies from her sister, she keeps writing. In Letter 85, all her letters to Nettie are returned to her, unopened, along with the telegram about her ship sinking. Nettie too keeps writing to Celie though she never gets any replies. She knows that Mr—is not passing on her letters to her sister, as threatened. After Celie leaves Mr—to go and live with Shug, it is Harpo who persuades his father to send her the remaining letters. It is important to understand that none of the letters in the novel reach their intended recipients.

Celie writes in the African-American folk dialect, as befitting a semi-literate woman of the rural South. Her education was disrupted when her Pa took her out of school, as she was pregnant. Celie’s language is more of an approximation of an oral style, with seemingly scant attention paid to spelling or rules of grammar. At first it may seem difficult to read but if you pay attention to the sounds, it is simple to grasp. For instance, “git” is “get,” “teef” is “teeth,” and “ast” is “asked.” Celie quotes extensively from other characters, but without using quotation marks, in what Henry Louis Gates terms “free indirect discourse” (42). Read this passage from the novel, where Sofia tells Celie about her mother:

She say, To tell the truth, you remind me of my mama. She under my daddy thumb. Naw, she under my daddy foot. Anything he say, goes. She never say nothing back. She never stand up for herself. (39)

The absence of quotation marks makes it difficult to determine whether the words are Sofia’s or Celie’s. There are innumerable passages like these in the novel. Here’s another one:

Shug saying Celie. Miss Celie. And I look up where she at. She say my name again. She say this song I’m bout to sing is call Miss Celie’s song. Cause she scratched it out of my head when I was sick. (70)

In this passage, it is not clear whether the last sentence is spoken by Shug or Celie. As Gates has explained:



Celie only tells us what people have said to her. She never shows us their words in direct quotation. Precisely because her written dialect voice is identical in diction and idiom to the supposedly spoken words that pepper her letters, we believe that we are hearing people speak, just as Celie did when the words were in fact uttered. . . In the speeches of her characters, Celie's voice and a character's merge into one. . . (41)

Nettie's letters, on the other hand, are written in standard English. She was a bright student as a girl and in Africa, she teaches the young children of the Olinka village. Nettie is keen to learn about the world around her: she observes, reads, and analyzes, almost like a sociologist. She tries to share all that she has learnt with Celie. But her language lacks the flavor of Celie's correspondence. It is no wonder that many readers feel that Nettie's letters diminish the impact made by Celie's Southern dialect.

The letters are uneven in length, especially those written by Celie. They vary from just a couple of paragraphs to several pages long, as the novel progresses. Letter 87, you may have observed, is several pages long. This variance mirrors her growing ability to put her thoughts into words. The pacing is also uneven. Sometimes letters are written within days of each other; as when Shug takes Celie and Mary Agnes with her to Memphis and they stay there. At other times, years pass between letters. In Letter 20, Sofia has two children and by Letter 31, when she leaves Harpo, she has five children.

As all the letters are undated, it is difficult to keep track of the time that lapses between each letter. You will recall how Shug has to arrange Nettie's letters on the basis of the dates on the postmarks, to put them in chronological order. There are random and often imprecise references to real people or models of cars and the blues singers; the names of Bessie Smith, Sophie Tucker, and Duke Ellington indicate it is the 1930s. The historian Edward Du Bois, the President of Liberia, and Packard cars are also mentioned, but they are not reliable pegs on which to place the time line. Some historical references are vague; Doris Baines talks of a big war and Nettie's ship is hit by German mines so we can assume they refer to the Second World War. The reader has to depend on random references to age to calculate the passage of time. In her first letter, Celie writes that she is fourteen years old and, a couple of letters later, her Pa tells Mr—that she is around twenty. When Celie marries Mr—, Harpo is twelve. When Harpo gets married, he is seventeen; so, we can assume that Celie is twenty-five years old by Letter 18.

It is when one starts using these scattered references to construct the time frame that the glaring anomalies come to the fore. In one of her early letters to Celie (Letter 55), Nettie mentions seeing Sofia with the mayor's wife. This is before she leaves for Africa. After doing the math, it would seem that Olivia and Adam would have been teenagers at



the time of sailing for Africa as Sofia had six children at the time she was working as a maid for the mayor's wife, which was after she spent three years in prison. Based on Nettie's letters, Olivia and Adam should have been middle-aged by the time they return to America. In Letter 87, Celie tells Albert about the Olinka myth of origin and mentions that Nettie told her all this, but there is no mention of these things in any of Nettie's letters. Are we to assume that all of Nettie's letters are not reproduced in the novel?

In his detailed study of the narrative inconsistencies in the novel, Steven C. Wiesnerberger calls them "major chronological incongruencies" (259). He points out that there is a "twenty-year chasm" between the narratives of Celie and Nettie (260). Alice Walker, it seems, was aware of these problems. In her essay "Writing *The Color Purple*" she hints at these difficulties:

Fortunately, I was able to bring Celie's own children back to her (a unique power of novelists), though it took thirty years and a good bit of foreign travel. But this proved to be the largest single problem in writing the exact novel I wanted to write. (359–60)

However, inconsistencies like these shouldn't interfere with our appreciation of the narrative arc of *The Color Purple*. The illusion of continuity survives in spite of the flaws. The epistolary style allows the author to present us with the unmediated narrative voice of Celie. It fits in with the core theme of *The Color Purple*. Celie's undiluted and unedited narration is a powerful tool in her personal growth.

Many critics have wondered about a peculiar aspect of Celie's writing; when and where does she write her letters to God and Nettie? Busy working in the fields and at home, she never mentions how she manages to find the time, and space to write. Nettie frequently mentions the time of day and place where she's writing, but Celie leaves us wondering about the physical circumstances of her letter writing.

1.7 Women in "*The Color Purple*"

Alice Walker, in her essays and interviews, has paid tribute to the women in her life; mother, aunts, grandmothers, and great-grandmother. Walker grew up in rural Georgia, listening to her mother narrate tales about her family, giving her rich insight into their lives. The character of Celie is based on that of her step-grandmother Rachel Walker, a "battered woman," who was the second wife of her grandfather Henry Clay Walker, a violent man who was the prototype for Mr—'s character. Henry Walker's first wife Kate Nelson was shot dead by an admirer, just like Annie Julia, Mr—'s first wife. Walker's father, Willie Lee Walker, like Harpo in the novel, witnessed his mother's murder. Henry



was an abusive man, who once chased her grandmother Rachel and shot her, but missed as he was drunk. The character of Shug is inspired by one Estella ‘Shug’ Perry, a woman her grandfather loved all his life, while still married to Rachel. Like Sofia Butler, Alice’s own mother once hit her father with a coconut on his head when he tried to beat her. Walker’s great-grandmother Anne was raped by a white plantation owner when just eleven years old, and had her grandfather Albert (her mother’s father) when twelve. These were women who worked hard in cotton fields, looked after large families and yet kept their creativity alive; nurturing gardens and sewing quilts. Some, like her aunts, who worked as domestic helps, would transform themselves into “femme fatales” on weekends, finding time to sing and dance.

In this novel, Walker has given a voice to the poor Black women of her family. As the *New York Times* cover story featuring her declared: “Novelist Alice Walker: Telling the Black Woman’s Story” (Bradley 1984).

Celie

There is no doubt that Celie is the most important character in the novel. Battling poverty, sexual exploitation, violence, and neglect; she succeeds in carving out her own identity. Guided by her lover Shug Avery and sustained by the love of her sister Nettie, she becomes a self-sufficient person, not dependent on any man or woman, for love.

Celie’s father dies when she is two years old and her mother remarries: a fact Celie doesn’t know till late in the novel. The man whom Celie thinks is her Pa, rapes her when she is around fourteen years old and she is taken out of school when she gets pregnant. Her Pa takes her baby girl away from her and tells her it’s dead. She has another baby and this one is also taken away. For most of her life, Celie suffers from guilt and shame and writes letters to God, sharing her ordeal. Writing gives her solace.

Celie suffers in silence but is protective of Nettie. When she is married off to Mr—, she looks forward to running away with her sister. For years, Celie puts up with a sorry existence; works hard in the fields and the house, looks after Mr—’s four children, and endures his frequent beatings. Women around her try to make her defy Mr—, but Celie remains passive. When Nettie watches how Mr—’s children push her around, she urges her to resist:

But she keep on. You got to fight. You got to fight.

But I don’t know how to fight. All I know how to do is stay alive. (18)

Mr—’s sister comes to visit and notices how Celie is disregarded by her family. She insists that Mr—buy her some new clothes and takes her shopping. Kate tries to make Harpo help Celie with the housework, but he complains to Mr—and she leaves the house crying:



You got to fight them, Celie, she say. I can't do it for you. You got to fight them for yourself. (22)

Celie is convinced that it is futile to fight. But, at times, there is seething anger beneath. She wishes that her step brothers kill her Pa when they grow up (18). Sofia Butler advises Celie to counter Mr—'s violence with violence:

You ought to bash Mr—head open, she say. Think bout heaven later. (40)

However, it is Shug Avery who brings about Celie's metamorphosis. The relationship between Celie and Shug Avery falls outside the bounds of romantic heterosexual love. Celie falls in love with Shug the moment she sees her picture, and another one on a flyer that she finds in Albert's trunk. At first Celie's infatuation seems normal; the attraction of a young woman for a beautiful, glamorous, and famous woman. But when Shug comes to her house to recuperate, Celie's gaze becomes overtly sexual. Her descriptions of Shug's body; and the jealousy she feels watching Shug look lovingly at Mr—, are frank expressions of her growing attraction: "I thought I had turned into a man" (47).

Slowly, Shug too starts to become appreciative of Celie. She chastises Mr—for trying to stop Celie from going to Harpo's juke joint and sings a song, composed for Celie, making her feel special. When Celie complains to Shug that Mr—beats her, she delays her return to Memphis so that she can make him stop. It is Shug who makes her aware of her sexuality and teaches her to look at her body without shame. Interestingly, none of the other characters acknowledge or oppose their unorthodox liaison. In the novel, the word "lesbian" is never used to label their same-sex relationship.

Shug takes an interest in Celie—asking her in detail about Nettie and getting hold of a letter from her. When Celie is furious at Mr—for hiding Nettie's letters, Shug helps her channelize her anger into something creative. She suggests they sew a pair of pants, putting "a needle and not a razor" in her hand (132). Celie is devastated on finding out that her real father was lynched and Pa is her stepfather. She goes in search of her father's grave but her Pa doesn't know where her parents' graves are. At the cemetery for colored people, Shug helps her pick a spot and tells Celie: "Us each other's peoples now" (165).

Celie's faith in God is shattered by Nettie's letter. All her life she made God her confidante but feels abandoned now. Shug teaches her how to look for God outside the church—in nature, in fields of purple flowers, and get the "old, white man" from the Bible out of her head (177). After this point, Celie's personality undergoes a transformation: it is as if Mr—'s hold over her has diminished, and his "evil sort of shrink" (177). The first step Celie takes in asserting herself is in addressing her letters to Nettie, in place of God; disengaging herself from spiritual bondage.



When Shug announces that she's taking Celie with her to Memphis, Mr—is furious, but Celie is defiant. She answers back, plunges a knife into his hand when he tries to hit her, and curses him like a high priestess:

Look at you. You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. Goddam, he say, you nothing at all.

Until you do right by me, I say, everything you even dream about will fail. (187)

At Shug's home, Celie is pampered with good food and care. Shug cooks elaborate meals for her and gives her money to buy raw material to make pants. She advises Celie about the importance of advertising and focusing on the creative aspect of her work; allowing her to use her dining room as a workshop. Shug helps Celie to discover and embrace her true sexuality, stand up for herself, and become financially independent.

However, the real test for Celie presents itself when Shug confesses her love for Germaine, a much younger man and asks Celie to let her indulge her passion. Shug reminds her that she had accepted Grady but Celie refuses to stay on in Memphis. She sheds her emotional reliance on Shug and returns home. Her friendship with Mr—reflects her maturity. Celie doesn't carry any resentment and appreciates the better man Albert has become, though she declines his offer of marriage. She exudes contentment, having broken the vicious cycle of love and inevitable disappointment. When, towards the end of the novel, Shug writes to her that she is coming back, she says:

Now. Is this life or not?

I be so calm.

If she come, I be happy. If she don't, I be content.

And then I figure this the lesson I was suppose to learn. (257)

Like the little Black boy in the Epigraph, Celie has learnt an important lesson. The salutation of Celie's last letter is symbolic of her all-encompassing love for people and nature around her. Like a mystic, she is full of love and acceptance for all living beings; exuding equanimity.

Shug Avery

In *The Color Purple*, Shug Avery is a blues singer.⁷ Shug (short for Sugar) is Albert's mistress, the woman he always loved but could not marry because his father objected. They have three children together; who remain with Shug's parents while she is asked to leave their house. Shug goes to live with her mother's "wild sister" in Memphis (111).

Shug is successful and popular, touring all over the country to perform. People flock to listen to her panther-like voice, seduced by her music as much as her bold outfits.



She has built a lavish and exotically decorated house for herself in Memphis and owns a Packard. Celie is mesmerized the first time she gets hold of her picture and later a flyer, where she looks carefree: “nothing seem to be troubling her mind” (26).

Shug is wanton and unafraid; carrying on her affair with Albert even after he marries Annie Julia, his first wife. She is unaffected by what people, her own parents included, consider her immoral lifestyle. When she falls ill, the preacher in Celie’s church slanders her and holds her up as an example of an immoral woman.

You would be interested to know that Alice Walker modelled Shug Avery on real blues singers Ma Rainey (1886–1939), also known as “Mother of the Blues,” and Bessie Smith (1894–1937), whose song “A Good Man is Hard to Find” (1917) Shug sings at Harpo’s juke joint. Alice Walker has written about how she would listen to these singers while writing *The Color Purple*. With a powerful voice and matching personality, Ma Rainey forged a place for herself in Black culture. Google ‘Ma Rainey’ or ‘Bessie Smith’ and take a look at their pictures—the sassy poses, the long necklaces, the feather adornments on the head—to visualize Shug’s charisma and beauty. It is no wonder Celie is captivated by the flamboyance in her picture. Being familiar with the personalities of blues singers like Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith, adds immense depth to our understanding of Shug Avery.

Shug Avery doesn’t care for appearances. She sleeps in the same room as Albert when she feels like, even as Celie sleeps in the next room. Although she has had three children with Albert, she seems to be in control of her body. She is, perhaps, the only woman in the novel who uses contraceptives. When Celie asks if she isn’t afraid of getting pregnant again, she replies: “Naw, not with my sponge and all” (73). She starts an affair with Celie, while she is visiting them with her husband Grady, and when Celie is away from Memphis, redecorating her home, she begins an affair with Germaine, a nineteen-year-old flutist in her band. Shug doesn’t think there’s anything wrong in this.

Though Shug is sexually liberated there is a vulnerable side to her as well. Celie notices that her eyes are sad the first time she sees her picture. Albert, the man she loved didn’t have the courage to marry her and her parents have disowned her. Shug’s confession of feeling unattractive as she’s growing old and begging Celie to allow her to continue her affair with Germaine, give us a glimpse of her loneliness.

Shug has a nurturing side to her as well. Her relationship with Celie is much more than a sexual one. She stands up for Celie, feels her love for Albert lessen when she finds out that he beats Celie, and takes her to her home in Memphis to help her get out of an abusive marriage. She also supports Mary Agnes—taking her along to Memphis, encouraging her to bring out her latent sexuality in her songs. As she explains, “that’s the reason they call what us sing the devil’s music” (105).



There is little doubt that Shug Avery is the character whom Alice Walker has chosen to articulate her spiritual philosophy. Shug has discarded the white man's white God and believes in looking for God in the beauty of nature—symbolized by the color purple. It is a return to her ethnic roots, similar to the Olinka's worship of the roofleaf. Like a seer, she holds Celie's hand and takes her out of a self-abnegating existence. She also guides Mary Agnes towards self-assertion. Towards the end of the novel, Shug has made peace with her dead parents, expressed her regret at the way she treated Albert's first wife Annie Julia, and reconciled with one of her children. She stays in touch with Celie and Albert, forging an unusual relationship with them.

Sofia Butler

Harpo's girlfriend Sofia Butler is just fifteen years old when Celie first meets her. She is pregnant and has come to meet Mr—. Fiercely self-respecting, Sofia is not intimidated by Mr—'s rude behavior. When he hints that Harpo is not the father of her child, she leaves. At the time, Harpo is silent but when their baby is born, he marries her at her sister's house.

They begin to live in a shed on Mr—'s property and Celie makes some curtains for them. But Harpo seems to be unhappy with Sofia even after they have had two children. He feels that she disregards his wishes and makes frequent trips to meet her sisters, without seeking his permission. Following his father's advice, Harpo tries to beat her but Sofia is not the kind to be cowed down and, as she tells Celie later on: "I'll kill him dead before I let him beat me" (39). Coming from a large family, with six brothers and six sisters, Sofia learnt to fight at an early age: "A girl child ain't safe in a family of men" (39). Physical resistance is the way she deals with oppression in any form: "all time think bout killing somebody" (93). She tells Celie that she used to hunt with a bow and arrow. Celie observes how she works like a man around the house, wearing Harpo's pants.

Years later, Harpo is still stuck on the same complaint. Celie tries to make him realize that Sofia is a good wife but he is unheeding. Sofia concludes: "He don't want a wife, he want a dog" (62). She tells Celie that she has lost interest in Harpo and is tired of him. She leaves him, taking her five children with her. When her five sisters, big and strong women, come to take her to Odessa's home, Harpo doesn't try to stop her and Sofia doesn't beg him to let her stay.

A few months later, Sofia visits Harpo's juke joint with her boyfriend Buster Broadnax. Squeak, Harpo's girlfriend feels jealous when Harpo dances with her and slaps her. Not one to tolerate bullying in any form, Sofia hits her so hard that two of her teeth fall out. However, Sofia has to pay a heavy price for her courageous and defiant spirit. Out with her boyfriend and her children, Sofia is approached by the white mayor's wife, who



wants to know if she would like to work as her maid. “Hell no” is Sofia’s peremptory response (81). For this, she is slapped by the mayor but hits back. She is arrested and put in jail for twelve years.

Sofia spends the first three years in sub-human conditions, doing prison laundry and is sent to work as the mayor’s maid for the remainder of her sentence. She has to live in the basement of their house and is allowed to meet her children only once a year. Fortunately, Sofia’s family is supportive. Her sister Odessa and her husband Jack help Harpo and Squeak look after her six children.

Sofia is the most tragic character in the novel, who is systematically crushed for resisting both sexual and racial oppression. Her marriage falls apart because she doesn’t quietly submit to Harpo’s violence. In jail, she has to train herself to silently endure humiliation by going against her true nature and, as she tells Celie: “I act like I’m you. I jump right up and do just what they say” (83). She spends her youth as a maid in the mayor’s household and, when she returns home, her own children are distant with her. She turns into an embittered woman and finds it impossible to respond to the friendly overtures of Eleanor Jane, the mayor’s daughter. Sofia is incapable of hypocrisy and refuses to behave, as expected of a Black servant. But it is to Eleanor Jane’s credit that she finds out the real reason for Sofia’s behavior, and tries to make amends by cooking and bringing yam dishes for her daughter Henrietta. It is her way of making up for her family’s unjust treatment of Sofia.

Watching Harpo take care of Mr—when Celie leaves him, Sofia feels some of the old attachment for him and returns to him. In a reversal of traditional gender roles, she ends up working as a salesperson in the store Celie inherits from her father, while Harpo is content to take care of the family and his home.

Nettie

Nettie is two years younger than Celie and, after their mother’s death, the two sisters share a close emotional bond; one that survives more than thirty years of separation and silence, during which they keep writing to each other.

Nettie tries to help Celie learn. Not realizing that Celie is pregnant, she pleads with their Pa to let her go back to school. She also asks their teacher Addie Beasley to persuade her Pa to let Celie continue with her studies. Observing her sister reading and writing, Celie admires her persistence, saying: “Patient her middle name” (18). Celie tells Nettie to focus on her studies when Mr—starts courting her. After Celie is married to Mr—, Nettie runs away from her Pa and comes to her, but when she doesn’t respond to Mr—’s sexual advances he asks her to leave. Celie is helpless to stop her and directs her to the



Reverend Samuel's house. Nettie is engaged to look after their children, Olivia and Adam, whom she immediately recognizes as Celie's. Nettie is like a surrogate mother to them, happy to be close to her niece and nephew. She is treated well at Samuel and Corrine's home, but she feels lonely and starts writing to her sister. Soon after, Nettie travels to Africa with the family to work as a missionary. She continues to write to Celie but Mr— doesn't pass on the letters to her.

When Celie manages, with Shug's help, to get hold of Nettie's letters, a second narrative voice is introduced in the novel. Most of her letters are about her life in the Olinka village and the problems they face after the arrival of the rubber plantation. She teaches the children there. Not only is there a geographical shift with the inclusion of her letters, the focus moves from the domestic to the political. Nettie's perspective is different from Celie's: she observes the world around her and tries to understand it. Before reaching Africa, she reads books on its history and culture. Like a sociologist, she documents the very different lifestyle of Black people in Harlem, the Senegalese traders in Dakar, the composition of the parliament in Liberia, and the customs and religious beliefs of the Olinka villagers. The Olinka roofleaf story is retold to Celie in detail. However, most critics feel that Nettie's letters are rather bland, as far as the language is concerned. Her standard English lacks the intimacy of Celie's Southern Black vernacular.

Unlike Celie, Nettie is not very forthcoming about her innermost feelings. It is apparent from her letters that she is secretly in love with Samuel, and that her admiration stems from much more than friendship. It is only after they get married that Nettie writes to Celie about her love for Samuel, apologizing for her "forward behavior" in confessing her love to him (215). Compare her restraint to Celie's uninhibited descriptions of her love for Shug Avery.

Nettie's journey is also one of inner transformation. The Olinka seem, to the bafflement of the Reverend Samuel and Nettie, entrenched in their customs and look down upon the American way of life. Disappointment and disillusionment lead them to re-examine their mission. Decades after working for the welfare of the Olinka, they feel irrelevant and unappreciated. Left with no money. Samuel and Nettie decide to return to America and start a new church, where people will be encouraged to seek God directly. The similarities with Celie's redefinition of God are unmistakable. Nettie learns that the religious mission she believed in, is an instrument of imperialism: to make the locals more pliant, so that they don't oppose the colonial powers.

Mary Agnes (Squeak)

Mary Agnes is Harpo's girlfriend who comes into his life after Sofia leaves him. Harpo has given her the nickname Squeak, which means a short, high-pitched sound. Mary



Agnes has mixed-race origins; her mother is Black and she is the illegitimate daughter of a white man—Jimmy Hodges, whose brother Bubber Hodges is the jail warden. For want of a better phrase, Celie describes her as Harpo’s “little yellowskin girlfriend” (78). Squeak is at the receiving end of Sofia’s ire and has two of her teeth knocked out when she slaps Sofia out of jealousy. But when she learns that Sofia is in jail for hitting the mayor, Squeak weeps. She is a kind woman and helps Harpo look after his children when Sofia is sent to jail.

Like Celie, Squeak too is a victim of incestuous rape. When she goes to meet Bubber Hodges, he rapes her, knowing that she is his brother’s daughter. However, there is an uncomfortable silence surrounding her rape in the novel. None of the characters reacts to it. For Mary Agnes, it marks the beginning of her crystallization into a stronger woman. She is usually submissive around Harpo but when he tries to comfort her, she asks him: “do you really love me, or just my color?” (90). Maybe she suspects that Harpo loves her only because she is light-skinned, compared to Black women. A few months later she begins to sing Shug’s songs and then writes her own. She writes about her sufferings as a mixed-race woman, facing racism of a different kind:

*They calls me yellow
like yellow be my name
But if yellow is a name
Why ain’t black the same (92)*

Mary Agnes finds her voice in song, just as Celie finds her voice in the written word. With Shug’s support, she leaves her daughter with Harpo and Sofia, and goes to Memphis to pursue a career as a blues singer. She starts an affair with Grady and leaves with him to live in Panama but starts smoking reefer, which affects her singing. Eventually, she leaves Grady and returns to take back her daughter Suzie-Q and go live with her mother. Though Mary Agnes is a minor character, her struggle for independence parallels that of Celie’s. She leaves both Harpo and Grady to become her own person. Mary Agnes shares an unlikely bond with Sofia, much like the wives in the Olinka village, who are happy to look after each other’s children.

Corrine

The Reverend Samuel’s wife Corrine is an educated woman, who studied at Spelman College, where Alice Walker herself was a student before transferring to Sarah Lawrence College in New York. She and her husband have two adopted children, Olivia and Adam who, as we find out much later in the novel, are Celie’s children. Alphonso, an acquaintance of Samuel’s at the time, had brought them to the childless couple, claiming they were born to his wife,



Celie's mother. Celie immediately recognizes her daughter when she sees her with Corrine, because of the strong resemblance to herself. Olivia is six years old at the time. When Nettie is asked to leave Mr—'s home, Celie directs her to Samuel and Corrine's home.

At first, Corrine is very happy with Nettie and treats her well. However, at the Olinka village, everyone remarks about the strong resemblance between Nettie and the two children and people assume that Nettie is Samuel's second wife. After this, Corrine is cold and distant with Nettie, forbidding her from being alone with Samuel or letting Olivia and Adam call her "Mama Nettie." She suspects that Nettie is the children's mother and Samuel their father and that is why Nettie had turned up at their door. It is only on her death bed that Corrine is convinced that the children are Celie's illegitimate offspring.

When Nettie and Samuel are in London to seek financial assistance for their missionary work, Samuel talks about his youth with Corrine. As youngsters, they would laugh together at the adventures of their missionary aunts and create comic-books out of those. Samuel also tells Nettie that Corrine had Cherokee ancestry and that she was "intuitive," with a "gift for understanding people" (213). Samuel believes that Corrine realized, much before he did, that they were irrelevant to the Olinka, and this knowledge eventually killed her.

Like Mary Agnes, Corrine too has mixed racial ancestry and, like her, is at the receiving end of racism. Before dying, she tells Nettie why she couldn't recall the meeting with Celie many years ago. It was because she the shopkeeper who sold her the fabric for Olivia's dresses "treated her like any ordinary nigger" (169).

1.8 A Note on Alice Walker's 'Womanism'

Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple* is celebrated as a "feminist fable" that traces the metamorphosis of a poor Black illiterate girl—who is a victim of incestuous rape and stuck in a loveless marriage—into a self-assured entrepreneur, who walks out of the home of the woman whom she loves, when confronted with her infidelity. In addition to Celie, Shug and Sofia are strong indomitable women who break male barriers; refusing to bow down before societal expectations of how a woman should behave. Nettie too tries to change the Olinka, as far as their beliefs about women go.

The plot of the novel warrants its inclusion in almost every course on Black feminist writing. However, Alice Walker herself intentionally avoided using the term 'feminist.' As a response to the feminist movement's non-inclusion of problems specific to race and class, she coined the term 'womanism.' The word has its roots in African-American folk dialect, where 'womanish' would mean sassy and curious. Read this excerpt from her book *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* to understand her definition:



WOMANIST: (According to Walker) From womanish. (Opp. of “girlish” i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the colloquial expression of mothers to daughters, “You’re acting womanish”, i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered “good” for one. Interest in grown-up doings, Acting grown-up. Being grown-up. Interchangeable with other colloquial expression: “You’re trying to be grown”, Responsible. In charge. *Serious* . . . (80)

The key phrase here is “a feminist of color.” There is a more detailed explanation of ‘Womanism’ in a footnote to Walker’s short story “Falling Apart,” where she writes:

An advantage of using “womanist” is that, because it is from my own culture, I needn’t preface it with the word “Black” (an awkward necessity and a problem I have with the word “feminist”), since Blackness is implicit in the term; just as for white women there is apparently no felt need to preface “feminist” with the word “white”, since the word “feminist” is accepted as coming out of white women’s culture. (100)

Alice Walker felt uncomfortable with the label ‘Black Feminist’ and ‘Womanism’ was coined to describe a new social theory, rooted in Black women’s culture. She felt that feminism had become irrelevant for Black women’s problems as it didn’t address their daily exposure to “two layers of oppression”: sexism and racism.

The Color Purple centers around the relationship between Celie and Shug, which is much more than a sexual one. In another section of *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens*, Walker explains why the term “lesbian” cannot adequately describe the bond between women. The womanist cares for other women and bonds of sisterhood are important:

The word “lesbian” may not, in any case, be suitable—or comfortable—for black women, who surely would have begun their woman-bonding earlier than Sappho’s residency on the Isle of Lesbos. Indeed, I can imagine black women who love women (sexually or not) hardly thinking of what Greeks were doing; but, instead, referring to themselves as “whole” women, from “wholly” or “holy”. Or as “round” women, women who loved other women, yes, but women who also have concern, in a culture that oppresses all black people (and this would go back very far), for their fathers, brothers, and sons, no matter how they feel about them as males. My own term for such women would be “womanist”. At any rate, the word they chose would have to be both spiritual and concrete and it would have to be organic, characteristic, not simply applied. A word that said more that they choose women over men. More than that they choose to live separate from men. In fact, to be consistent with black



cultural values (which, whatever their shortcomings, still have considerable worth) it would have to be a word that affirmed connectedness to the entire community and the world. . . . (80–81)

Celie and Shug share a bond that goes beyond the sexual; they nurture each other “like sisters.” Other relationships between the women are significant. Celie supports Sofia when Harpo criticizes her, and Sofia urges Celie to break Mr—’s head when he beats her. Shug helps Mary Agnes’ follow her career as a blues singer, encouraging her to find her unique voice. Sofia and Mary Agnes share an unlikely bond: Mary Agnes and Odessa care for Sofia’s children when she’s in jail, and when Mary Agnes goes to Memphis, she leaves her daughter Suzie-Q in Sofia’s care. Sofia’s sister Odessa is a pillar of support for her; taking her and her five children in her home when Sofia leaves Harpo. Nettie and Celie share a bond that survives more than thirty years of silence between them. In the Olinka village, Olivia helps Tashi study in her hut, as her parents don’t send her to school. The Olinka tribe is polygamous, but the wives live in peaceful co-existence.

Womanism, as you must have understood by now, is more about nurturing a sense of community amongst women; shifting the focus from assertions of equality and individuality, as propounded by western feminism. *The Color Purple* is a ‘womanist’ text in that sense. As bell hooks comments: “The values expressed in woman bonding—mutuality, respect, shared power, and unconditional love—become the guiding principle shaping the new community in *The Color Purple* which includes everyone, men and women, family and kin” (65).

At a critical moment in the novel, Mr—abuses Celie when Shug announces that she’s taking Celie with her to Memphis, in the presence of all the characters:

You bitch, he say. What will people say, you running off to Memphis like you don’t have a house to look after?

Shug say, Albert. Try to think like you got some sense. Why any woman give a shit what people think is a mystery to me.

Well, say Grady, trying to bring light. A woman can’t git a man if peoples talk.

Shug looked at me and us giggle. Then us laugh sure nuff. Then Squeak start to laugh. Then Sofia. All us laugh and laugh. (181)

The solidarity between the women is epitomized in their laughter; a bond that the men cannot comprehend. However, in the end of the novel, the men are included in the community. Albert and Harpo find a place in the extended family, but it is only after they have been sufficiently “feminized” (Bradley, 1984). Recall Harpo’s cooking and Mr—’s taking up stitching to help Celie.



1.9 The Men in “*The Color Purple*”

As mentioned earlier, the novel became the target of fierce criticism when it was first published, especially for its portrayal of Black men. Alice Walker was accused of being a traitor to her race and perpetuating racist stereotypes of Black men as violent, virile, and oppressive, with a white audience in mind.

However, a closer look at the male characters in the novel proves otherwise. If there is Mr—, then there is Jack, Sofia’s brother-in-law, who stands behind her like a rock. He welcomes Sofia and her five children to his home, when she leaves Harpo. Celie praises him, saying he: “Love children. Respect his wife, Odessa, and all Odessa’s amazon sisters” (192). Three of Sofia’s brothers are happy to go against tradition and let their sisters help carry their mother’s coffin at her funeral. The Reverend Samuel is also a kind man. He suspects that Olivia and Adam are Nettie’s illegitimate children but, instead of judging her, kindly takes her along to Africa so that she can be with them. His concern for the Olinka is genuine and he travels to Africa for the uplift of his race.

Alphonso (Pa)

Referred to as Pa by Celie and Nettie, their step-father is a menacing figure in the early letters. He speaks the only direct line in the novel: “*You better not never tell nobody but God. It’d kill your mammy*” (3). He rapes the young Celie, threatens her, and gives her babies to the Reverend Samuel; telling her that they are dead. We also find out, much later in the novel, that he is not Celie’s and Nettie’s real father but married their mother, after their own father was lynched by a mob of white farmers. He is violent, abusive, and exploitative. When Celie gets pregnant the first time, he takes her out of school. Although Mr—is interested in marrying Nettie, Alphonso persuades him to marry Celie instead. He tempts Mr—with the offer of a cow and has no qualms about telling him:

She ain’t fresh tho, but I specs you know that. She spoiled. Twice. But you don’t need a fresh woman no how. (9)

He always uses sexist language when talking of women. After the death of Celie’s mother, he marries a young girl, May Ellen. When Celie visits him many years later and enquires about May Ellen, he is dismissive. He says that she has left him: “Got too old for me, I reckon” (163). He has another wife now, a young girl named Daisy, whose parents work on his land.

When Shug and Celie go to find out the location of Celie’s father’s grave, Alphonso displays no guilt or shame for his acts. Instead, he boasts about being a better businessman than Celie’s father. He is unchanged and remorseless till the end. When Celie hears



the news of his death and that she and Nettie have inherited his house she doesn't want to accept it, but the ever-practical Shug reminds her that they are the rightful heirs. She puts things in perspective for Celie, telling her to think of Alphonso as "just a bad odor passing through" (22).

Daisy's description of his death is almost comical: "Us was spending a little time in bed together, you know, before us drop off" (220). His death is befitting for his character. He didn't get a headstone for Celie's mother, whereas his own is like a small skyscraper, full of hypocritical tributes, such as "upright husband and father" (221).

Mr—(Albert)

Albert makes his first appearance as Nettie's suitor and wants to marry her. When Celie sees him, she notices that he is "the same shape almost as Pa"; hinting that he is cast in the same mould as Celie's step-father (6). Mr—agrees to marry Celie instead as he needs a woman to look after the house and take care of his four children. Celie always calls him Mr—; never feeling close enough to write his first name. Theirs is a loveless marriage, and Albert is violent and inconsiderate. He sits around while she works hard in the fields and looks after the children. He is unconcerned about Celie, when he starts sleeping in the same room as Shug, while she's staying at their home. But when Celie leaves with Shug, Mr—breaks down. As Sofia tells Celie, he became disoriented and ill. Harpo takes care of him and it is only when Albert returns the remainder of Nettie's letters to her that he starts to recover. Celie notices the change in him at Sofia's mother's funeral, when he comes up and talks to her in a civil manner. Sofia tells Celie how he's a different man now; he "act like he trying to git religion" (201). Though he doesn't go to church, he works hard in his fields, cooking and cleaning "just like a woman" (201).

After learning that Shug loves Germaine, Celie comes back to live in her home, getting to meet Mr—on several occasions. Celie tells Nettie how he has become more appreciative of nature. It is as if he has imbibed Shug's paganism. Mr—invites Celie and Sofia to his house, to admire his collection of sea shells and listen to the sounds of the ocean. He even carves a purple frog for Celie. During the course of their talks, he admits he was a fool to treat Celie with contempt. Celie feels comfortable enough with him to cry when Shug's name is mentioned. He talks about his own past—how he was dominated by his father, who didn't permit him to marry Shug, and how he mistreated his first wife Annie Julia. Mr—confesses how he would feel insecure, watching the bond between Celie and Shug. His empathy for Celie is sincere: "I'm really sorry she left you Celie. I remember how I felt when she left me" (246).

He becomes a nurturer, cooking yam dishes for his granddaughter Henrietta, who has a blood disorder. Mr—asks Celie questions about Olivia and Adam, and soon begins to



help her sew pants. Celie cannot help notice what an unlikely picture they make; sitting on the porch, sewing and smoking pipes, like “two old fools left over from love, keeping each other company under the stars” (246).

Mr—shares his innermost thoughts about the meaning of existence. Again, echoing Shug’s philosophy, he says:

I think us here to wonder, myself. To wonder. To ast. And that in wondering about the big things and asting bout the big things, you learn about the little ones, almost by accident. But you never know nothing more about the big things than you start out with. The more I wonder, he say, the more I love. (256)

Mr—seems to have more than redeemed himself by the end of the novel. Shorn of his aggressive masculinity, he is happy to lead a simple life, cooking and sewing.

Harpo

Mr—’s eldest son Harpo is twelve years old when Celie is married and hits her on the head with a rock on her wedding day. He is troubled by memories of his mother Annie Julia dying in his arms, shot by her lover for refusing to leave her family for him.

When he is seventeen, he marries his girlfriend Sofia Butler after their first baby is born. He marries her even though Mr—doesn’t approve of Sofia; unlike his father, who didn’t have the courage to go against his father and marry Shug. After he marries, he becomes a responsible man; working hard in the fields and Mr—begins to pay him for his work. But Harpo’s constant complaint is that Sofia doesn’t “mind” him and Mr—tells him “Nothing can do that better than a good sound beating” (35). Feeling jealous of Sofia’s strength, Celie too advises Harpo to beat her, but Sofia cannot be beaten into submission.

Harpo comes across as a confused man. At times it seems he is happy to be married to a strong woman. Celie notices the pride in his voice when he talks of how Sofia back-talks: “To tell the truth, he sound a little proud of this to me” (35). While Sofia repairs things around the house, like a man, Harpo is content to wash dishes. Sofia comments that “he love cooking and cleaning” (57). But most of the time, he complains about her. His anxiety manifests itself in an eating disorder: he starts to eat enormous amounts of food and begins to look like a pregnant woman.

Celie tries to make him accept Sofia, pointing out that she’s a good wife and loves him but he is stubborn. Tired of his peevishness, Sofia leaves him. Harpo’s girlfriend, a mixed- race woman named Mary Agnes, is much more submissive than Sofia and he nicknames her Squeak. But she too leaves him to pursue her singing career, accompanying Shug and Celie to Memphis.



Like his father Albert, Harpo too is a changed man. When Albert is unwell after Celie leaves him, Harpo nurses him. It is Harpo who convinces Mr—to do the right thing and send the remaining letters from Nettie to Celie. Seeing this, Sofia feels some of her old love for him and returns. By the end of the novel, Harpo has eased himself into the role of caregiver for his family, while Sofia works as a clerk at Celie's store. He has learnt to accept her. When Celie asks him if he minds her working, he replies: "What I'm gon mind for? he say. It seem to make her happy" (254).

The Reverend Samuel

Samuel takes Nettie into his home, believing that she has come to be near her illegitimate children, Olivia and Adam. From the beginning he is described as a kind man. In Africa, he preaches at the church built in the Olinka village. He realizes he is ineffective in changing the Olinka way of life. After more than three decades there and losing his wife Corrine, he travels to London to appeal for funds but returns empty handed. He is genuinely concerned about the Olinka tribe but decides to return to America when he realizes that he is powerless before their indifference. Samuel sees his "failure to understand his unwitting complicity with colonial practices as a flaw in his theory of spirit" (Berlant 850).

Samuel performs an important narrative function in the novel. Nettie instinctively knows that Olivia and Adam are Celie's children, but it is Samuel who confirms that it was Alphonso who brought Celie's babies to him.

1.10 The Theme of Spirituality

In the *Preface* to the tenth anniversary edition of *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker has written about her intent in the novel; describing it as a "theological work examining the journey from the religious back to the spiritual" (xi).

In many interviews, Alice Walker has spoken of a return to Nature as the path to salvation. Underlining the importance of Walker's words does not imply that issues of gender, race, and nationality are merely incidental in the novel. Celie's travails cannot be understood or viewed, devoid of their historical context.

For most of the novel, Celie's letters are addressed to God. Even in the most excruciating of circumstances, her faith sustains her—through rape, physical abuse at the hands of her husband, and more than thirty years of separation from her sister. When Nettie runs away from their Pa and comes to Celie's home, she is disturbed to see how Mr—and his children treat her. Celie reassures her:

Never mine, never mine, long as I can spell G-o-d I got somebody along. (19)



She admits that it is difficult to put up with Mr—’s anger but her faith sustains her. As she tells Sofia:

But he my husband. I shrug my shoulders. This life soon be over, I say. Heaven last all ways. (40)

At her church, Celie works hard to help the preacher keep it clean and make wine. He calls her “Sister Celie,” and says: “You faithful as the day is long” (42).

It is when Celie finds out that her Pa is not her real father, that there is a crisis of faith. She tells Shug that the God she has been praying and writing to all these years is like all the other men she has known; “Trifling, forgetful and lowdown” (173). It is Shug who points out that Celie was mistaken to have worshipped the God found in “the white folks’ white bible” (175).

In what is perhaps the most significant passage of the novel, Shug spells out her own religious beliefs: “I believe God is everything” (176). She further elaborates:

But more than anything else, God love admiration.

You saying God vain? I ast.

Naw, she say. Not vain, just wanting to share a good thing. I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don’t notice it. (177)

It is apparent that Shug is a mouthpiece for Alice Walker, who believes that Nature is the essence of Paganism.⁸ It is, according to Walker, the only God/ Goddess worshipped by the Africans, that could survive the arduous journey from Africa to the New World.

Celie understands that before she can begin to appreciate God’s beauty around her, she has to “git man off your eyeball” (177). Just as Celie has to learn to break Mr—’s control, she needs to discard the patriarchal god she has been worshipping. Giving her spiritual beliefs a historical context, Walker writes:

It is possible to visit black churches in the south, even now, and find the object of devotion to be a very pale Jesus Christ, blue eyes raised toward his adored father in heaven. This was the same adoration of himself that the slave master drilled into his slaves. I was born at a time that permitted me to see remnants of this baffling and soul-murdering behavior, and to join the movement of Black people in the Sixties whose goal was to eliminate it. (Preface xix)

Writing letters to Nettie, instead of God is the first step in Celie’s spiritual growth. Nettie too learns to look for God within. When Samuel, Corrine, and Nettie travel to Africa they sincerely believe in the sanctity of their mission—to take “Christ and good medical advice” to the Africans (118). In a church in New York, before leaving for Africa, Nettie



is elated to read the quote from Psalm 68:31 above the pulpit: *“Ethiopia Shall Stretch Forth Her Hands to God”* (120). Also known as the Ethiopian Prophecy, it was an inspirational text for the African-Americans going as missionaries to Africa.⁹ Nettie is naïve, ignorant of the fact that it was also used by leaders of the Civil Rights Movement, as well as Black abolitionists to imply that the downtrodden race will deliver itself from bondage. She also notices that the walls of the Missionary Society only have pictures of famous white missionaries like John Hanning Speke, David Livingstone, and Henry Morton Stanley, who opened up Africa to the Western world (122). She fails to understand that Black missionaries occupy a lower position in the organization’s hierarchy. Nettie views Africans from a western perspective:

Today the people of Africa – having murdered or sold into slavery their strongest folks – are riddled by disease and sunk in physical and spiritual confusion. (124)

Immediately upon arrival in the Olinka village, the missionaries attend a welcome ceremony where they are told the roofleaf story. As their guide Joseph says: “We know a roofleaf is not Jesus Christ, but in its own humble way, is it not God?” (139) Nettie herself feels that the visual icons of Christianity are out of place in the Olinka village. Instead of the pictures of Christ and the Virgin Mary that she has brought with her, she hangs woven rugs and embroidered cloth on the walls of her hut. Even after more than three decades in the village the missionaries have little impact on the beliefs and customs of the Olinka, who practice polygamy, female circumcision, and facial scarification.

The Reverend Samuel feels powerless to counter the Olinka’s beliefs about polygamy or the education of women. Most of the villagers are contemptuous about American culture. They feel sorry for Nettie who is unmarried and Tashi’s mother Catherine thinks that she is no more than “the missionary’s drudge” (141). When the villagers carve their identity on the faces of their children, all Nettie and Samuel can do is “provide antiseptics and cotton and a place for the children to cry and nurse their wounds” (219). Tashi too decides to get her face scarred, in an assertion of her tribal identity.

When Samuel and Nettie go to London to appeal for more funds for their missionary work, the bishop indifference makes Samuel realize the futility of their work, compounded by the fact that the younger people in the village are happy to work for the British plantation owners. They decide to leave Africa and return to America to start a new church:

God is different to us now, after all these years in Africa. More spirit than ever before, and more internal. Most people think he has to look like something or someone – a roofleaf or Christ – but we don’t. And not being tied to what God looks like, frees us. (233)



Nettie and Samuel realize that they were mistaken in trying to impose an alien God on the Olinka, based on assumptions that Christianity is superior to their form of worship. Nettie also learns about Olinka origin myths as an alternative to Christian origin myths in Genesis. Celie tells Mr—how her son Adam was renamed Omatangu, to reclaim his African heritage. Mr—too seeks answers to life’s disappointments, becoming a calmer and loving person and converted to Shug’s creed.

1.11 The Theme of Colonialism

Nettie’s letters document the impact of colonialism on the Olinka village. When the villagers first notice workers constructing a road outside their village, they are excited, thinking that it’s being built for their convenience. However, when the work continues and the road goes through their village, their fields are uprooted, their dwellings destroyed, and even the church is demolished. The Olinka are relocated in barracks, forced to work for the British plantation owners, pay rent for the land they live on, and pay taxes for water. Their lives are disrupted and many run away to join the rebel *mbeles* in the great rift valley. Nettie and Samuel go to London to appeal for more funds to help the Olinka but return empty-handed. They don’t see the irony of their situation; appealing to the British missionary society for funds to counter problems created by the British plantation owners. Not only have the British owners displaced the Olinka, they have destroyed their way of life. Roofleaf trees have been uprooted and the youngsters don’t mind working in the rubber plantation to earn money to—as Samuel notes with dismay—buy things. Yams are not grown anymore and, deprived of their traditional food that protected them from malaria for generations, the villagers start to fall ill.

It is a minor character named Edward DuBoyce who makes a scathing attack on the nexus between imperial powers and missionaries. Samuel tells Nettie how, many years ago, at a get-together organized by Aunt Theodosia, who had served as a missionary in the Belgian Congo, she was telling the gathering about the medal she received from King Leopold for her “service as an exemplary missionary” in the colony, when DuBoyce reacted with impatience:

Madam, he said, when Aunt Theodosia had finished her story and flashed her famous medal around the room do you realize King Leopold cut the hands off workers who, in the opinion of his plantation overseers, did not fulfill their rubber quota? Rather than cherish that medal, Madame, you should regard it as a symbol of your unwitting complicity with this despot who worked to death and brutalized and eventually exterminated thousands and thousands of African peoples. (214)



Walker merges historical fact with fiction in this episode. The character of Edward DuBoyce is based on the famous Black historian and civil rights activist, W.E.B Du Bois. Though Samuel and Corrine were present on the occasion, they don't see the relevance of his words to the economic and political agenda underlying their religious mission.

Before leaving for Africa, Nettie reads the Black historian T.A. Rogers, but fails to apply his ideas to evaluate her mission. She doesn't notice the incongruity of the material wealth, acquired by people who set out to do God's work, that is on display in the museums she visits in London: "jewels, furniture, fur carpets, swords, clothing, even *tombs*" (124). Nettie comments that the cabinet of Fie Tubman, President of Liberia, has few Black members. In Dakar, she observes that the Senegalese are "blacker than black": a comment that verges on the racist (126). At a cacao plantation near Monrovia, she notices Black labourers working hard. She finds out that the plantation belongs to Dutch chocolate manufacturers, not the government; indicating that foreign powers still have control over the country's resources.

Doris Baines, the missionary whom Samuel and Nettie meet on the ship to England, puts their problem in perspective when she explains that what is happening in their village is happening all over Africa; a prelude to the war between imperial powers. Though she is better informed than Samuel and Nettie she is convinced that, because she owns the village of Akwee, she can put a stop to the construction of the road there.

In the Olinka village, Tashi's father has understood that, unlike the missionaries, the 'trader' is there to stay. He tells them:

You Christians come here, try hard to change us, get sick and go back to England, or wherever you come from. Only the trader on the coast remains, and even he is not the same white man, year in and year out. (146)

Adam spends some time with the *mbeles*, impressed by their preparations for "missions of sabotage" against white plantation owners (251). These few references hint at the brewing unrest in Africa.

1.12 Motifs and Symbols

At Emory University in Georgia, there is a colorful patchwork quilt made by Alice Walker on display. It has red and purple squares, sewn by the author while she was working on *The Color Purple*. Almost all of Alice Walker's biographies mention how her mother gifted her three things before she left home for college: a typewriter, a suitcase, and a sewing machine. It is not surprising that quilts and clothing are important motifs in the novel.



You will recall that when Sofia is upset with Celie, she brings back the curtains gifted to her. But when they have reconciled their differences, Celie suggests they make a quilt out of the curtains. They sit on the porch, sewing together square pieces of cloth. When Shug notices this, she gives them a yellow dress of hers and Celie cuts out pieces to stitch in, that look like stars. It is a pattern called “Sister’s Choice” (56). The symbolism is unmistakable; the quilt becomes a material symbol of their solidarity. Celie gifts it to Sofia when she leaves to go and live with her sister. When Corrine is extremely ill and troubled by the suspicion that Olivia and Adam are Nettie’s children, and Samuel the father, Nettie cannot convince her otherwise. It is only when she brings out a quilt from Corrine’s trunk, that is sewn out of pieces of cloth cut out of Olivia’s old dresses that Corrine remembers the meeting with Celie and dies peacefully. Weaving rugs and colorful textiles is an important part of Olinka culture and even the men in the village weave and embroider. As a young girl, Celie embroiders Olivia’s name on her diapers before her Pa takes her away. Albert tells Celie that, as a boy he liked to sew with his mama but stopped because everybody laughed at him (247). He helps Celie by stitching shirts that are both functional and comfortable.

When Celie feels murderous towards Mr—, after discovering that he has been keeping Nettie’s letters from her, Shug puts a needle in her hand and suggests they make a pair of pants. Celie makes a pair for Jack, Odessa’s husband. Soon she is making pants for people around her, and with Shug’s support, turns her creativity into a business, naming it “Folkspants Unlimited” (193). Celie’s pants are different, as they are not structured but loose-fitting. To use modern fashion terminology, they are unisex. She uses a variety of patterns and vibrant colors, marking an “aesthetic shift” that reflects the shift to worshipping Nature (Berlant 861).

After Celie leaves Mr—to live with Shug, she starts wearing pants and everyone notices how she looks better. Celie’s choice of attire signals her new-found confidence. When she was married to Mr—, she didn’t have the means to buy appropriate clothes. She goes to Harpo’s juke joint, dressed in her churchgoing clothes, and one of the things she admires about Shug is her glamorous outfits. Shug’s stage attire is calculated to highlight her sexuality. As she advises Squeak, dressing right is important.

In Africa, Nettie feels hot and uncomfortable in the dresses Corrine has got her. As she notes, these outfits were not meant for the tropical climate. The Africans themselves wear cumbersome Mother Hubbard dresses that were introduced by the “ladies of England” (172). They signify cultural domination by colonial powers.

Colors permeate the novel, beginning with the title. Scores of critics have explained the significance of the color purple—how it symbolizes royalty, or Jesus, who was made



to wear purple robes before his crucifixion. But to read too much into the symbolism would subtract from its aesthetic function. Alice Walker uses it as an example of God's creativity. The pink walls of Shug's house, the purple walls and yellow floors of Celie's home, the red and purple pants Celie wants to make for Sofia: all these are expressions of Black women's creative spirit. In her essay, "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens," Alice Walker writes about the uncelebrated creative spirit of Black women like her mother who, in spite of spending the whole day toiling in the fields, could find the energy and the time to grow lush plants in her garden. It is this creative spirit that finds expression in the colorful quilts, pants, and walls of their homes.

In a book that preaches admiration for Nature, it is not surprising to find symbols from nature. Celie trains herself to become like an unfeeling tree, when faced with Mr—'s violence, and Mr—compares Celie to a frightened bird when he was married to her. Shug's home is decorated with elephants and turtles, reminiscent of the forests/ lands of her ancestors. When Celie curses Mr—before leaving his house, she draws her power from nature:

Until you do right by me, I say, everything you even dream about will fail. I give it to him straight, just like it come to me. And it seem to come to me from the trees. (187)

It is only after her spiritual reawakening that Celie begins to notice the vibrant colors and lush foliage around her; not even recognizing her own home when she visits it.

1.13 Summing Up

In this part of the study material, you have read about various aspects of Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple*. The novel is multi-layered; with the themes of female empowerment intersecting with that of spiritual awakening. Celie's letters document her suffering and growth into a person who, with Shug's love and support, breaks free of her abusive husband Albert and learns to express her creativity in her stitching. When Shug disappoints her by falling for a younger man, Celie, without anyone to hold her hand this time, moves out of Shug's home to her own. By the end of the novel, she is full of calm acceptance for every creature. Reunited with her sister Nettie and her children, she is happy. You have also read about Walker's theory of 'womanism,' as a more authentic framework within which to represent the struggles of colored women.

Remember that the author wanted her novel to be read primarily as a theological work. Walker's spiritual message in the novel is a return to her African cultural and religious heritage: like Nettie and Samuel, who realize that it is incorrect to assume that the Olinka's worship of Nature, in its many forms, is inferior to Christianity.



1.14 Questions

1. Discuss how Shug Avery is instrumental in Celie's growth.
2. Compare the letters of Celie and Nettie, in terms of language and style.
3. Do you think *The Color Purple* is a 'womanist' novel? Give reasons.
4. How does Albert change after Celie leaves him?
5. Discuss Sofia Butler's character in detail.
6. What happens in the Olinka village after the arrival of the rubber plantation?
7. Why do Samuel and Nettie decide to return to America?
8. Write a note on the symbols and motifs in the novel.

Notes

1. **Harlem:** In the 1920s and 1930s, Harlem in New York City was a flourishing centre of art and culture for the African-American community, which migrated from the rural South in search of a better future, bringing their culture with them. Harlem became the site for the production of literature, painting, poetry, and jazz music. It was a venue for plays, a meeting place for Black intellectuals, and political activism as well. The poet Langston Hughes recorded his excitement on exiting from the subway to reach Harlem for the first time when he was nineteen years old.
2. **J. A. Rogers (1880–1996):** Jamaican born African-American journalist and writer. In his writings, he challenges the pseudo-scientific basis of racial differences. A self-taught man he wrote *100 Amazing Facts About the Negro: A Short Cut to the World History of the Negro* (1934) and, among other books, three volumes on *Sex and Race* (1941–42). With detailed documentation, he challenged Eurocentric historians and anthropologists who had omitted Black contribution to humanity.
3. **Reefer:** Another name for cannabis, which became popular in colored immigrant communities in America, during the 1920s. Smoking cannabis was supposed to lower inhibitions, by making the smoker feel as if time was slowing down. Many jazz musicians smoked reefer. Louis Armstrong, famous jazz musician, said smoking reefer made him "forget all the bad things that happen to a Negro."
4. **Cherokee:** The largest indigenous group in the Southeast of the United States. Between 1838–39, the government displaced around 60,000 Native Americans from Georgia, driven away from their ancestral homelands to areas west of the Mississippi, designated as Indian territory. Those who remained behind, like Corrine's ancestors, mingled with the Blacks and lost their cultural identity.



5. **William Edward Burghardt Du Bois (1868–1963):** Sociologist, historian, author and activist. He received his PhD from Harvard in 1895 and was the first Black American to do so. Du Bois was one of the founding members of the National Association for Advancement of Black Americans, formed in 1909, and editor of its magazine *The Crisis*. He was one of the most prominent Black scholars of his time and his book *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) is one of the landmarks of African-American literature.
6. **Facial scarification** has been practiced by tribal communities all over Africa for hundreds of years. There are a number of reasons documented by anthropologists; beliefs that scarification links them to their ancestors, as a rite of passage to teach children to endure pain, to signal the willingness of a young girl to become a mother by scarring the abdomen, and as a mark of having attained manhood. Incisions are made on the face and the resultant scars form a recognizable pattern. Sometimes children as young as six months old are scarred. **Female circumcision** refers to the partial or total removal of external female genitalia. In many African communities, young girls between the ages of one and fifteen undergo the rite of circumcision, based on cultural beliefs that it will control sexuality, preserve virginity, and maintain hygiene.
7. **Blues:** A genre of music that has its historical origin in the plantation life of the American South in the early twentieth-century. Historians trace its roots to work songs, field songs, and spirituals sung by African-American agricultural workers, especially in the Mississippi delta. Sharecroppers would sing or holler in the call-and-response style. Blues were lyrical expressions of sadness and melancholy, popular at juke joints, illicit nightclubs known as speakeasies, and brothels. The songs were about love, lust, and longing and man-woman relationships. Many Blacks considered it sinful and it was also known as the devil's music. In the novel, as pointed out, the character of Shug Avery is based on blues singers Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith. When Shug sings at Harpo's juke joint, one of the first songs she sings is Bessie Smith's "A Good Man is Hard to Find." Listen to the singer to experience the sheer power and magic of her voice. [<https://youtu.be/BZVDQqNoak>]
8. **Paganism:** It is an umbrella term for a number of religious ideas, believing in the worship of the natural world, as a manifestation of the spiritual. It was used to denote those people who practiced a religion other than Christianity.
9. **Ethiopian Prophecy:** It is another name for Psalm 68:31: "Princes shall come forth out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch forth her hands unto God." It is a prophecy about how the Black Jews of Egypt and Ethiopia will be converted to Christianity. The Ethiopians stretch out their hands to Christ, to be pardoned from sin. However, white abolitionists in Europe and America interpreted this as divine authority for



their civilizing mission; to lead the Africans out of darkness. But during the Civil Rights Movement in America, the slavery of the African-Americans was compared to the slavery of the Hebrews in Egypt and Psalm 68:31 became an inspirational text, implying that the Ethiopians will deliver themselves from bondage.

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The Yellow Wallpaper

Charlotte Perkins Gilman

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Structure

1. *Introduction*
2. *Learning Objectives*
3. *Biographical Sketch and Literary Pursuits*
4. *Context*
5. *Summary and Analysis*
6. *Themes and Motifs*
7. *Characters*
8. *Summing Up*
9. *Further Readings*

1. Introduction

The history of male domination and consequent oppression across cultures has been such that it has led many feminist writers to imagine female utopias that are imaginary landscapes that are women centric and free from male control and violence. Charlotte Perkins Gilman is one such author whose writings reflect the tyranny of patriarchal conventions and the vexed female longings. Best known for her short story “The Yellow Wallpaper”, Gilman was the late 19th century American writer, humanist and social reformer who advocated for female independence.

2. Learning Objectives

In this study lesson on Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper”, you will learn about:

1. The author’s personal life trajectory
2. “The Yellow Wallpaper” as an auto-biographical account
3. Key ideas such as female hysteria, rest cure, infantilization
4. Internalization of gender roles, and the female desire for agency



5. The trope of madwoman in the attic and mother
6. The yellow wallpaper as a key motif
7. Intertextuality: *Jane Eyre* and “The Yellow Wallpaper”
8. Significance of the ending

3. Biographical Sketch and Literary Pursuits

Charlotte Perkins Gilman was born on 3rd July 1860 in Hartford, Connecticut. Abandoned in her infancy by her father she was raised by her destitute mother who found it difficult to provide on her own. Consequently, she was helped by her father’s aunts that included education activist Catharine Beecher, suffragist Isabella Beecher Hooker, and Harriet Beecher Stowe, the author of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Growing up amidst straitened circumstances, she had an irregular schooling. Nonetheless, this did not deter her inclination towards learning. She was especially interested in natural philosophy, more than literature and history. At the age of 18, her artistic aspirations led her to join Rhode Island School of Design which helped her sustain herself as an artist of trade cards, a precursor to modern day business cards. By this time, her absent father too began to support her financially.

At Design School, Gilman forged a close friendship with Martha Luther as attested by the numerous letters that were exchanged between the two. Critics have commented upon their nature of friendship as a deeply passionate one though Gilman herself denied any sexual aspect to it. Nonetheless, she was distraught when Luther married a man in 1881. Later in 1884, Gilman too married an artist Charles W. Stetson. She experienced serious postpartum depression after the birth of her daughter. Her marriage resulted in a divorce, post which she moved to California.

At this point, she actively immersed herself in several feminist movements and organizations. She advocated ideas that were radical such that she argued not only for leadership positions for women but urged men to be equal participants in domestic chores. Very importantly she did not repudiate the conventional qualities of females as objects of derision. Rather, she upheld them and invested them with new meanings. In so far as her private life is concerned, a couple of years later she married her cousin Houghton Gilman, a Wall Street attorney, with whom she seems to have had a better relationship. Houghton died of cerebral haemorrhage in 1934. Charlotte Gilman, who had lived a tempestuous life with depression and breast cancer that was detected in 1932 committed suicide on 17th August 1935.



4. Context

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's own life provides a compelling context in which to locate her writings. Having personally experienced the ordeal of postpartum depression and suicidal tendencies, she was all too-familiar with the oppressive modes of male paternalism and ill-suited medical treatments of the time. Drawing upon her personal experiences and prevalent understanding of mental illness, "The Yellow Wallpaper" is a semi-autobiographical account.

Published in 1892 in the *New England Magazine*, "The Yellow Wallpaper" is a deeply sensitive portrayal of a woman in isolation who is struggling with mental illness and has therefore been prescribed "rest cure". Despite the care of an apparently concerned husband she suffers from an eventual mental breakdown. By focusing on questions concerning female hysteria and rest-cure, the author underscores men's limited understanding of postpartum depression and medical ailments afflicting women. It was also her response to Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell, the noted medical practitioner of the time, who prescribed rest cure, and was the one who treated Gilman as well. She admits to it in her essay "Why I wrote 'The Yellow Wallpaper'" (1913) wherein she writes about the debilitating effect of such medical prescriptions which had brought her on the verge of what she calls "utter mental ruin". Her critique of his practice is also evident in the fact that she sent a copy of the story to him. The story thus also points to the medical history of depression and nervous breakdown in Gilman's America and the patriarchal marginalization of women. Thus, the impact of her work merits greater attention and calls for a detailed analysis.

5. Summary and Analysis

This section will take you through the story of "The Yellow Wallpaper". For the sake of easy comprehension, the summary has been divided into three sections even though the author makes no such distinctions in the story itself. The tripartite structure here is loosely based on the major developments in the story. Hence, the first section deals with the conditions in which the protagonist-narrator is placed in the nursery and her impression of the house. Second section focuses on the protagonist's growing fascination with the yellow wallpaper of the room she is confined to. The third and final section corresponds to the events of the last few days before the narrator and her husband are likely to leave the place.

Section 1

"The Yellow Wallpaper" begins with an unnamed narrator expressing her surprise at the "colonial mansion" that her husband has rented for the summer. While she cannot believe



her luck she wonders if it is “a haunted house”. She finds it “queer” that people of her standing could avail such an aristocratic house for so cheap, a suspicion that her doctor husband is quick to dismiss. A note of male control and patriarchal dismissal of women is introduced right in the beginning when she mentions her doctor husband John who laughs at her idea and saying in the same breath that one (women) can expect that in marriage. Like most men whose manners are patronizing, John too is indulgent but carries the stamp of his male authority which gains force from his professional qualification as a doctor. As such, being a practical man, he does not entertain anything that is not palpable or empirically proven and which is why he is quick to lash out at faith or superstition.

The point of John being a physician is stressed upon which is to suggest the source of his authority. Though the narrator cannot confront him on this she believes that it is precisely because of him being a doctor that she cannot recover faster implying that she is not well. In between, in passing, the reader is subtly told that the narrative is written in the confessional mode of a private journal, and it allows her great relief as she can commit onto paper what she cannot tell her ‘loving’ husband.

One can sense a sigh of exasperation when the narrator tells us that her husband refuses to believe she is sick even though she strongly feels so. That he is a doctor and therefore supposed to know better only works to undermine any attempt that the narrator makes to convey to him how she actually feels as John does not believe what he cannot see. What makes it even worse for her is that he convinces everyone that it is just “temporary nervous depression—a slight hysterical tendency”. Considering his views as a doctor it is impossible for her to communicate to anyone her authentic feelings because no one is going to believe her when the authority of male knowledge reigns supreme.

As an antidote to her nervous depression John has prescribed her “rest-cure” forbidding her from doing any work especially intellectual which the narrator finds stifling. Given the confining circumstances she finds herself in, and her intuitive belief that work would help her sustain, she writes but does so in secret as even that is forbidden to her. All of which suggests the extreme degree of control that John maintains over her even though he comes across as a deeply caring husband. His denial of letting her work, even writing, is just the beginning. As the narrative progresses, one finds that every little wish of hers is denied to her; be it change of room or the floral chintz that she feels would help her feel better. It is John who despite his apparent affection and care is the one who is in control of her life and her choices such that she cannot do much except quietly acquiesce to him. The male paternalism that her husband exercises on her fills her with a sense of guilt every time she feels a sense of disagreement with him. It points out to the many ways in which control is maintained over women.



Being left with no choice and confined to the room as part of her treatment, she turns her attention to the yellow wallpaper. Gradually she became obsessed with it despite its hideous looks. Nonetheless, the wallpaper brings out for the reader her imaginative side, which contrasts with the pragmatic John who doesn't believe in what he cannot see. Though John does not agree with her, the narrator believes that working would be better for her both as a diversion and treatment. Consequently, she confides her thoughts by writing a secret journal wherein she describes the house and particularly the room. She informs us that while she is growing fond of the room, she is repulsed by the wallpaper. The room which appears to be a nursery judging from the barred windows, gradually takes on a sinister appearance as more details, such as, - the "nailed down" bed, and the floor that is "scratched and gouged and splintered" - begin to emerge such that the narrator calls it an "atrocious nursery". While John who checks on her now and then has been busy, the narrator state is "dreadfully depressing" which the former refuses to acknowledge convinced as he is that she has no reason to suffer. The narrator's search for someone in whom she can confide and who can empathize with her is frustrating. Her thoughts are also punctuated by her worries for her baby who is in the care of Mary, a nanny, since the narrator cannot attend to her baby following her postpartum depression.

The sheen of apparent concern that John has for his wife, the narrator, also begins to peel off as one finds him gradually refusing her every little demand for change such as repapering of the wall that she felt would make her feel better. John believes that if he allows her this one indulgence then it could be something else the next day and so on and so forth. One is also told that he is away most days now including on some nights. This in conjunction with the fact of a gullible wife who believes everything he says and rather feels guilty introduces an element of suspicion as regards John's fidelity to the narrator-wife. Instead of doing anything according to the narrator's choice, he has convinced her in the most patronizing ways when he says, "You know the place is doing you good," he said, "and really, dear, I don't care to renovate the house just for a three months' rental."

Section 2

Gradually, the yellow wallpaper begins to dominate the story. It is inscribed with anthropomorphic qualities. The narrator's lively imagination makes her see "so much expression in the inanimate thing". The result is that the incongruities of the nursery-room begin to emerge, and it takes on an ominous turn. At this moment when the narrator seems to be consumed by the appearance and patterns of the wallpaper, the readers are introduced to Jennie, John's sister. She comes across as an embodiment of an ideal woman of her times. One is told that "she is a perfect and enthusiastic housekeeper and hopes for no



better profession”. That she too believes that it is the act of writing that has made the narrator sick is suggestive of how she has ingrained the patriarchal ideas of authorship as masculine domain. She thereby also reinforces sexist stereotypes of women as weaker sex with weak brain. The shame and pressure that women feel in not upholding the traditional virtues as dictated by men is highlighted in the fact that the narrator must do her writing in secret lest Jennie finds it out.

As weeks pass by without much improvement, John threatens, albeit in a veiled manner that he would send her to Weir Mitchell, a medical practitioner famed for his rest cure treatment for hysteria. She disagrees with it and compares Mitchell to John and her brother thereby suggesting that they (men) are all the same in so far as dictating choice, and their opinion of her condition and its treatment are concerned.

The wallpaper has her strangely fixated which she describes in vivid details. The grotesque wallpaper gives the room an oddly menacing feel when one notices that the bed is nailed down to the floor along with the barred windows. One begins to wonder if it was indeed a nursery. The narrator’s fascination with reading shapes and meanings into the wallpaper is such that it leaves her exhausted. One can sense that her condition has begun to deteriorate when the narrator tells us that she can see a “faint figure” wanting to break free from the patterns of the wallpaper that seems to have imprisoned her. The narrator moves to test it by feeling it with her hands. Soon, she starts believing that there is a “stooping and creeping” woman trapped behind the patterned wallpaper.

With John being away most of the time, reading meanings in the wallpaper becomes the narrator’s primary entertainment. It is heightened to a point where she becomes overtly secretive about it. The obsession is such that when Jennie is found closely inspecting the wallpaper she is startled by the narrator who finds her doing so. Jennie informs the narrator that she had found yellow stains on their clothes thus presaging possible links between the inhabitants, the narrator and the imaginary “trapped woman” behind the wallpaper patterns that now appears to be like bars of a cage.

John confuses the narrator’s fixation for tranquility with an improvement in her health. On the contrary, the narrator sleeps less. She complains for the first time that she can smell the odour of the wallpaper. She also discovers a peculiar streak of yellow on the four walls of the room. She is affected to such a degree that she sees more heads behind the bars furiously shaking them in their attempts to break free. However, she can see only one figure at a time and imagines her creeping even on the long road under the tree. The reader is informed by the narrator herself that she too creeps during the daylight but only when John is not around and in secret so as not to be discovered. The narrator takes upon herself the mission to free the woman at night all by herself.



The day of their leaving the mansion is close. She is excited but has a mission set out for herself which is to free the crawling woman trapped behind the patterns of the wallpaper. Apprehensive that John and Jennie, perhaps, know of her preoccupation with the wallpaper, she decides to tear down the paper at night. But before that she locks the room and throws away the key on the front path rendering her room inaccessible for others.

Section 3

The narrative takes an enigmatic turn on the last day of their stay in the summer mansion which has haunted her mind. She seems to be possessed by a spirit as she goes on a rampaging spree biting the iron bed and tearing the paper in her endeavour to rescue the woman who she feels is struggling to break free. In this frantic moment she imagines as if the “strangled heads and bulbous eyes and waddling fungus growths just shriek with derision!” She almost decides to jump out of the window but then decides the better of it. John too has arrived by now and is crying for an axe to barge into the room. In the tumult that ensues, the narrator is crawling and becomes the woman she wanted to save. There are obvious pointers in the text that collapse the distinction between the two to suggest that the woman the narrator imagined as trapped behind the wallpaper and one who would crawl on the road in the daylight was a projection of her own self. The woman behind the wallpaper as the narrator claims to see is only an extension of her own repressed self as her life is governed by John and her brother with hardly any space for her own independent assertions.

Towards the close of the story, the narrator’s identification with the woman of her imagination is complete. Finally, when John is able to enter the room, he is shocked to see her in such a bestial state. Shocked at the horror of his wife behaving animal/infant like he faints and the narrator continues to crawl around the room and over John’s body repeatedly. The story ends on a note of mental breakdown of the narrator as symbolized in the animal imagery. It is also a symbolic moment replete with multiple significations.

Self-Check Questions-1

1. How does the female protagonist-narrator view the ‘nursery’ in which she has been placed?
2. What is the role of John in the story? What does his treatment of his wife tell you about him?
3. Write a short note on the “rest cure” as prescribed to the narrator.



4. How does the wallpaper become a force of its own in the story? What are the implications of it for the narrator?
5. Discuss the presence of the woman behind the wallpaper as suggested by the narrator. Is it an extension of her own self?

6. Themes and Motifs

Critical discussions of “The Yellow Wallpaper” have looked at it as a representative text that embodies the deplorable position of women in the 19th century society. Among the many thematic concerns that inform this text - and which have already been woven here in the textual analysis - some of the persistent ones are questions of gender, modes of patriarchal control, lack of female agency, and the importance of marriage and domesticity. Therefore, this section shall focus on some of the other seminal ideas that are crucial to understanding this story and the historical time that it represents.

6.1 Hysteria and “rest cure” in the 19th Century Europe

The term hysteria has a long history going as far back as the Greek classical antiquity with its etymological meaning in the Greek word ‘*hystera*’ or womb. Despite its long history, understanding of hysteria remained shrouded with ignorance and prejudices. One such misunderstanding was that it was believed to be resulting from the wandering of uterus. That myth, however, was soon discarded. Dr. Sigmund Freud, the 19th century Austrian psychoanalyst, developed an interest in hysteria whose theories however remained inconsistent. Moreover, they were based not on scientifically proven methods but therapies. At the core of it, hysteria was seen as symptomatic manifestations of a psychological disorder. As a result, it was used as an umbrella term to describe mental illness, nervous depression, a feeling of sickness etc. all of which were all viewed as hysteria. In the 19th century the American physician, Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell, prescribed “rest cure” as treatment for women diagnosed with hysteria which involved resting and eschewal of any work, particularly of intellectual or creative kind. Other treatments included “talking cure” as propounded by Anna O’ who experienced hallucinations, blurred visions and partial paralysis.

The misogyny of the prognosis and the treatment is evident when one examines the long history of hysteria. The myth of women as lascivious, seeking carnal pleasures have long been in circulation. Female sexuality too has been seen as problematic. Connections have been drawn between female hysteria and sexual repression. Perhaps this also explains why sexual passivity and self-restraint have been valorized across cultures as hallmarks



of a good woman. The women who transgress are seen as threat and therefore labelled as mad, hysterics and therefore in need to be put to rest (nursery/attic/death).

“The Yellow Wallpaper” however is a critical indictment of such diagnosis and treatments which failed to account for the inner lives of women and made the female body a site of male biases. Her criticism of the prevalent medical understanding of women and their ailments also stems from the fact that they were more oppressive and regimental than curative as the author had herself experienced firsthand. The ambiguity surrounding hysteria also points to the failure of men’s imagination and reason to know and appreciate woman and her ‘self’. Other feminists too felt the devastating consequences of such medical prognosis. Virginia Woolf, the 20th century feminist writer, who too underwent this treatment was also critical of such medical practices which she debunks in her work *Mrs. Dalloway*.

The author of “The Yellow Wallpaper” argues that hysteria is a result of a boring and inactive life. The inactive life implies not just mundane living and lack of creativity but also the lack of a fulfilling sexual life. Thus, hysteria and insanity seem to be inevitable for women who are subjected to such conditions of enforced living. All this gains force because the author is writing this from a deeply personal space of traumatic experience in which she was pushed precisely because of such psychiatric care.

6.2 Infantilization

The theme of infantilization of women is one of the main themes in the story. Right from the beginning when we find the narrator being allotted a nursery as a resting space on a summer vacation to John’s treatment of his wife, the narrator. Like one indulges a child, John indulges his wife without giving in to any of her demands. His calling her “a blessed little goose” is a powerful reminder of how he treats her, not as an equal partner but a plaything. He dictates to her every little thing as far as her everyday routine is concerned. While one might argue that he is excessively concerned about her, it is to be noted that the author here points out how patriarchy works on an everyday basis. It does not work by using force only but often employs psychological devices to manufacture consent in its favour. The narrator’s imagining of bars in the nursery as safety guards despite its prison like similarities reinforces the idea of making it appear as psychiatric wards than reformatory.

The child-like associations are further noticeable in how the narrator is completely dependent on John and Jennie for her wants who look after her as parents would. While John is bound to his professional duties as a doctor, and Jennie splendidly carries on with her domestic roles, the narrator who is also a mother otherwise is not expected to



do anything, not even the domestic chores. The infantilization of the female narrator is complete when she is found to be crawling on the floor like a child.

The infantilization of women then serves two purposes: one, it reinforces the stereotypes of women as weak, childish and ill-suited to take independent decisions, and therefore in need of male patriarchs who can ensure protection. Two, the child like equation also provides a convenient alibi to maintain gender segregation and uphold patriarchy. Briefly put, it allows for the marginalization and subjugation of women.

6.3 The Ending

The narrator's descent into madness is steeped in ambiguity and offers multiple readings. A conservative reading underlines what men believed happens to women who choose to go against men in their aspirations, especially cerebral, that are divorced from domesticity. However, a more liberal reading interprets it as an act of liberation from patriarchal confinement. Nonetheless, a more focused analysis of the ending of the "The Yellow Wallpaper" calls for a nuanced interpretation as regards the possibility of freedom for women. It is undeniable that a feminist longing for freedom informs the narrative.

In its concern with female independence, the story demonstrates the ways in which women's everyday lives are regulated. The idea that dominance often masquerades as love and concern is also explored in the story through the figure of the doctor husband. The lasting image in the story is that of the narrator tearing, crawling and moving over the unconscious body of her husband. It would be perhaps a farfetched idea to read it as symbolizing a victorious moment for the female character. If anything, it is a disturbing image that is unsettling for its readers. While it can be read as a moment of tearing down of established structures, the uncertainty that looms large as the narrative closes is even more terrifying. One knows for sure that it is not an absolute moment of freedom. The apprehensions that it raises are far more unnerving: What will be her fate? What will happen when John regains his senses? Does the narrator going crazy not imply she will be put into a madhouse? Will she be disciplined for violating John's dictates and committing 'sacrilege' by trampling over her husband? Will she be condemned like the legendary madwoman in the attic to rage and rant in a forsaken attic? Conclusively, it might be said that the story's open-ended closure points to the long walk to freedom that feminists will have to walk.

6.4 The Wallpaper

The wallpaper can be metonymically seen as a text narrating the oppression and struggles that women face. Like a text, it is peppered with signs and symbols, and is layered with meanings that offer multiple interpretations. As a paper, it signifies a long but troubled



history of association between women and education. The wallpaper here is a projection of many things.

One is the male authored history that has first denied women access to education, and by extension a denial of knowledge, authority and sources of legitimacy on which their power rests. Two, it signifies what Gilbert and Gubar call “anxiety of authorship” (p. 49) that female authors face in the absence of a recorded history of female writers. An anxiety that is reflected in many ways in the unnamed female narrator’s struggle to write and hide the same from the censorious eyes of John, and even Jennie who has internalized the values as propagated by patriarchal structures of power. Thirdly, in ascribing human qualities to the wallpaper the narrator tells us of the male gaze and surveillance that women find themselves under. Therefore, the wallpaper with its “bulbous pattern”, “many heads” has a “vicious influence” on the narrator.

The colour “yellow” further underlines the sense of decay, disease and gloom that pervades the environment. It has none of the warm associations of ripeness and fragrance that summer entails. The narrator calls it “a sickly yellow”. The sickening effect is continued in the malodorous smell that the protagonist feels in the room. That the wallpaper pattern “strangles them” and “suddenly commit suicide” ominously signify the terrible censorship and repression that women have historically faced. The suffocating repression of females is suggested in this potent image of patterns committing suicide which creative women such as female authors and women who don’t fit the societal stereotypes experienced. The image of the trapped woman in the wallpaper vigorously shaking the bars of the wallpaper thus underlines the urgency of freedom for women.

6.5 ‘Madwoman in the Attic’

The trope of ‘madwoman in the attic’ is a long one. Women writers are acquainted with a long list of literature that represented transgressive women as potential threats to the fabric of established social order. One finds various accusatory labels such as witch, sorceress, lunatic, madwoman etc. being used for nonconformist women. Aware of the consequences of such nomenclature the feminist writers have seized upon this all-too-familiar trope for deviant women and have turned it upside down to narrate female resistance. It is for this reason that one finds that the figure of the madwoman comes to people in so many female-authored texts. While they abound in fictional texts, it visually comes alive in Charlotte Bronte’s novel *Jane Eyre* where Bertha Mason is a quintessential madwoman. Using that as a reference point, Gilbert and Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) is an extensive study of female writers and the literary tradition. It also examines the gender and sexual anxieties that are embedded in the figure of a madwoman in 19th century Victorian



literature. For many intellectuals, the trope of a madwoman offers exciting possibilities; here, madness being a sign of woman's intelligence and fecund creativity of mind that must be channelized towards aesthetic and intellectual purposes. As such it liberates the image of a raging madwoman from its deeply misogynistic context. However, in taking the argument further, Gilbert and Gubar argue for the importance of moving above such dichotomy. Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" is one example of such complex treatment that disrupts the dichotomy of the angel and the madwoman.

6.6 "The Yellow Wallpaper" and *Jane Eyre*: An Inter-textual Reading

The uncanny similarities between the narratives of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" and Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre* are striking. Both share commonalities in their depiction of women who face resistance in their intellectual pursuits and Victorian notions of woman as 'angel in the house' or the 'madwoman in the attic' figure. The binary of the angelic women and disheveled madwomen embody the 19th century categorizations that sought to fit women into patriarchal framework.

Talking of the inter-textual parallels between the two texts in question, the nursery in Gilman's story bears a striking resemblance to the sequestered 'Red room' and the gothic Thornfield Hall with its haunting quality. The similarities are carried forward in the image of a neurotic woman who has been confined to a room (nursery/attic) by a man; Mr. Rochester confining his creole wife Bertha Mason in the case of *Jane Eyre*. Though Gilman makes no specific mention of the novel, the similarities are far too many. Both these narratives have domineering men who call their wife/lover with pet names suggesting affection, but it soon becomes clear that they are more tools of infantilization and containment of women. That it oppresses women even more is obvious in the fact that women in both these texts make their displeasure at being controlled by men clear to the readers. Their repression by male dominated society is thrown into sharp relief when one finds Gilman's narrator "securely fastened now by [her] well-hidden rope" and crawling in the room just as Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre* is bound to a chair with rope is "snatch[ing] and growl[ing] like some strange wild animal covered with clothing"; but it was covered with clothing, and a quantity of dark grizzled hair, wild as a mane, hid its head and face" (Brontë, p.258).

Further, they both seek to escape and escape they do but in different ways. While Bertha Mason sets the mansion on fire the unnamed narrator does not burn down the house, but she does entertain such a thought. It is also important to stress here that the unnamed narrator in "The Yellow Wallpaper" is an amalgamation of both Jane and Bertha Mason. The final utterance by the narrator where she exclaims to have escaped "in spite of you



and Jane” is perhaps one more strong reason for intertextuality. However, if a point of departure were to be highlighted, one could say that unlike Bronte, Gilman gives us not just a glimpse of a ‘madwoman in the attic’ figure. It rather evocatively describes the exilic conditions that drive women insane pointing to the psychological effects of stringent control of women’s behavior and thoughts.

Self-Check Questions-2

1. How does hysteria figure in the story “The Yellow Wallpaper”? Discuss its ramifications.
2. How does infantilization of women play a role in the subjection of women?
3. The ending of the “The Yellow Wallpaper” prisms open more questions than resolutions. Do you agree?
4. What does an inter-textual reading of “The Yellow Wallpaper” and Jane Eyre tell you about representation of women in the 19th century?
5. Discuss the significance of the wallpaper in the story.

7. Characters

7.1 John: The Doctor-Husband

John comes across as an idealized husband who is excessively caring and protective about his wife. He forbids her from working, writing and exercising her imagination. He is patronizing in his tone when he calls her “a blessed little goose” only to dismiss her request for a change of wallpaper that could make her feel better. He laughs it off condescendingly. His refusal to believe his wife when she tries to apprise him of her sickening condition is a marker of men’s willful blindness towards women. His recourse to the argument that he is a doctor and therefore knows better only adds to the silencing of his wife. He thus contributes to the worsening of her emotional and psychiatric condition.

John being a doctor and yet unable to understand his wife’s sufferings heightens the irony. It also represents the larger inability of men to understand women and their difficulties. For all his apparent concern for his wife, he doesn’t give much space to accommodate her suggestions. He is blinded by his masculine sense of superiority that he imposes upon her and regulates her life in every aspect. It may be argued that John’s inability to see beyond his traditional gender role despite his sympathy for his wife mirrors how gender binaries and patriarchal norms are internalized by men as well. It is not only women but men too who find themselves trapped by societal expectations to conform to gender



norms. However, this does not exonerate them when viewed in terms of the consequences of their behaviour and attitude towards women.

Consequently, men's carefully crafted image of themselves as strong and mature, and therefore capable of protecting women is challenged by Gilman in the figure of John. Thus, she has John whose confident self comes undone, almost satirically, at the end of the story. Though he persists in treating and dismissing his wife as a child, he cannot bear the sight when he finally sees her being reduced to a crawling infant. The shock of being faced with it is such that he collapses on the floor. In a reversal of roles, it is him who finally comes across as a "weak" and "sick" "young man" with the female narrator wresting a position of dominance, no matter how unfeminine and unpalatable it might seem. For all patriarchal projections of women as infant or mad the men cannot withstand such a reality when confronted with it. This is expressive of the instability of gender norms and the cultural exclusion/demonization of women to bolster patriarchy.

7.2 Protagonist: The Unnamed Female Narrator

It is perhaps significant that the female narrator is denied a proper noun which mirrors the denial of female selfhood. It also signifies the patriarchal denial of individuality to women. That she lacks a name also points to the long history of erasure of women whose voices have gone unheard. Such is the case literally with the narrator whose pleas are not granted by her husband John who ends up imposing his own version of reality and choices upon her. Consequently, the unnamed female narrator represents women who are bound by patriarchal impositions, and her story mirrors the toll it takes on women who seek to resist society.

Women struggles, as they strive to free themselves, are similar. The narrator imagining the woman crawling on the main road and the narrator struggling to write her journal despite being forbidden to do so are to be read in the same light. Towards the end that the narrator behaves literally like the woman trapped in the wallpaper and accordingly crawls and seeks escape corroborates such a reading.

7.3 Jane: Who am I?

"I've got out at last in spite of you and Jane. And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!" (Gilman)

An odd mention of Jane in the concluding part of the story has most readers of "The Yellow Wallpaper" struggling to identify as to whom the appellation "Jane" refers to. One might contend that the name "Jane" is a corruption of the name "Jennie" or that it is a slip of tongue as Jane is diminutive of Jennie. However, both these readings do not hold



water. To argue for a case of linguistic collapse in this context is a futile one because the narrator's speech even when she is reduced to an infantile state is neither incoherent nor reduced to gibberish. Furthermore, to think that the narrator, in the given mental state that she is in, would call a person by any other name except what she is normally used to is asking for much. Hence, both these suggestions that equate Jane with Jennie are invalid.

Therefore, though not an established theory, it can be argued that Jane is the narrator herself though she remains unnamed for a large part of the story. Given the narrator's psychological condition, which deteriorates as we move into the story, it is perhaps understandable that she does not introduce herself with her proper noun.

Further, the format of a journal - implying a self-enclosed intimate zone where naming of the self does not matter focused as it is on the interiority - could be another reason. Nevertheless, it most likely refers to the narrator herself though she names it only in the moment of its rejection. The reasons for her rejection of her identity as Jane could be many.

The name, even in its moment of anonymity, is a marker of an identity that was ascribed to the narrator by the patriarchal order. It is the same order that refuses to allow her an expression of her feelings and does not accommodate even a small choice of hers which is suggested in the figure of her husband John. Perhaps this is why she identifies with the "faint figure" of "the woman behind" the yellow wallpaper - an identification that gradually intensifies such that the two become interchangeable. The narrator tells us, "I pulled, and she shook, I shook and she pulled, and before morning we had peeled off yards of that paper," (Gilman). This identification is complete when she becomes the creeping woman. In fully inhabiting the space of the once-trapped-woman who is now ostensibly free, she maps her own longing for such a space. But such a space of freedom also entails a rejection of previous identities that patriarchy binds her with. It is this rejection of patriarchy and everything that it demands that is emphasized in her disdainful rejection of Jane. In vocalizing her name, she calls out patriarchy and its manifestations. Therefore, she names and repudiates the imposed identity that she so far attempted to ignore. Such a reading is also validated when seen in light of the fact that Jane's double is mirrored in Jennie. The conventional ideal that the latter represents seems to have been already rejected by the narrator. Though, according to patriarchal standards, Jane and Jennie are expected to be alike - in marriage, domesticity and motherhood - Jane is not the same as Jennie. The rejection of patriarchy in the form of her acquired name takes us back to the point of original discussion which is to say that Jane is in all likelihood the narrator herself.



7.4 Jennie and the Narrator/Protagonist: Woman as a Mother

Jennie's happy embracing of her domestic role contrasts with the protagonist. Unlike Jennie, she is excited not by home but by writing which is seen as a male forte. Her inability to fit herself in the role of a typical woman is suggested in the idea of her not being able to mother her child. Further, her not being able to live up to her role as expected of a woman is underscored in the fact of her guilt that she finds herself grappling with. The guilt is accentuated in the same degrees in which Jennie seems to fulfill her womanly duty. However, that she does not carry out domestic duties as Jennie does not mean she is without maternal instincts. In fact, she feels glad that her child does not have to live in the "atrocious nursery" with the horrible wallpaper in which she finds herself in.

Further, it may be argued that Jennie is everything that the narrator is not except that of being a mother. However, that does not matter since Jennie seems to compensate for that lack by taking upon herself the maternal role of looking after others. In opposition to her, the narrator herself is unable to fulfill the role of a mother despite having a child of her own who has been left in the foster care of Mary, the nursemaid. Their relationship to mothering/motherhood leaves us with questions: why such an expectation from women only? Is motherhood the ultimate validation of a woman's identity? What becomes of women who can become anything but do not fit into the mould cast by patriarchy?

7.5 Mary, the Nursemaid

Mary is the nursemaid to the baby of the narrator-protagonist. She, a minor character, appears when the narrator expresses her own inability to take care of the baby. However, she feels glad that her child is with Mary, which is expressive of the latter's importance and the kind of person she is. Since "The Yellow Wallpaper" is imbued with symbolism, it would be helpful to locate the nursemaid and her function considering the associations that her name brings to mind. Moreover, the author's use of generic names such as Jane, John, Jennie allows for such a reading as well. The name of the nursemaid echoes Virgin Mary who is an epitome of motherliness. As someone whose name resonates with idealized motherhood, Mary as nanny represents the best care that the narrator could provide for her child.

The pangs of motherhood are well known to most women who constantly suffer from a sense of insufficiency as regards the fulfillment of their maternal responsibilities towards their children. Likewise, the narrator too suffers from the guilt of not being a hands-on mother. Following the postpartum depression which has resulted in her being prescribed resting cure, the narrator's confinement in a nursery in a different mansion has effectively rendered her incapacitated to take on her motherly duties. Moreover, in



the face of the narrator's imminent insanity portending a probable lack of mother for the child, Mary is the best that the child can possibly have. The narrator's utterances - "It is fortunate Mary is so good with the baby. Such a dear baby! And yet I CANNOT be with him, it makes me so nervous." – (Gilman) are prophetic. Mary thus, despite her marginal presence in the narrative, would come to occupy a prominent position by virtue of her childcare services.

The character of Mary also signifies the kind of professions that were conventionally seen as amenable for women. According to conservative men, women were fit for nursing/ babysitting governess; jobs that were essentially connected with the idea of care and nourishment at domestic level. These professions were seen as requiring emotions but no intellect. Any intellectual engagement as suggested in the act of reading, writing or reasoning was actively discouraged as happens in the story since it was seen as exciting mind and passions, arguably the cause for hysteria. It is no wonder then that many women writers were diagnosed as hysterics since they engaged in intellectual pursuits. Effectively, Mary also serves to provide a useful benchmark to the limits of professional aspirations for women until the 19th century.

Self-Check Questions-3

1. Do you agree with the opinion that John has internalized the gender codes of patriarchy? Give a reasoned answer.
2. What do you think could be the reason the author chooses not to give her female narrator a name?
3. In what ways are the narrator and Jennie opposites of each other?
4. Explore the relationship between patriarchy and motherhood.

8. Summing Up

The richness of 'The Yellow Wallpaper' is such that it yields multiple readings. Yet, what unites many scholars on Gilman is that they have interpreted this story as a symbolic rejection of patriarchal constructions of womanhood as defined by patriarchy. Others have read it as a rejection of heterosexual normativity that functions to serve patriarchy and help maintain its status quo. Such a rejection perhaps then points to feminist longing for utopias that imagine a world order where women can have their say and can make interventions without fear and prejudice. However, an essential condition for such a world to be made possible is female solidarity.



In the final analysis, “The Yellow Wallpaper” is a story calling for hope and courage in the face of all odds that beset women’s struggles for freedom. Gilman’s powerful story teaches us that we must put our thinking minds, critical faculties, and our creative imagination in the act of resistance. It is not without reason therefore that Gilman, in an article titled “Why I Wrote the Yellow Wallpaper” first published in October 1913 in *The Forerunner* said: “(i)t was not intended to drive people crazy, but to save people from being driven crazy, and it worked”. (p. 265).

9. Further Readings

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“Sultana’s Dream” Begum Rokeya

Binoy Bhushan Agarwal

Structure

1. *Introduction*
2. *Learning Objectives*
3. *Biographical Sketch and Literary Pursuits*
4. *Context*
5. *Summary and Analysis*
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7. *Characterization*
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1. Introduction

Feminism with its core belief in the equality of gender has a long history. One of the misconceptions however has been that it is essentially understood to be a movement in the West that percolated to the East. Consequently, such an approach has resulted in an erasure of the indigenous voices that have shaped the Indian feminist movement. In mapping Indian feminism two names that stand out are Tarabai Shinde and Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain. Tarabai Shinde was a 19th century social activist who worked closely with Jyotirao Phule and Savitribai Phule, the other social activists of the time fighting the oppressions of caste and gender. Collectively, they established a school in 1848 for girls from the Untouchable caste. They also set up a shelter for upper-caste widows in 1854 who were forbidden from remarrying. In a similar vein, Begum Rokeya too, because of her crusade against patriarchal oppressions and feminist interventions in the lives of Bengali Muslim women, is known as the first Bengali Muslim feminist writer and activist.

Their writings are powerful examples of literatures of resistance as they sought to bring about progressive feminist reforms in society. Tarabai Shinde’s *Stri Purush Tulna* (A comparison between men and women) originally published in Marathi in 1882 is a stringent



feminist critique of the upper caste patriarchy and religious texts - the intertwined strands that regulate women’s lives. Informed by a similar impulse to challenge contemporary orthodoxies for a gender inclusive society Begum Rokeya takes a leap of faith in crafting a feminist utopia in her story “Sultana’s Dream”. The significance of Begum Rokeya’s contribution to the cause of women empowerment and advancement can be gauged from the fact that every year in Bangladesh, 9th of December is commemorated as Rokeya Day to celebrate her legacy. Her iconic status is further reflected in the fact that Bangladesh has also instituted an award - Begum Rokeya Padak - to honour individual women achievers for their outstanding accomplishment.

2. Learning Objectives

This study material would help students to:

- ◆ Learn about Indian feminism vis-à-vis Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain.
- ◆ Get an idea about a woman-centric world.
- ◆ Know the kinds of oppression women face.
- ◆ Understand science fiction vis-à-vis “Sultana’s Dream”.
- ◆ Learn about the various forms of stereotypes and restrictive impositions that women have to deal with.
- ◆ Comprehend how women’s education is linked to both their individual emancipation and the progress of the nation.

3. Biographical Sketch and Literary Pursuits

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, also known as Begum Rokeya, was born in 1880 on 9th December in an upper-class Bengali Muslim household in Pairabondh in British India, now Bangladesh. Born in an affluent zamindar family, she was encouraged to learn Persian and Arabic so that she could read Quran and be a good and devout Muslim woman. English and Bengali were, however, prohibited as that could contaminate her with radical ideas and Bengali was also the language of the commoners. Nonetheless, she learned these languages under the secretive tutelage of her brother Ibrahim Saber. Later, at the nubile age of sixteen, she was married to 38-year-old Khan Bahadur Sakhawat Hossain who was educated in England and was the deputy magistrate of Bhagalpur. He was liberal in his attitude towards women and was an important influence in her life inspiring her to continue reading and writing.



Motivated by her brother and her husband Rokeya went onto establish the first school for girls in 1909- initially founded in Bhagalpur but later relocated to Calcutta in 1911. She also founded the Muslim Women's Association in 1916 for women's education and employment. A decade later in 1926 she presided over the Bengal Women's Education Conference, a first-of-its-kind, to mediate on issues of women's education rights. An advocate for women's education and liberation, she engaged in literary and political activism. Realizing the centrality of education in the lives of women as essential to their emancipation, Rokeya made it the focus of her activism.

Rokeya was a prolific writer who wrote in a variety of genres and publications wherein she articulated the need for social reforms and women's education. Beginning with *Pipasa* ("Thirst"), an essay published in 1902, her corpus of writings includes *Nari-Srishti* (Creation of Women), *Abarodhbasini* ("The Secluded Women"), *Education Ideals for the Modern Indian Girl* (1931) and *Nari Adhikar* (Rights of Women), an unfinished essay as she passed away in 1932 before she could complete it. Through her writings, Rokeya not only furthered the agenda of women's rights, education and independence but also critiqued colonial violence and imperial ambitions. Her life and works are a pointer to the determined woman that Begum Rokeya was. Her achievements are also telling of all that a woman's zeal compounded with education can help achieve.

4. Context

Born and brought up in a conservative and feudal Muslim household Rokeya had personally experienced the oppressions women faced. Her birth in an upper-class family too did not ensure much freedom in education nor did it lessen the adherence to the normative female code of conduct. All these stoked in her the feminist impulse to give expression to female desire and to be vocal about the need for education for girls as she saw it as an essential fulcrum for the development of society as a whole. It is this idea that is expounded in Rokeya's utopian short story "Sultana's Dream" which imagines a woman-centric world governed by women and the many consequent benefits that accrue in such a society. By inverting the power relations and the gendered spaces of zenana and the public and by using time travel through the dream mode, Rokeya projects for her readers the many possibilities that will open up if only women are allowed access to education. Though science fiction and a utopia, this short story is a powerful argument made in favour of women's rights and education.



5. Summary and Analysis

“Sultana’s Dream” was first published in *The Indian Ladies Magazine* in 1905 in English. The story is utopian in spirit as it reimagines a world free from any constraints for women. In this imagined world where women reign supreme with their knowledge and skills, the usual gendered spaces are reversed with men being relegated to the secluded space of ‘mardana’ and women taking over the public sphere. Begum Rokeya uses the mode of science fiction and concept of time travel, a novel idea for its time, to transport the readers into this world which is characterized by balance and progress under the able leadership of women. In what makes it even more interesting is the way in which Rokeya fuses questions of patriarchy, power and privilege with science and politics to explore the possibilities for women.

The narrative of “Sultana’s Dream” is relayed in the form of a dream sequence. The story opens with Sultana, the narrator, falling into a reverie one afternoon while reflecting on the condition of Indian womanhood. The reader finds her transported into an idyllic landscape where she is guided by a lady whom she takes to be her friend, Sister Sara. Though hesitant at the beginning, as she finds herself walking about unveiled contrary to the custom, she is gradually eased into this new world of Ladyland. Fascinated as she is by this city composed of gardens, her curiosity is pricked by the fact that she encounters hundreds of women but not a single man. On her asking about their whereabouts, Sister Sara reveals that in Ladyland, men are kept “in their proper places, where they ought to be” just as women are expected to stay in zenana in Sultana’s Calcutta which she finds amusing. In the conversation that ensues between the two, orthodox notions such as women being the weaker sex and men as intellectually capable and fit to deal with commercial and political business that are prevalent in the narrator’s part of the world are challenged by positing an alternative as practiced in the Ladyland.

The site of conversation gradually moves to the interiors of Sister Sara’s house which is a shining example of the harmonious balance of aesthetics and sustainability. It is revealed that the practices in this city are in sharp opposition to those prevalent in Sultana’s city. But what is encouraging despite its unusual nature is the notable progress that has been made possible by banishing men to the *mardana* and allowing women to control and manage the public affairs. It is important to note that the traditional skills of women such as embroidery that requires patience and skill, is not denigrated. The result is that women with their patience, skills and abilities are better equipped to occupy important positions. With women at the helm of power and research, this land knows no



epidemic or early death. The daily business of living is organised along the principles of eco-sustainability such that solar heat is utilized for cooking; a point that leads onto the seminal idea of education for women who with the knowledge acquired have put it into devising best practices.

In telling the history of Ladyland, Sister Sara tells the narrator that about thirty years ago the Queen mandated compulsory education for all by starting several schools for girls. She also prohibited early marriage for women because of which more and more women were educated leading on to establish universities that produced remarkable research and inventions such as the “water balloon” among other things.

The narrator is spellbound to know of all that Ladyland has to offer. Noticing how a reversal of gender roles with women being educated has led to greater peace and prosperity, she wonders how the men were confined to the four walls. To which Sister Sara says, “by brain” which goes to prove the point that women are no less in intellect though the misogynist stereotypes perpetuate otherwise. She good humouredly also remarks on how men who initially mocked at women’s discoveries as “a sentimental nightmare” are now themselves dreaming sentimental dreams. The opportunity to prove themselves superior sprang up for women when the king of a neighbouring country declared war. Most of the men including boys as young as sixteen were either killed or conceded utter helplessness when faced with a tough opponent. When the Queen exhorted them to use their brain, the Lady Principal of a University thoughtfully came up with a plan but with the condition that men be asked to go into the zenanas for the sake of purdah. Consoled at the offer and pleased by the remarkable success of inventions made by women scientists as well as to further enable them in their scientific pursuits aimed at saving the country, the Queen ordered all men to move into the zenana. The men quietly acquiesced. By channelizing the sun and heat as their only means of defence, the two thousand strong army of women students drove away the invaders and later destroyed the weapons left behind by the enemies. Since then, Ladyland has seen neither invasion nor felt a need for any system of policing. With men being put into zenana, now known as *mardana*, there has been no crime, effectively translating into a peaceful city.

Meandering through a series of issues, the issue of religion is also brought up by Sultana who has known how religion is used as a tool of containment. On her asking Sister Sara about her religion, the latter tells her that their religion ‘is based on Love and Truth’. As for punishment, if at all the need arises such as when a person lies, then he/she is banished from the city, but death is never awarded in the Ladyland.

Marvelling at it all the narrator draws comparison with the management of affairs in her own land. In her inquisitiveness to know more about it she wants to meet the good



Queen who is “so sagacious and far-sighted”. In order to fulfil her wish Sister Sara takes her along on an air-car, an equivalent to modern day airplane, to meet the Queen. The narrator is awestruck as she finds the Queen not only excited to meet her as if they have known each other for years but also without any paraphernalia and sycophants that surround such royal personage. The Queen during their conversation tells her that while her subjects are permitted to trade with other countries, no such trade relations were possible with countries where women were kept secluded from education and confined in zenanas. Nor do they deal with men as the latter have lower morals. Furthermore, the Queen informs Sultana that since in her land they enjoyed nature’s gifts to the best and that they liked to pursue knowledge, they did not seek or indulge in vain and avaricious quests for diamonds, lands or the Peacock Throne. Post her meeting with the Queen, the narrator visits the famed universities where she sees for herself their laboratories, observatories and manufactories.

The narrative ends at a moment when she is about to board the air-car once again but slips down. The imagined fall jolts her back to reality. With the rupturing of the dream the narrator finds herself in her bedroom.

Conclusively, one finds that in inverting the gender roles and exchanging the gendered spaces in “Sultana’s Dream”, Begum Rokeya subverts the patriarchal structures to demonstrate the fallacy of sexist stereotypes that seek to denigrate women and thereby control them. It exposes the lies perpetuated by such a parochial society that is not in favour of education for women. By denying education to women, the men and society at large seeks to keep women in subservient position by indoctrinating them with notions that suit conservatives and disallow women the power or freedom that comes with education. It is therefore important for the author to underline the necessity of education vis-à-vis school and universities as central to the emancipation of women that is crucially linked to the progress of humankind as the story demonstrates.

Though the story is a utopia which is to say that it is an imagined ideal world it does not take away from the credibility of the feminist arguments that form the subtext in the story. The use of imagination is perhaps linked with the idea of foresightedness that becomes necessary for those in power to be able to foresee the future such that wise decisions can be made. Such a thought perhaps might have been on the writer’s mind as well to suggest that in a dystopic patriarchal world where half the population (women) is excluded from the mainstream in the name of purdah, it needs a figment of imagination to be able to understand why gender equality matters. Further, by employing the motifs from science fiction, Rokeya not only crafts one of the earliest feminist science fictions but powerfully suggests all that women with intellect, reason and compassion can achieve.

**Self-Check Questions-1**

1. How is Begum Rokeya's "Sultana's Dream" a utopian text?
2. The Ladyland posits an alternative universe for women free from male control. Do you agree? Discuss.
3. How does the narrator respond to the revelations made by Sister Sara as she takes her through Ladyland?
4. What role does the Queen play in the story?

6. Themes and Motifs**6.1 Seclusion or Gender based Segregation**

The theme of gender-based segregation and discrimination is an important idea in the story. This division of labour based on gender has been one of the main organizing modes in all patriarchal societies. In Muslim cultures, *zenana* as the locus for women denotes one such example. Similarly, in all conservative male dominated societies the women are consigned to the private space of domesticity as their exclusive realm. At the other end of this binary - of the home and the world, the private and the public - are men who are expected to occupy political and economic roles. Unlike women they are expected to participate in the larger governance with leadership and managerial roles. In the Ladyland, however, the gender binaries are reversed. The men in this fantasy land are expected to conduct household chores and look after the babies as well. Such treatment of men in the story might seem unfair but it is not so. The seclusion of men concomitant with the freedom granted to women is not at all to suggest that men be treated in the same way. Rather, it is a literary trope to prove a point about what women, perhaps, experience when constrained by the societal expectations and patriarchal injunctions. Effectively, "Sultana's Dream" is an argument for equality and education for all including women for the greater good and prosperity of a society.

6.2 Female Education

The theme of female education is central to the story and is linked to the emancipation of women. The liberating possibilities afforded by education are explored to their maximum. One finds in the story how women empowered with their intellect, education and scientific research can bring about peace and prosperity. The might of women's intelligence and reason combined with female solidarity can prove to be a great deterrent is exemplified



during war time wherein the army of women with their innovative use of nature and technology save their land from invasion when men had virtually conceded defeat. The ingenious efforts of women have also resulted in technology driven projects that blend in harmoniously with the sustainable practices with optimal use of natural resources. All of which goes on to demolish the negative typecasts of women such as them possessing weak brains and being hysteric and weak and therefore incapable of managing public affairs. The story underscores the need to provide educational nourishment to women. In doing so the human resources can be doubled up which has hitherto been left untapped by prohibiting education and equality to women.

6.3 Oppression of Women

In creating an alternative universe in the form of Ladyland the author writes a story of oppression and empowerment. In this utopian land women are educated, occupy public offices and are engaged in scientific discoveries and creative pursuits as well as come together to protect the nation. It is utopian in its spirit is obvious in the fact that it allows women an environment to fully develop and express themselves. Nonetheless, it is a world that is still ridden with anxiety. An indication of this is the fact that even here women’s innovations were laughed off as “a sentimental nightmare”. For women to feel completely free and safe to roam about and to be able to exercise their full potential, a certain condition becomes pre-eminent; the condition that men remain secluded in spaces known as *mardana*. By making men conform to the demands of the Lady Principal, the author highlights how, in reality, women are expected to toe the line and conform to value systems created by men. In foregrounding such division of spaces even in the ideal world of Ladyland, the author astutely highlights, albeit through a reversal of reality, the patriarchal modes of regulating female behaviour and sites of female oppression. Thus “Sultana’s Dream” is a satirical critique of reality and a mirror to the society that justifies cultural oppression of women in the name of religion and tradition. Conclusively, the story becomes a clarion call for women to throw off their yoke and for men to ascribe women their due.

6.4 Colonial Resistance

The theme of colonial resistance is also touched upon in the narrative. Though mentioned only towards the end of the story, the anti-colonial sentiments cannot be ignored. The Queen rejects imperial pursuits and colonial conquests that revel in annexation of foreign lands and property. The references to the Koh-i-Noor and the Peacock Throne are specific allusions to the colonial violence unleashed by the British in India in their loot of the Indian wealth. The Koh-i-Noor, a one of its kind diamond, and the Peacock throne embellished



with precious gems and diamonds that were forcibly taken over by the British and shipped to Britain tell the story of the colonial rapaciousness. The Queen's rejection of imperial acquisitiveness and violence and a preference for an engagement with knowledge and an enjoyment of nature's bounty is a telling critique of the British colonialism in India.

6.5 Anti-Violence Sentiments

In envisioning a better inhabitable world marked by peace and stability, anti-war sentiments are a must. The story highlights how war is often a mindless and vain display of masculine aggression and power. Some key moments in the narrative that validate anti-war sentiments are (i) the non-violent means with which the women protect their nation when threatened with the possibility of invasion, and (ii) the Queen's unequivocal statement that they do not fight for a piece of diamond no matter how priceless that might be. With the one exception when women were pushed into a conflict like situation which they dealt with great intelligence, the Ladyland has not witnessed any violence such that it requires no police or judiciary. The anti-war and anti-violence sentiments inform the core of Ladyland. It is worthwhile to note that in situations of war like conflict and violence, women and children become the hapless casualty with threat of rape and women being taken as spoils of war as history of violence attests to. The prosperity of the nation is thus linked to both- a nation where women are educated as well as one that is free from violence and war.

6.6 Science and Gender

In the story "Sultana's Dream", the author subverts the male hegemony and intellectualism by taking on war and science which is usually seen as the preserve of men. Both these fields have been used as sites for display of machismo and aggression. War has been as much about reliance on science and technology as shrewd political strategy. Like war, science has been seen as a masculine domain much to the exclusion of women. Proposing an alternative view through her fiction Begum Rokeya delineates a new geography which is splendidly governed by women.

In a departure from the conventional, the story delves at length on women's innovativeness and purposiveness in their approach to science and technology which is highlighted in their utilitarian approach to knowledge. As history bears witness, the male dominated societies have used the knowledge gained through science in perpetuating mindless conflicts and self-aggrandizement pursuits. The Queen's critique, in the story, of imperialistic tendencies that are inherently violent corroborates such reasoning. As opposed to such perverse tendencies which have proved more destructive than anything, women's scien-



tific pursuits as reflected in the story show that science and technology can be used for better purposes, and for a happier and sustainable living. As such one finds the women in the fantasy land contributing to research that is used for betterment of everyday life and avoiding political conflicts. Women in the Ladyland have developed practical solutions to maintain the temperatures, collect rain water, harness solar energy, have developed systems like air-cars that prevent road accidents, utilize solar energy to fend off the enemies and have burned down the arsenals left behind. Consequently, it advocates the idea of science as a knowledge system that should be deployed in the service of humanity for the overall welfare rather than military might or territorial expansion. This feminist utopia also underscores the necessity to think of women as integral to science and technology. It fundamentally calls for a redefining of the social, political and intellectual fabric of a society. Conclusively, it proposes a civilization where women are fundamental to this new world order.

6.7 The Absent but still Present Men

In the imaginary world evoked within the narrative of “Sultana’s Dream” that imagines a utopian space for women, men are an absent presence. While ostensibly absent they never leave the space but continue to occupy the periphery. The readers come to know of them through the commentary of Sister Sara and Sultana. Contrary to the reality where men dominate, men in this fictive world are pushed within the confines traditionally meant for women. The inverting of the customary practice is to drive home two major points: one, the many promises and possibilities that women are capable of and, two, to give men an idea of how they treat women and how such societal incarceration feels like. It also reflects on the mindless wars and conflicts men engage in, the wastrel that they are such that work that can be effectively done in lesser time is unnecessarily wasted in smoking and killing time. The text also criticizes their pseudo-scientific theories such as women have weaker brains. The portrayal of men laughing at women’s experiments as “a sentimental nightmare” and subsequent dismissal of women’s scholarly caliber reflects on men’s vanity and misogyny. This satirical representation of men is meant to show what our society suffers from. Thus, the men although invisible remain an absent presence in the story.

6.8 Use of Satire

A satire is a literary form that uses wit and humour to expose the ills and follies of society with a corrective end in view. Begum Rokeya utilizes the power of humor that satire affords to illuminate upon the restrictions imposed on women by various structural forms of patriarchy. In inverting the position and treatment of women in society as is prevalent



in Ladyland it makes fun of the vanities of ‘mankind’ and their frivolous and mindless pursuits. Among other things, it is an expose of ills afflicting society. However, it is in no way informed by any sense of vindictive revenge. By choosing to relate the seriousness of discrimination against women through a form that is light-hearted, the author points to the need for introspection, not vindictiveness, in any attempt that is aimed at correcting social and gender norms. Therefore, the segregation that one observes in the narrative is to be read not as an absolute demand for such a spatial and gender division. Rather, by showcasing women’s abilities by way of their innovative interventions in the public sphere, it suggests the many possibilities that men can benefit from if only women are accepted as equals within the folds of society. It is such a corrective vision for a gender inclusive society that informs the author’s use of satire in the writing of “Sultana’s Dream”.

6.9 Significance of the Ending

The ending of “Sultana’s Dream” though not often commented upon is significant. The fact that it ends with the shattering of the dream and not in the utopian land serves an important lesson. One, fiction and imagination are crucial to imagine a better world. However, mere wishful thinking, no matter how well intentioned, is of no use if it is totally divorced from the ground reality. The real world of the narrator riddled with various social evils constantly impinges on the ideal world of Ladyland as is evident in the frequent comparisons that the narrator makes between her own world and the Ladyland that she is enthralled with. Two, good ideas and practices must be gleaned from whatever accounts possible and put to use. Such an idea is intermittently made explicit by the narrator in her dream who is exhilarated at the wonderful possibilities that Ladyland offers to its women free from male surveillance. Excited as she is to know about the customs and practices of this place, she wonders how her friends would receive her narration of Ladyland. Sister Sara encourages her to tell them all about what she has seen in Ladyland. Sister Sara’s encouragement is meant more in the sense of good practices that should be implemented and emulated in an effort to establish good practices and an equal society.

Self-Check Questions-2

1. Critically examine the usage of the trope of gendered space in the story “Sultana’s Dream”.
2. How is education of women linked to female emancipation and societal progress? Discuss with reference to examples from the text.
3. How does the writer make an effective use of the absent presence of men in a utopia about women and to what end?



4. “Sultana’s Dream” is a critique of patriarchal oppression and colonial violence. Discuss.
5. Comment on the use of satire in the story.
6. In your opinion how do you view the ending of the story? Elaborate.

7. Characterization

7.1 The Queen

The Queen is the alter ego of Sultana. She stands in for all that Sultana can be - a figure who if given appropriate conditions could be the Queen-like figure effectively ruling the world with her might that comes from her intelligence as well as compassion. Thus, she embodies within herself a benevolent ruler and one who stands for the intellectual development of society. What is also important to note about her is that she is anti-war and hates self-aggrandizing missions and colonial plunders that rulers are usually keen on. Despite that when thrown into such a situation of conflict, her instinctive impulse is not to retaliate with violence and bloodshed but rather call upon her people and encourage them to use methods that are not violent such that no life and property is damaged while driving away the foes. Further, when weapons are left behind by the invaders she commands them to be destroyed. In a symbolic move the author suggests through the persona of the Queen that women’s protective instincts are reflected in other aspects of their life as well. Hence, one finds in the story a symbiotic relationship between women and the land which is infused with congeniality and nourishment. This sense of harmonious balance and inevitable prosperity is signified in the metaphor of a luxurious garden that the verdant Ladyland is, governed as it is by a queen.

7.2 Sultana

Sultana is the framing narrator of the story who leads the reader onto the main story composed of a dream. She is representative of how women are positioned in male-controlled society. A psychoanalytic reading of Sultana’s lapsing into a dream world where women can walk without fear of the judgmental male gaze suggests the repression that women face. Her dream sequence is a reference to an imaginative longing of a woman for a world free of restrictions and gendered impositions of any kind that hinder free development of mind and personality. And a model for such a space is offered in Ladyland.



Sultana is the heir apparent to the Queen of Ladyland. Etymologically, her name is derived from the word “Sultan” which signifies many things in its linguistic context. In the Arabic language, it denotes a range of meaning such as “authority”, “power”, “rulership” – all centering on the idea of rule. “Sultan” effectively then means a male ruler. Thus inferred, the name Sultana translates as a female equivalent of Sultan, one who wields authority. One may read Sultana’s dream as an epiphanic text which makes Sultana realize her purpose in life that is visualized in the figure of the Queen. While the Queen is an ideal embodiment of a woman ruler Sultana is a harbinger of change.

7.3 Sister Sara

Sister Sara is the other narrator along with Sultana, the framing narrator. Sister Sara hails from Ladyland. She is the one who leads Sultana into this new world. While giving Sultana a tour of this world governed by women, she also describes to her the history, culture, politics and the everyday life as is lived here which is in sharp contrast to the world that Sultana inhabits. Thereby, in a manner akin to a divine messenger, she awakens in Sultana a longing for such a space characterized by freedom and equality for women. By the time they meet the Queen, Sister Sara, one may infer, has prepared Sultana for the larger responsibility that should devolve upon her and by extension women. What is also important in this larger scheme of things is a sense of female solidarity. The feminist movements too have highlighted on this urgent need for female kinship in their acts of resistance to patriarchy. Early in the text, an inherent sense of kinship between women is hinted at when one finds Sultana confusing the stranger in her dream for her friend ‘Sister Sara’. However, even when she realizes her mistake she continues to address the stranger as Sister Sara. It speaks of their female camaraderie thereby presaging a world defined by amity and easy social relations.

Collectively they underline how women empowerment combined with education and empathy is the only hope for a better world.

Self-Check Questions-3

1. Would you agree with the view that the Queen is an alter-ego of Sultana the narrator and embodies all that the latter wishes to be? Give a reasoned answer.
2. Reality impinges on the ideal dream world of Ladyland through the figure of Sultana. Discuss.
3. What is Sister Sara’s role in the story? Discuss.



8. Summing Up

Rokeya Begum’s short story “Sultana’s Dream” is a satirical illustration of ills afflicting society in general. Though narrated with a wry sense of humour the story is brilliant for the ways in which it reveals how women are marginalized and subjugated. By projecting a futuristic narrative by employing tropes of science fiction, it turns the demeaning representations of women upside down by showcasing women’s brilliance of mind and enterprising spirit. The author thereby also succeeds in critiquing the patriarchal oppression of women. She not only makes a case for gender equality and female education but also allows one a peek into what a women-centric world might look like if only women were granted their rightful place and their much-deserved rights and privileges. In short, “Sultana’s Dream” is a powerful feminist narrative seeking an egalitarian world where women can live on their own terms as free and equal citizens.

Begum Rokeya’s feminist ideas continue to hold relevance in contemporary times as well. Even though education for women is a reality in the present day that owes much to the struggles of early indigenous feminist movement, there remains much ground to be tread in so far as the elusive Ladyland-like world is concerned.

9. Further Readings

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Excerpts from *Amar Jiban* (1876) Rassundari Devi

Shrimi Gupta

Structure

1. *Introduction*
2. *Learning Objectives*
3. *About the Author*
4. *Summing Up*
5. *Bibliography*
6. *Image Courtesy*

1. Introduction

The earliest known autobiography in English is *The Book of Margery Kempe* (1501) written by an English pilgrim in the fifteenth century. The form was thereafter employed by several women writers to carve out a place for themselves in history. It is one amongst a plethora of life-narrative forms used to record a person's life experiences, and takes centre stage with regard to women's writing, for it allows access to the subject's perspective that is otherwise eliminated by institutionalised monologic discourse. One amongst the three prescribed readings within this section, Rassundari Devi's *Amar Jiban* (1876), is the earliest known autobiography written by an Indian woman. Historically, it was not until the late nineteenth century that Indian women started writing about their experience of oppression. Ironically, the culture of Indian women writing life-narratives finds its roots in the western literary tradition that spread with the establishment of British colonialism. It brought with it the notion of individualism and selfhood. The significance of such writings becomes evident when viewed within the larger patriarchal discourse that deprives women of agency, i.e., the ability to make choices. The act of writing, then, becomes synonymous with an act of defiance and resistance as women take to questioning their oppression. The writings of the female writers in question played a critical role in the development of a female selfhood in eighteenth and nineteenth century society.



2. Learning Objectives

This lesson will enable you:

- ◆ To explore how women writers challenged patriarchal constructs through their writings.
- ◆ To examine women's autobiographical writings as an act of resistance and self-assertion.
- ◆ To understand the structural oppression of women.

3. About the Author

Rassundari Devi (1810-1899) is the first known author of a full-length autobiography in Bengali. Born into a prosperous, high-caste, landowning family of Potajiya village, Pabna district in former East Bengal (present day Bangladesh), she was raised by her religious mother and relatives following the early death of her father. At the tender age of twelve, she was married off to Sitanath Sikdar, a well-to-do landlord from Ramdia village, Faridpur. A Vaishnavite by faith, her devotion to God and desire to read religious texts drove her to secretly learn how to read and write.



Figure 1: Rassundari Devi

3.1 About the Text

Amar Jiban or *My Life* was written and published in two parts. The first part, published in 1876 and made of the comparatively longer set of sixteen compositions, highlights Rassundari Devi's coming to terms with the consuming drudgery of domestic life and explores the subsequent struggle involved in her 'transgressive' attempt at learning how to read and write in secrecy. The exploration of the idea of death and her awareness of the same takes centre stage in the fifteen compositions that make up the second part of *Amar Jiban*, published in 1906. A dedicatory poem precedes each of these compositions.

3.2 Detailed Summary

The Third Composition

Preparations are underway for Rassundari Devi's marriage to Sitanath Sikdar. Devi invites readers into her thoughts as she gives words to the mixed emotions she experiences



following the news of her marriage. She is seen fighting back her apprehensions, fears and an “unspoken agony” by shifting attention towards the wedding music, ornaments, the red wedding sari, and the arriving guests. As the wedding rituals end, an inconsolable Devi is bid farewell by her weeping mother who reminds Devi of the inevitable nature of the geographical shift that follows marriage. She reassures Devi of God’s perpetual presence and life-long companionship. The striking comparison drawn by the author between her journey to her husband’s home and a sacrificial goat being dragged to the altar distinctly reflects her perception of her miserable and “hopeless situation”.

The Fourth Composition

Devi elaborates upon her boat journey to her husband’s home in Ramdia village. She continues to feel afraid and alone amidst ‘strangers’. In an attempt to describe her predicament, she compares herself to a “caged bird”, a “fish caught in the net”. Weeping incessantly, she seeks refuge in prayers. The kind words of her in-laws, the mention of the boat approaching “home” remind her of her family and friends left behind. The unending reassurances from her ‘new’ family fail to relieve her of her longing for her people.

The Fifth Composition

Devi recalls her journey as a twelve-year old new bride struggling to acquaint herself with domestic chores, as a fourteen-year old experiencing the desire to learn to read books, and as an eighteen-year old birthing her first child. She reminisces about how she took over the household work in “a spirit of duty”, hoping to “please people” with her dedicated efforts; how the affection and concern of her ‘new’ family failed to compensate for the loss of freedom that she experienced. Overhearing people speak of a woman’s desire to study as “strange things”, she resolves to never verbalise similar desires of her own.

The readers learn of the twelve children that she goes on to give birth to in the duration of twenty-three years, one though dies in the womb. In keeping with the custom, no maidservant was assigned to work in the “inner quarters” of the house causing Devi to single-handedly take over the plethora of domestic and childcare duties. The “pressure of work” was such that she often had to go without having a single meal. She narrates one such incident wherein consistent engagement in chores prevents her from eating for two straight days. Devi takes care to not let it come to the knowledge of the family members for fear of feeling embarrassed, and rather thanks God for blessing her with “excellent health”. The caregiving experience induces guilt of not having taken good care of her own mother. Devi painfully recollects how she was not allowed to visit her ailing mother as in her absence “household work here would suffer”. She reiterates feeling like a caged bird, a slave who was “allowed” to visit her family “only under certain conditions”.



The Sixth Composition

Devi describes the range of emotions she experiences with time as the desire to learn how to read grows stronger. She ponders over the additional challenge of learning how to read in the absence of a teacher. Being aware of the shame and criticism that disclosure of the same could bring to her and her family, she abandons all hope until one night she dreams of reading the sacred text - *Chaitanya Bhagavata*, the first biography of saint Chaitanya in Bengali. The satisfying experience leaves her with a desire to locate the text in her husband's collection but her inability to read hinders her attempt at accomplishing the task. An unlikely coincidence leads her husband to leave his copy of the *Chaitanya Bhagavata* for his eight-year-old son to fetch for him later. Reading it as God's will, Devi rushes to the 'spot' where the text lay, memorises its illustration to be able to identify it in the future, and detaches a sheet to read from later. Risking the "danger of being seen", she takes upon the arduous task of learning how to read, in secrecy, by using the palm leaf on which her eldest son practised handwriting to identify the letters on the 'stolen' sheet, following it up with a "verification with the speech of others". Her fading knowledge of the alphabet from her primary school days also came in handy in completing the "process" she adopted to learn how to read. She concludes by recalling how the fear of criticism prevented her from learning how to write, and revisiting the humiliation she experienced on a personal level for having to take recourse to such clandestine measures to read only because "I was a woman".

3.3 Critical Analysis

Nineteenth-Century Bengal and Patriarchal Hegemony

Amidst social reformers' efforts towards women's education and empowerment in nineteenth century Bengal, Rassundari Devi grew up without a formal education. This was on account of the deep-seated misogynistic belief that education held the potential to corrupt a woman's mind such that a literate woman was bound to end up a widow. Such ideas were deliberately planted in the minds of young girls to deter them from as much as entertaining the thought of learning the alphabet, let alone reading literary texts. By depriving women of education, the upholders of patriarchy managed to quash any possibility of resistance, in turn perpetuating and naturalizing gender inequality. *Amar Jiban* highlights the subjugation of women within patriarchy – a social structure characterised by male dominance and the relegation of women to the margins.

Social conditioning paved the way for internalisation of gender roles, such that majority of women lived their lives silently performing ascribed gender roles, failing to understand and at times even realise that gender roles were but a social construct, put in



place to maintain a social order that allowed men to yield power over women. The ones who managed to identify the unjust nature of the patriarchal structure struggled, often lifelong, to find an avenue to voice their dissent.

In *Amar Jiban*, Rassundari Devi, a victim of the patriarchal order, perceives her oppression as being God's will. Uprooted early on from her childhood home and sent away to a stranger's home, she expresses her suffering by comparing her condition with that of a "caged bird". A sense of duty underlines her performance of domestic duties. Devi's awareness of being caged is worth noting for it shows that while she might have been physically chained by the institution of marriage, she was mentally not subjugated. Devi's plight echoes the predicament of scores of women who are forcefully planted into new families at an early age leading to an identity crisis and fear of entrapment. Despite her wilful submission to the patriarchal order, Devi remains aware of her suffering being the direct consequence of her gender identity for in the fifth composition, she confidently states that had she been a son she would have flown directly to her mother's bedside. Her painful cry of "Why was I ever born a woman?" highlights the degrading nature of the patriarchal regime that thrives on the victimization of women.

Recourse to Religion

Torn away from her mother's protective care, Devi is seen taking refuge in religion. Her conversations with God seem to compensate for the absent mother and father figures in her life. Her prayers are marked by constant reiteration of her suffering as being God's will and her wilful submission to the same. In the event marking a dream involving the reading of *Chaitanya Bhagavata* by her, Devi is seen resorting to religion to legitimise her otherwise 'transgressive' desire to learn how to read – "God had at last listened to my constant appeals and had given me the ability to read in my dreams". It reflects her internalisation of norms and values, specific to her gender, as established by patriarchy – "Girls did not read. How could I?" It is interesting how, despite her well-established religious devotion, there is a striking absence of elaboration on religious teachings, practices, and meditations in the book.

The Romanticization of Women's Labour

Amar Jiban draws our attention to the long history of glorification of the self-effacing Hindu wife who braves suffering with a smile. Rassundari Devi is celebrated as a domestic success for her slavish obedience and silent compliance with her wifely duties. The praise from her in-laws validates the "sea of housework" that she repeatedly does in "a spirit of duty". A major chunk of the narrative is devoted to describing her unending domestic and child-rearing duties. Contrary to popular opinion, labour does not offer an emotional



release but is enslaving. Devi gets reduced to a slave who is “allowed” to visit her family only for “a couple of days like a slave”, and is not permitted to visit her dying mother “because the household here would suffer”.

The due completion of the plethora of housework is achieved at the cost of her health. Devi records how she often had to go without meals due to the domestic demands. The same stands true for the collective experience of women across the country for whom habitual neglect of physical and mental health gets normalised, and non-eating is valorised.

3.4 Self-Check Questions

1. Why does Rassundari Devi compare herself to a fish caught in the net?
2. What role did religion play in the life of Rassundari Devi?
3. How does patriarchal society contribute to the romanticization of women’s labour? Explain with reference to Rassundari Devi’s Amar Jiban.

4. Summing Up

The writing of life-stories by women reflects a growing sense of selfhood. Here, it is important to remember that there are layers to an experience of oppression, and that different women experience oppression in different degrees depending upon their historical, socio-economic and geographical position. For instance, an upper-class, upper-caste, physically-able Indian woman’s account of patriarchal oppression cannot be considered as being representative of the experience of all women of India for it doesn’t take into account the layered experiences of a low-caste, low-class woman who finds herself at the receiving end of not only gender-based, but also caste and class-based oppression. Therefore, while examining how first-person accounts of women facilitate(d) the formation of female subjectivity and female selfhood, it is necessary to look for whether the multiplicity of female voices have been accounted for or done away with.

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6. Image Courtesy

Figure 1: Rassundari Devi, Photo: Facebook

Source: <https://www.facebook.com/396700860700876/photos/rassundari-devi-was-the-first-indian-woman-to-write-an-autobiography-aamar-jiban/397134323990863/>. Accessed 5 October 2021.



(i) “I cannot live with you”
 (ii) “I’m wife: I’ve finished that”
Emily Dickinson

Shruti Sareen

Structure

1. *Learning Objectives*
2. *Introduction*
3. *“I cannot live with you” – Critical analysis*
4. *‘I’m “wife”—I’ve finished that’ – Critical Analysis*
5. *Bibliography*

1. Learning Objectives

- ◆ To understand the social context behind Emily Dickinson’s poems
- ◆ To be able to understand and critically analyse the prescribed poems

2. Introduction

Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) was born in Amherst, Massachusetts. She was educated at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary. 19th century America was largely homosocial, which means people of the same sex generally stayed with and interacted with each other, and had very limited interaction with the other sex, therefore leading to separate educational institutions for girls and boys. Dickinson did not publish any of her poems in her lifetime. This perhaps goes to show how difficult it was for a woman to be a poet at that time. Dickinson is a confessional poet. She largely writes of her emotions. Friendship and love were perhaps more important to Dickinson than anything else. Themes of death and immortality predominate, as do poems of love and nature. There are two major themes relating to Emily Dickinson’s work and the social context within which it was produced: a) religion, b) gender and sexuality.

Emily Dickinson’s poems are unique because of the metre she uses which is very short and rapid. The lines are usually 6 or 8 syllables long. This would be called tri-meter



or tetrameter. She also uses irregular capitalisation and punctuation in her poems, and a lot of dashes. Dickinson's writing may perhaps be linked to the "écriture feminine" which French feminism talks about—a kind of female writing from women's experience which is different from phallogocentric language. Phallus refers to man, and logos to knowledge, philosophy, so phallogocentric language is that language that man has created and which has always been man's preserve and domain—education, knowledge, philosophy. Écriture feminine is an attempt to create a woman's language which may perhaps be more based on intuition, emotion, allowing for women's experiences; écriture feminine literally means "writing with the female body". The very body itself comes into play in the act of writing. Perhaps, we can see Dickinson's unusual and different use of language as something like écriture feminine.

Religion: During Emily Dickinson's time, there was a lot of focus on religion. The Protestant strain of Christianity actively promoted the idea that no intermediary authority is required to find Christ, one has to find and realise Christ for oneself. However, this in itself became a dogma. From an early age, children were taught about God, sent to Sunday school, and in their mind, God was an anthropomorphic (man-like) entity. Emily's brother Austin believed that God lived just above his room and could see all the wicked things he did. The branch of Protestantism that was followed at the time was called Calvinism—according to which we are born sinners, and it is through faith and good deeds that we will be redeemed of our sins.

The Great Revival took place in 1850. Also known as the Second Great Awakening, it spread religion through revivals and emotional preaching, Hundreds of people converted to the new Protestantism. There was an outpouring of religious fervour. However, Emily Dickinson, and her family and friends did not convert initially. Her mother was the first to convert. Slowly however, she watched her father, brother and sister converting to Calvinism, she saw her closest friends converting to Calvinism. All these people said that they had found everlasting peace and happiness by recognising Christ. Emily, however, remained a dissident until the end. Although she was lonely and she tried hard to understand what this experience of Christ was that influenced everybody, she still could not commit to it. The doubt persisted in her mind though, and her troubled heart often finds a voice in her poems—her tussle between following the others and converting, or being a lone dissenter.

The reason why Emily could not accept the Father in Heaven is because she felt he did not answer her prayers. She especially felt this as a child, when her cousin and friend got sick and died. Emily thought that if nobody answered her prayers, was there even somebody really there who was listening? And if yes, what sort of a cruel, indifferent



God was he? She had a sort of bargaining relationship with God, instead of committing herself to him unconditionally. Love and friendship are the greatest things for Emily, and they come even before God. In fact, the golden heaven that she asked God to give her was basically love and friendship. Ironically, if God would have given her this love and friendship, the love would have become more dear to her than God himself. In fact, she resented it that God took her friends away from her when they died. Her loved ones died and went to the Father in Heaven, and then she couldn’t have them anymore. We will clearly see the truth of this when we read the poem.

Gender and Sexuality: In Dickinson’s lifetime, it was seen as the most normal and natural thing for a woman to marry and have children. In fact, society could not conceive any other roles for a woman than to be a wife and a mother. Dickinson did neither. She never married in her lifetime. Although love was extremely important to her, marriage was not. It was a culture that did not allow one to be a woman, without becoming a wife. Thus, in Dickinson’s poems, we have a double voice or a double consciousness—that of being feminine, and female. The feminine is what patriarchal society expected her to be—delicate and wifely and going about her womanly duties. The female however is what she truly feels and wants as a woman. In many of her poems, Dickinson adopts the voice of a child, or a little girl. This helps her in two ways. One, it helps in gaining the reader’s empathy, secondly, the little girl persona enabled Dickinson to question societal norms and to get away with it. Little children ask all kinds of questions, and by portraying herself as innocent and naïve, she is trying to bypass the censure and criticism she might have got otherwise.

In her personal life, she seems to have loved both men and women in her lifetime. Perhaps the most intense and passionate love of her life was Susan Gilbert—who would later marry Emily’s brother, Austin Dickinson. Critics have sought to hide the relationship between Emily and Susan. And Emily and Susan preferred to hide it themselves—after all, Oscar Wilde’s trials for being gay were held in the 1890s, and Freud had written essays calling queer sexuality as infantile and abnormal. The relationship between Emily and Susan, and also between Emily and Austin, changed after Austin and Susan got married. But Emily and Susan continued to send each other passionate love letters. Later, in her thirties, Emily did show some interest in some other women, and also in a few men. Out of all the love poems that Emily Dickinson has written, there are many that are clearly, and overtly, written for a woman, whereas some other love poems do not specify the gender of the beloved.

**Self-Check Questions-1**

1. What are the distinctive qualities of Dickinson's poetry?
2. What are the major themes?
3. Why does Dickinson have a problem with Protestant Christianity?
4. Why do we say that she has a "double consciousness"?

3. "I cannot live with you" – Critical analysis

Dickinson's poem "I cannot live with you" is one of her greatest love poems. It follows a logical argument similar to the metaphysical poets or Shakespearean sonnets. However, unlike them, Dickinson seems to argue against love at first glance—the first stanza explains why she cannot live with him/her, the second why she cannot die with him/her, the third why she cannot rise with him/her, and the fourth why she cannot fall with the beloved. The poem both begins and ends on a note of impossibility.

I cannot live with You –

It would be Life –

And Life is over there –

Behind the Shelf

The Sexton keeps the Key to –

Putting up

Our Life – His Porcelain –

Like a Cup –

Discarded of the Housewife –

Quaint – or Broke –

A newer Sevres pleases –

Old Ones crack –

We must note that she capitalises 'You' which seems as if she is putting the beloved in the place of God. Living with the beloved would be 'Life' itself—again, 'Life' capitalised makes it seem as if this would be something more than ordinary life, a heightened experience of love and bliss. But then she concedes that perhaps Life is 'Behind the Shelf'—meaning, in heaven. This will become more clear in the lines that follow. The



Sexton represents the church. He puts up our life like we put up porcelain cups. Just as the housewife discards quaint or broken cups, our lives too are put away. She seems to imply that living with the beloved would be more 'Life' than living in heaven—and therefore perhaps it is forbidden. How could one be allowed to have so much pleasure that it exceeds the happiness of heaven? The line is clearly ironical. Dickinson's dissent against religion and disdain for it is very apparent in these lines. Thus it seems that the poet is trapped within the domestic confines of a housewife discarding china/porcelain, and also within the confines of the church, as the Sexton too discards lives the way the housewife discards porcelain.

The lines alternate between long and short, particularly in the second and third stanzas. The delicate, "cracked" lines about the china, seem to be physically overwhelmed with the lines about the Sexton and the housewife.

I could not die – with You –
For One must wait
To shut the Other's Gaze down –
You – could not –
And I – could I stand by
And see You – freeze –
Without my Right of Frost –
Death's privilege?

Here, she suggests, that the alternative to living with someone is dying with them. Here she writes that not being able to live with the beloved is the same as being dead. She writes that she cannot die with the beloved—because death is a private act. She cannot go with the beloved in death, after all. She must wait "to shut the Other's Gaze down" may simply mean that she must wait for him to close his eyes—but somewhere she also implies that the Gaze itself is sustaining life, that looking upon the other with love creates and sustains life, and this gaze must be shut down for death to occur. And she imagines that the beloved may not be strong enough to stop looking at her, nor she at the beloved. She could not see the beloved die, without dying herself. So death now becomes a privilege—it is better than life, because in death there is the Right of Frost... we freeze, we no more remember and love and long for somebody.

Nor could I rise – with You –
Because Your Face
Would put out Jesus' –



That New Grace
Glow plain – and foreign
On my homesick Eye –
Except that You than He
Shone closer by –
They'd judge Us – How –
For You – served Heaven – You know,
Or sought to –
I could not –
Because You saturated Sight –
And I had no more Eyes
For sordid excellence
As Paradise

Here, she refers to the final Day of Judgement before God. But she cannot even see paradise because the face of the beloved is far brighter, and puts out Jesus's light as one puts out a candle. She is consumed by her love for her beloved, and she cannot see the light of heaven. Jesus's light and grace would be plain and foreign, and Emily would be homesick in heaven for life on earth. Clearly, the light of the beloved is greater than the light of Christ. Perhaps the light of her beloved has distracted her from the light of Christ. It seems as if her beloved had converted and was a believer. The poet's experience here is deeply linked to sight, perhaps implying that what cannot be seen (god, heaven), cannot be experienced. When she writes that "They'd judge Us", there is a complete breakdown of rhyme. "I could not" also shows a total breakdown of rhyme. There is a broken fragility about the lines, and the "—" dashes seem to convey a kind of hesitance, as if she falters. "Sordid", usually meaning ordinary and banal, is here applied to paradise—a word which is only used to describe unpleasant things. Surely, it is clear here how love is far more important to Emily than religion or believing in Christ.

And were You lost, I would be –
Though My Name
Rang loudest
On the Heavenly fame –
And were You – saved –



And I – condemned to be

Where You were not –

That self – were Hell to Me –

Just as she cannot see heaven because her beloved's face is brighter than heaven's light, her definition of hell is living without the beloved. If the beloved was lost, she would be too, even if all the bells of heaven proclaimed her name. And if her beloved was saved (chosen/elected for heaven), then to live without the beloved would itself be hell to her. She does not imagine both of them being saved together, or condemned together.

So We must meet apart –

You there – I – here –

With just the Door ajar

That Oceans are – and Prayer –

And that White Sustenance –

Despair –

In the line "You there—I—here—", we see a perfect example of how the poet's dashes work to hold "You" and "I" apart. We see a greater rhyme scheme in this last stanza. There are internal rhymes like "are" rhymes with "ajar", and half-rhymes with "apart". Moreover, "despair" rhymes with "there" and "prayer", and perhaps with "here". This rhyme perhaps goes to show the perfection of her argument in the poem's conclusion. Also these words are very significant: the words "despair", "there", and "prayer" ultimately show the entire problem and dilemma of the poem. 'Prayer' here stands for 'hope', not for religious prayer. However, the conclusion is different from "I cannot stay with you". The conclusion is a sort of blend of staying apart and yet being together, which is really not what she has said in the rest of the poem. "Sustenance" does not rhyme—which perhaps suggests that "white sustenance" does not actually sustain. But also, this sustenance is "white", like god or heaven, as if it is her earthly equivalent to heaven. Despair is white sustenance, but it is still a kind of sustenance.

In the last stanza, for the first time, we see the capitalised word "We". Meeting apart is a possibility in this stanza. She writes that the door is ajar, which signifies hope and possibility, but then she writes that this "ajar" is as wide as the oceans, which means it is wide open as the earth. It is this door, wide as the oceans, that is ajar, and prayer, and the white sustenance of despair that is going to sustain her now. In the last stanza- Dickinson reverses everything even while she is saying it—the lovers are apart but meeting, the door is ajar but is as wide as the ocean, and despair somehow turns out to



be a nourishing force. The poem ends with a dash “—”, and whether it is meant to be ajar or shut is unanswerable.

Although the gender of the beloved is not revealed in the poem, it is clear that this is an impossible love, and that it cannot be consummated. This leads one to think that perhaps the beloved is a woman, considering that Emily’s most passionate attachment in her lifetime was to Susan Gilbert.

Self-Check Questions-2

1. The poem clearly says that for Dickinson, human love on earth is far more important than god. Analyse the poem closely to see what are the ways in which she achieves this?
2. Does the form of the poem—Dickinson’s dashes, unconventional capitalisation etc have any relevance to the meaning of the poem?

4. ‘I’m “wife”—I’ve finished that’ – Critical Analysis

I’m “wife”—I’ve finished that—
 That other state—
 I’m Czar—I’m “Woman” now—
 It’s safer so—
 How odd the Girl’s life looks
 Behind this soft Eclipse—
 I think that Earth feels so
 To folks in Heaven—now—
 This being comfort—then
 That other kind—was pain—
 But why compare?
 I’m “Wife”! Stop there!

Stanza 1: Putting “wife” and “woman” in quotation marks places our attention on them, whereas girlhood is not even named, it is spoken hesitantly. The pauses, and dashes which precede and succeed “that other state” mark this sense of being hesitant. The speaker of the poem states that she has become “Czar”,—like a king—after becoming woman and wife.



Stanza 2: The Girl’s life is equated with earth, and the wife’s life with heaven. Although usually society considers heaven to be better, clearly Emily prefers life on earth as compared to heaven as we have seen in the previous poem as well. Marriage is described as a “soft eclipse”. An eclipse transforms the self and makes it invisible.

Stanza 3: The word “wife”, being the ideal female self in Dickinson’s era, is clearly associated with safety and comfort. But are safety and comfort worth the eclipse of a life? Wife then, is associated with the +afterlife here—safety and comfort, but not the real experience of being alive. Society does not however seem to offer her an option of being Woman without being a Wife—the two are immediately equated with each other. However, we must remember that Emily remained unmarried throughout her lifetime. Then she tries to reason with herself—if marriage was safety and comfort, “the other kind” of life must be pain, at least according to received notions of society. Again, the word “Girlhood” is not mentioned clearly. It is only “that other state” and “that other kind”. Again, we see that the speaker is hesitant as she says this—again the pauses and dashes before and after the phrase seem to show the tone of hesitance. It seems to show that she may quite well have liked the Girl’s life. But “Why compare?”, she continues. “I’m “Wife”! “Stop there!” The role of wife does not permit further questioning and investigation. She abandons her question, and does not want to think about it further, afraid that the answers might be unfavourable, painful, and may once again mark her distance and dissent from societal values and notions.

The poem, which is entirely about marriage, does not even mention the word marriage once. As Emily did not marry in her lifetime, we can only suppose that she is putting on a role here. The speaker of the poem is not the poet herself.

Self-Check Questions-3

1. Why is the girl’s life compared to earth and the wife’s to heaven?
2. Do you see any common or similar attitude with regard to religion in both the Dickinson poems prescribed in your course?

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(i) “Lady Lazarus”
(ii) “Daddy”
Sylvia Plath

Shruti Sareen

Structure

1. *Learning Objectives*
2. *Introduction*
3. *‘Lady Lazarus’ – Critical Analysis*
4. *‘Daddy’ – Critical Analysis*
5. *Bibliography*

1. Learning Objectives

- ◆ To understand the psychological backdrop of Plath’s poems
- ◆ To understand the imagery and style of the poem, and to see why she employs it
- ◆ To understand and analyse the two poems in the syllabus

2. Introduction

Sylvia Plath, born in 1932, in Boston, Massachusetts in the USA. She died by suicide in 1963 at the age of 30. Her parents were Otto Plath and Aurelia Plath and she had a younger brother. She married another well-known poet, Ted Hughes. They had two children together. Later, they separated because of Hughes’ infidelity towards his wife. Many still hold Ted Hughes to be the primary cause behind Sylvia Plath’s suicide, though her problem actually stems from the wound and the obsession caused by her father’s death, and her relationship with Ted Hughes is only a continuation of that. We will know more about this in the section on Oedipus/Electra complex that follows, and also in the discussion of the two poems. She is best known for her poetry collections *Colossus*, and *Ariel*, and for her semi-autobiographical novel, *The Bell Jar*. She lived through the years of the Cold War, where a recurrence of World War II in the form of a Nuclear War was always imminent. Plath is widely known as a confessional poet. The Confessional Poetry movement began



in America in the late 1950s and 1960s. This is the poetry of the personal “I” and dealt with private experiences and feelings about death, trauma, depression and relationships. However, these poems are not mere cries of lament, but are controlled expressions with a high degree of craftsmanship. As we read the poems, we will see how they are so full of imagery and how Plath, instead of being vulnerable and revealing herself as is common in confessional poetry, tries to desperately snatch back control and power from her oppressors. Robert Lowell and Anne Sexton were other confessional poets in the US during Plath’s time. One very important aspect in Plath’s poetry is the complex love/hate relationship she shares with her father. We will discuss this further in the sections that follow.

Oedipus and Electra Complex: These theories were developed by well-known psychologists, Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung respectively. In loose and simple terms, Oedipus complex refers to a boy being sexually attracted to his mother, and have a complex relationship of envy or jealousy with the father. The attraction may not necessarily be physical/sexual, but romantic or intense attachment can also come under the umbrella of Oedipus complex. This then has effects and repercussions in later life as the boy tends to look for a wife who resembles his mother. The Electra complex is just the opposite of this with gender roles reversed. In Electra complex, the girl is attracted to her father, and harbours a kind of hate or jealousy towards the mother. In later years, the girl may try to find a copy, a replica of her father in the man she marries. Both these complexes, Oedipus and Electra, have been named after ancient Greek myths. Electra complex comes through very clearly in Sylvia Plath’s poems.

Relationship with Father: Plath’s father died when she was 9 years old. This marked a major point in her life. She had a difficult love/hate relationship with him. As a pre-teen 9-year old girl, she needed the first man in her life to affirm her womanliness, her sexuality. She needed recognition from him which she never got. Hence, she also wants a husband who is like her father. However, her father is also an authoritarian figure, a symbol of patriarchy in her poems. Thus, she has this complex love/hate relationship with him where she is attracted to him and yet she does not like his control over her. His control over her is also metaphorical in that she was obsessed with her father for years after he died. He may have died physically, but he had not stopped exerting control over her mind. In some sense, the poems are an attempt to exorcise this figure from her mind to achieve freedom. In the two poems we will discuss, we will see this ambivalent attitude of love/hate towards her father.

Holocaust imagery: In the two poems that we will discuss, Plath uses a lot of imagery from World War II. At first glance, it may seem like exaggeration or even insensitive to compare her relationship with her father to a Nazi-Jew relation. However, she herself has



said that this is her way of connecting personal themes with larger issues happening in the world. Although she writes confessional poetry, she does not write lame and pitiful cries from the heart. Her poems are highly controlled and stylised. During her time, WW II was still very relevant during the Cold War years because the threat and danger of a Nuclear War happening loomed large. Sylvia Plath had studied about the Holocaust both in school and college and it created an impact on her. Thus, part of the reason why she brings in the Holocaust is to try to link her personal concerns with something larger and wider. Another reason is also that her father, Otto Plath, was German, so she feels more directly connected to the Holocaust. In her poems, she equates patriarchy and Fascism. To her, it is the same masculine patriarchal control which leads to Fascism, so the two evils have the same root. As she calls the men in her life Nazis, she tries to say that patriarchy leads to Fascism, that they are both about power, domination and control. Fascism was largely a man's project as we don't usually see women as Nazis or military leaders and so in on during the era of World War II.

3. ‘Lady Lazarus’ – Critical Analysis

I have done it again.

One year in every ten

I manage it—

She has tried to attempt suicide after every decade of her life. The first time was when she was ten years old—after her father had died. It was partly a way of getting back to him. She had complex emotions of both nostalgia for her father as well as guilt, that perhaps her bad thoughts about him had caused his death. The tone is cool and calm. The tone is not the tone of a desperate person attempting suicide. Sylvia Plath later tried to kill herself when she was 20—and was brought back to life, rescued three days later. This poem is about that time when she attempted suicide at age 20. Finally she died by suicide after attempting it after another ten years—when she was 30. Every ten years because her father died when she was 9-10 years old.

A sort of walking miracle, my skin

Bright as a Nazi lampshade,

My right foot

A paperweight,

My face a featureless, fine

Jew linen.



Here, we see the tone of confidence continuing. This is not a suicidal victim whom other people are trying to rescue and help. This is a woman, poised and sure of herself, putting on a performance for these people who are watching her, these people who have rescued her. She compares herself to a Jew, and the patriarchal band of men to Nazis. She calls herself a miracle because she has been brought back to life. She has been resurrected, like Christ had resurrected Lazarus in the Bible. Thus, she calls herself—Lady Lazarus. The Nazis would make lampshades out of human skin—out of the skin of the Jews.

Peel off the napkin

O my enemy.

Do I terrify?—

The nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth?

The sour breath

Will vanish in a day.

Soon, soon the flesh

The grave cave ate will be

At home on me

She calls the men surrounding her as her enemies. These men who have “rescued” her, but probably because of whom she wanted to die in the first place. She asks them to peel off the napkin from her face. She asks them if she terrifies them, if they are scared. Clearly, she is not scared, she is putting on a theatrical performance for these men who are voyeurs. She asks whether her eye pits and teeth terrify them. She assures them the sour breath will vanish soon. Soon, the flesh would be back. The flesh the grave would have eaten will now be back as her suicide attempt is unsuccessful.

And I, a smiling woman.

I am only thirty.

And like the cat I have nine times to die.

This is Number Three.

What a trash

To annihilate each decade.

Again, her tone is poised and confident woman. She does not sound at all like a suicide victim. She is smiling. She writes that she is only thirty and has many times to live and die like the cat. It is a proverb, that cats have nine lives. Actually, although she writes



30, this poem is about her suicide attempt at the age of 20. At 30, she died, there was nobody to rescue her. When she writes “trash to annihilate each decade”, for the first time we see a kind of sorrow associated with suicide.

What a million filaments.

The peanut-crunching crowd

Shoves in to see

Them unwrap me hand and foot—

The big strip tease.

Gentlemen, ladies

These are my hands

My knees.

I may be skin and bone,

The peanut crunching crowd is the audience who is watching her for their entertainment—basically these are the people who have found and “rescued” her. But she regards them as her enemies. She is broken into a million filaments, and it is these broken pieces of herself that these men are rushing into see. Here, she seems to be the victim.

And yet, Plath will not consent to being the victim. So she converts this into a “strip-tease”. A striptease is a performance where a woman seduces men by slowly taking off her clothes and revealing herself to the men. However powerless she may be, Plath tries her best to keep control of the situation. She will not let herself be turned into a victim. Nevertheless, I am the same, identical woman.

The first time it happened I was ten.

It was an accident.

The second time I meant

To last it out and not come back at all.

I rocked shut

As a seashell.

They had to call and call

And pick the worms off me like sticky pearls.

They think she is the same as she was before—which she is—but in a different sense. She still has the intention to die, she will still try again. Again, although she finally died



in her third suicide attempt, but she speaks here as if she has been resurrected, brought back to life, like the earlier time. She had meant to last it out and to die—and it was only three days after she attempted suicide that they had found her, which is why she refers to worms sticking to her like pearls. Pearls are precious. To her, these worms are precious. She wants to die.

Dying

Is an art, like everything else.

I do it exceptionally well.

I do it so it feels like hell.

I do it so it feels real.

I guess you could say I've a call.

It's easy enough to do it in a cell.

It's easy enough to do it and stay put.

It's the theatrical

These lines are perhaps the most famous lines from Sylvia Plath's work that are known all over the world. Again, we can see here that the act is "theatrical". She is putting up a performance for her audience. Death is a deeply private act, and in being "rescued" or "resurrected" from her attempted suicide, she has suddenly become a victim of, and extremely vulnerable to, these men. She tries as much as possible to take back that control from them, she is determined to control the situation. The rhyme in these lines makes them sound even more polished, confident, and theatrical.

Comeback in broad day

To the same place, the same face, the same brute

Amused shout:

'A miracle!'

That knocks me out.

There is a charge

For the eyeing of my scars, there is a charge

For the hearing of my heart—

It really goes.

And there is a charge, a very large charge

For a word or a touch

Or a bit of blood



She comes back in broad daylight to the same place, with the same face—the brute can refer to all the men in her audience, but especially to her father and husband. She then compares herself to Christ. Jesus is believed to have been resurrected by God three days after he was crucified, just like Plath. So she treats herself as being as precious and hallowed as Christ. She says that there is a charge—you have to pay to hear her heart, or for a word or a touch or a bit of blood from her—because she has been resurrected, has come back to life after death.

Or a piece of my hair or my clothes.

So, so, Herr Doktor.

So, Herr Enemy.

I am your opus,

I am your valuable,

The pure gold baby

That melts to a shriek.

I turn and burn.

Do not think I underestimate your great concern.

"Herr" is "Mr." in German. And we know that her father, Otto Plath, was German. He was a professor. Thus, it is her father she is addressing when she says Herr Doktor and Herr Enemy. However, her father is also a symbol for all patriarchy so she is also addressing the group of men in front of her. She is valuable, she is like a baby of gold, she is his handicraft—her father's. She wants to be valuable to him and to be as precious as gold. We see a running complex love/hate attitude towards her father. The lines containing the words "turn", "burn" and "concern" are again poised and controlled. She has mastered the art of controlling the situation. She has created dying into an art, and prides herself for doing it exceptionally well.

Ash, ash—

You poke and stir.

Flesh, bone, there is nothing there—

A cake of soap,

A wedding ring,

A gold filling.

Herr God, Herr Lucifer



Beware

Beware.

Out of the ash

I rise with my red hair

And I eat men like air.

She is like the phoenix who has risen from the ashes after having been burnt. So there is only ash left now. No flesh, no bone. She has risen up like a miracle, from the flames. Again, she compares herself to the Jews. The Nazis used to take out gold from the wedding rings and the gold fillings in their teeth from the Jews. But immediately after making herself a pathetic victim like the Jews, she challenges God and the devil themselves. Once again, these are also men and are also, her enemies. She writes that they had better beware of her because she rises out of ash like a phoenix and destroys men. The poem may be seen as ironic or pathetic because one who actually has no control is desperately trying to enact a theatrical performance in order to show that she is in command of the situation.

Self-Check Questions-1

1. How does Plath attempt to turn a pitiable, pathetic situation into one where she exerts remarkable control?
2. Why does she use Holocaust imagery and how does she link Nazism with patriarchy?
3. Why does she link herself with Lazarus and with Christ?

4. 'Daddy' – Critical Analysis

You do not do, you do not do

Any more, black shoe

In which I have lived like a foot

For thirty years, poor and white,

Barely daring to breathe or Achoo

The poem continues the ambivalent love/hate attitude towards her father and the holocaust imagery which we saw in Lady Lazarus. The poem is titled "Daddy" which is an affectionate and endearing term for father. The simple and childish "oo" rhyme continues throughout the poem with words like do, shoe, achhoo and gobbledygook. This rhythm gives a sense of light verse about this poem which actually deals with serious subjects. This duality also portrays the poet's ambivalent love/hate relationship with her father. Here



Plath refers to the nursery rhyme ‘The Old Woman Lived in a Shoe’. The rhyme says the woman did not know what to do with so many children. Similarly, Plath here tries to reinforce her agency against her father. She tries to get back at him because he has confined her like a shoe, confines a foot. When she says “you do not do”, she is saying that you are dead now, you cannot do anything, you have no control over me. However, in reality it seems that for thirty years, her father has had control over her mind, she is still obsessed with him, she is not free of him. The entire poem is about exorcising the spirit of her father. Another thing we must note is “black” shoe. Throughout the poem, Plath uses “black” to describe her father and her husband. He is a black shoe, confined by which she has lived for thirty years, poor and white, scarcely even daring to breathe.

Daddy, I have had to kill you.

You died before I had time—

Marble-heavy, a bag full of God,

Ghastly statue with one grey toe

Big as a Frisco seal

And a head in the freakish Atlantic

Where it pours bean green over blue

In the waters off beautiful Nauset.

I used to pray to recover you.

Ach, du.

She says that she has had to mentally exorcise her father from her mind and life because he went and died before she had time to do that. There is a childish anger at the father for having died, there is also nostalgia, there is also guilt that maybe her bad thoughts killed him, and there is also a desire for revenge and to get back at him. Heavy as marble, with a bag full of God, her father seems to be a figure of authority and power. In fact, she compares him to a huge, huge statue, where he has one toe in America, with his head in Europe. Sylvia Plath travelled from US to UK for college, and Otto Plath was also German, so that is how the Europe reference comes in. One grey toe is a reference to Otto Plath’s diabetes and the misdiagnosis which ultimately caused his death. A Frisco seal refers to one of the sea lions near San Francisco. It shows how enormous and gigantic her father’s image is for her—like a colossus, which is also the title of one of Plath’s poetry collections. “Ach, du” is an expression of disgust. Once, she had nostalgia and would pray to recover him. Now she only feels disgust. Again, this shows her ambivalent attitude towards her father.



In the German tongue, in the Polish town
Scraped flat by the roller
Of wars, wars, wars.
But the name of the town is common.
My Polack friend
Says there are a dozen or two.
So I never could tell where you
Put your foot, your root,
I never could talk to you.
The tongue stuck in my jaw.
It stuck in a barb wire snare.
Ich, ich, ich, ich,
I could hardly speak.
I thought every German was you.
And the language obscene
An engine, an engine
Chuffing me off like a Jew.
A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen.
I began to talk like a Jew.
I think I may well be a Jew.

Here, she tries to seek her father's origins. All she knows is that he was from a Polish town in Germany, but the name of the town was so common that she could never exactly find which one he was from. She just knows that lots of wars had happened there. And she does not even know where he went after he died. So these things make it difficult for her to get a closure to the fact of her father's death. But suddenly, even while trying to seek her father's lost origins, the tone becomes accusatory and once again Holocaust imagery is employed. She was never able to speak to her father. She was so scared of his authoritarian and patriarchal manner. The tongue stuck in her jaw. "Ich" means "I" in German. Her tongue seemed stuck in barbed wire, and even when she tried to speak, nothing came out. Finally, in the act of writing the poem, she finds her voice. Now she is wrenching power and control away from him. Just as she says "you do not do" in stanza



I, now he cannot speak. Nor can he act. She is the one speaking finally. She thought every German was like him and hated all Germans. Again, she employs violent holocaust imagery. She is the Jewish victim being led off to concentration camps like Dachau and Auschwitz.

The snows of the Tyrol, the clear beer of Vienna
Are not very pure or true.

With my gipsy ancestress and my weird luck
And my Taroc pack and my Taroc pack
I may be a bit of a Jew.

I have always been scared of *you*,
With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygoo.
And your neat moustache
And your Aryan eye, bright blue.
Panzer-man, panzer-man, O You—

Not God but a swastika
So black no sky could squeak through.
Every woman adores a Fascist,
The boot in the face, the brute
Brute heart of a brute like you.

Tyrol and Vienna are in Austria, which is just next to Germany. Plath writes that even the pure snows of Tyrol and clear beer of Vienna have been stained and polluted by the happenings in Germany. Somewhere they too have become complicit. Also, purity in the context of the Nazis meant racial purity which was a dangerous idea. She imagines that maybe she had gypsy ancestors who were fortune-tellers, and maybe she actually is part-Jewish. Seeing herself as Jewish, she sees her father as a Nazi. Luftwaffe were the air weapons used by the Germans, Aryan is the superior race to which Hitler claimed to belong, and Panzer-man refers to the German tank drivers. She continues with this imagery wherein she is locked in combat with her father—earlier he was a colossal statue and she was a devotee, now he is the oppressor and she is the victim—both ways he exerts power and control over her. He’s not a God but a swastika—swastika was the Nazi symbol. Again, her father is termed as “black” which we have seen earlier as well. When she writes that every woman adores a Fascist, she clearly links patriarchy and Fascism. For her, Fascism



is the ultimate end result of patriarchy. She might also imply that women are complicit in their own victimisation as they only adore the Fascists and patriarchs. Once again the image of the boot—we have seen black shoe earlier—boots were worn by Nazis. The repetition of “boot” and “brute” also serves to enhance the vigour and power of the poem, increasing its impact, while continuing to use the childish “oo” rhyme.

You stand at the blackboard, daddy,
In the picture I have of you,
A cleft in your chin instead of your foot
But no less a devil for that, no not
Any less the black man who
Bit my pretty red heart in two.
I was ten when they buried you.
At twenty I tried to die
And get back, back, back to you.
I thought even the bones would do.

After having seen her father as a colossal statue and as a Nazi, here she sees her father as a professor (which he actually was), and as a vampire. The blackboard image refers to her dad as a professor. There is a belief that the devil always appears with a cleft in his foot. Plath likens her father to the devil, only he has a cleft in his chin instead of his foot. Once again, the word “black” is used to describe him. As a student, she is subservient to her professor. If he is a vampire, she is the victim.. Then suddenly, the tone changes. Instead of accusing her father, she shows how much she tried to unite with him. When she was twenty, she committed suicide only to get back to him, even if it was in death. Once again, we see the ambivalent attitude towards the father.

But they pulled me out of the sack,
And they stuck me together with glue.
And then I knew what to do.
I made a model of you,
A man in black with a Meinkampf look
And a love of the rack and the screw.
And I said I do, I do.



So daddy, I'm finally through.
The black telephone's off at the root,
The voices just can't worm through.
If I've killed one man, I've killed two—
The vampire who said he was you
And drank my blood for a year,
Seven years, if you want to know.
Daddy, you can lie back now.
There's a stake in your fat black heart
And the villagers never liked you.
They are dancing and stamping on you.
They always *knew* it was you.
Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through.

Here we see how Plath tries to, in some sense, resurrect her father in the man she marries, how she tries to regain her father. When her suicide attempt failed and they pulled her out of the sack and stuck her with glue, meaning, when she was unable to unite with her father, she re-created him in the form of her husband. She made her father into a “model”—a role model. Like her father, now her husband here is also described with the adjective “black”, and with the Nazi term – “Meinkampf ” which is the name of Hitler's book. Her husband too is shown to love weapons like the rack and the screw. And she said “I do”—which means, that she married him. The black telephone's off at the root—the black telephone may be a way of reaching her father even in death, but the telephone is cut at the root, and she still seems unable to reach him, even though she wants to.

She feels that by killing one man she has killed two—her father and her husband. The poem could be a way of taking revenge at them, and to exorcise them from her mind, to free herself from the control they exerted over her. Here, she turns the father/husband image into a vampire. As vampires, they have sucked her blood. Again, she has been their victim. In all the four images—statue, Nazi, professor and vampire, he is the powerful one, exerting control over her. She is bound unto him/ them. For seven years, her husband, Ted Hughes, drank her blood—their separation after Hughes's infidelity happen seven years after marriage. Finally, she drives a stake in his – again black—heart, killing him, exorcising him. She calls him a bastard (even while using the affectionate word “daddy”) and tells him that the villagers never liked him either. And yet, the end of



the poem is again ambivalent in the last line—"daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through". Either she is through with him, done with him, is free of him, has finally exorcised him from within her. Or, she could also be through "to" him—perhaps she has managed to unite with him, perhaps she has got through to him over the black telephone, even though it was cut at the root.

Self-Check Questions-2

1. What is Plath's ambivalent relationship with her father?
2. How does her "Electra" complex come through in the poem?
3. What is the significance of the four images—statue, Nazi, professor and vampire?

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(i) “Advice to Women”
(ii) “Bequest”
Eunice de Souza

Shruti Sareen

Structure

1. *Learning Objectives*
2. *Introduction*
3. *“Advice to Women”*
4. *“Bequest”*
5. *Bibliography*

1. Learning Objectives

- ◆ To learn about the themes and style of Eunice de Souza’s poetry
- ◆ To be able to place the poetry of Eunice de Souza in the context in which it was written
- ◆ To be able to analyse and interpret the poems included in the syllabus

2. Introduction

Eunice de Souza (1940-2017) was born and brought up in Pune, in a Goan Catholic family. She studied English literature and obtained her MA from Wisconsin, USA and a PhD from the University of Mumbai. She taught English at St. Xavier’s College, Mumbai. Her poetry collections are: *Fix* (1979), *Ways of Belonging* (1990), *Selected and New Poems* (1994), and *Learn from the Almond Leaf* (2016). She has also written children’s books, novellas, and has edited numerous poetry anthologies.

Arundhathi Subramaniam, a major poet herself, writes that if Kamala Das ushered in the poetry of female sexuality into Indian poetry in English, then Eunice de Souza brought in female fury- “white-hot, page-searing, bone-chilling fury”. De Souza’s poems are fierce and full of anger. The second most notable point about them is their economy. De Souza’s poems are sparse, she uses the bare minimum words possible to convey extremely strong



points. In a poem containing 48 words, she writes that in this poem, there are 48 words too many. Arundhati Subramaniam writes about the “ferocious economy” of de Souza’s poems—“cooked under such heat and pressure that only the barest minimum language remains—spare, attenuated, fine-grained.”

Perhaps the best way of describing the themes of de Souza’s poetry is the title of one of her books, *Ways of Belonging*. De Souza’s gaze is that of insider-turned-outsider. Although she has lived in Pune Mumbai, Goa, and has visited Delhi several times, she never completely felt at home or “belonged” in any of these places. Mumbai was the closest to home, for her, among all these places. She has a double-consciousness when she writes poems about the Goan Catholic community. She belongs to the community herself, and in some ways, the poems about her own community help to establish her connection with that community. However, her gaze is always critical, even as she looks at her own community. She points towards the patriarchy implicit in the Goan Catholic community. She exposes the ethnocentricity and hypocrisies of the minority Goan Catholic community. She critiques the Hindu religion for its patriarchy as well. However, her real battle was with patriarchy—the community of men, no matter what religion or ethnicity they belonged to. Eunice de Souza’s feminist politics were largely shaped by her time in Wisconsin where she did her MA in the 1960s—at the height of the Civil Rights movement in the US which addressed issues of racial, gender, and sexual inequality. The movement against apartheid (racial segregation) was at its height at that time. In 1963, President Kennedy proposed his historic Civil Rights Bill which would end racial and gender discrimination and the time when Martin Luther King gave his speech ‘I have a dream...’. Even though de Souza returned to India, the movement largely shaped her politics.

Finally, no discussion of Eunice de Souza can be complete without mentioning her love for animals and nature. The most famous and popular photo of Eunice de Souza has a parrot sitting on her head, and a cigarette in her hand, while other pictures feature dogs and so on. In her earlier phase, her poems were more autobiographical, and also more ferocious and angry. Later, she also focussed on nature, and the temporary and ephemeral nature of life, as is seen from the title of her last poetry collection—*Learn from the Almond Leaf*.

3. “Advice to Women”

Keep cats
if you want to learn to cope with
the otherness of lovers.



Otherness is not always neglect -
Cats return to their litter trays
when they need to.
Don't cuss out of the window
at their enemies.
That stare of perpetual surprise
in those great green eyes
will teach you
to die alone.

Critical Analysis

Human relationships in general are complex, and more complex and difficult is the one between man and woman. Eunice de Souza in this poem is offering advice to women on how to cope with this unique relationship. She suggests that women should keep cats, as the behaviour of cats offers an invaluable lesson in understanding and coping with relationships, especially with the otherness of lovers. Cats generally exhibit an otherness; most of the time they do not seek company, they are quite happy being alone. At first glance, this may seem strange because we usually associate lovers with intimacy, not with otherness. Otherness, she writes, does not always mean that the other doesn't want you. As with cats, the otherness exhibited by lovers does not mean neglect, it simply means that the other may want to share with you, the same space and time all the time. Although, cats are extremely independent, they will nonetheless return to their litter trays when they need to. So will the lovers. The 'advice' being offered by Souza here is to understand and respect otherness, in order to navigate the complexities of human relationships.

De Souza draws our attention to two other characteristics of cats. Cats do not curse at their enemies. Here the advice is to maintain composure and not give in to anger in a situation of conflict. More importantly, in the concluding lines, De Souza focuses her attention on the "stare of perpetual surprise in those great green eyes". This striking image of the eyes reflects not only the wonder and mystery of the world around that is waiting to be explored, but also conveys the ultimate truth about the condition of all existence, that "you die alone."

In this poem, cats serve as a metaphor, to explore and understand otherness and independence in the realm of human relationships, contemplate on the wonder and mystery of life and the inevitability of loneliness. The poem asserts that the independence displayed by cats is a virtue worthy of emulation by women, thereby suggesting that women should



reclaim their independent identity, which usually becomes a casualty within the patriarchal social order. The cat thus, is elevated from the diminutive role of a pet animal to that of a wise teacher who imparts important life lessons.

Self-Check Questions-1

1. What are the distinctive qualities of Eunice de Souza's writing?
2. What are the main themes of De Souza's poetry?
3. Why according to the poet should women keep cats?
4. Explain the metaphor of cats in the poem.

4. "Bequest"

In every Catholic home there's a picture
of Christ holding his bleeding heart
in his hand.

I used to think, ugh.

The only person with whom

I have not exchanged confidences
is my hairdresser.

Some recommend stern standards.

Others say float along.

He says, take it as it comes,
meaning, of course, as he hands it out.

I wish I could be a

Wise Woman

smiling endlessly, vacuously

like a plastic flower,

saying Child, learn from me.

It's time to perform an act of charity
to myself,

bequeath the heart, like a

spare kidney –

preferably to an enemy.



Critical Analysis

Bequest basically means a legacy, something that is bequeathed, passed on, from one generation to another, from one era to another. In the first four stanza's of the poem, what is being bequeathed is a set of authoritarian patriarchal values, which rob women of their voice and identity. Society through its various institutions, instils these values in women right from their childhood. Their minds are conditioned into believing that these values are not only good but also desirable. The agonized voice of the poet rejects these bequests and instead she bequeaths her own heart, and unlike Christ, she does it not for the redemption of others, but for her own redemption.

Stanza 1: The picture of "Christ holding his bleeding heart" is a symbolic representation of Christ sacrificing his blood to redeem humanity. The idea of sacrifice is one of the basic tenets of Christianity. Sacrifice as a concept, when institutionalised, takes away one's freedom to dissent. The societal norms within the patriarchal dispensation expects many sacrifices from women. The bleeding heart here could also refer to the poet's own bleeding heart, wounded by the many patriarchal norms inflicted. The poet admits to feeling disgust at the picture of Christ in her childhood. Although not explicitly stated, the picture no longer evoked disgust after she grew up, as her own bleeding heart perhaps found a parallel in it.

Stanza 2: The image of Christ holding his heart is interpreted by the poet as an opening of her heart to others. She confesses that in this spirit she has exchanged confidences with almost everyone with the only exception being her hairdresser. One can detect a note of sarcasm here; she probably means that she has exchanged confidences with just about everyone she knows, except those with whom the relationship is purely transactional. It is pertinent to note that exchanging confidences is one way of forging relationships within the society one lives in, but these confidences again need to adhere to rules that govern socially acceptable thoughts and feelings. In this sense, the confidences are not free but limited.

Stanza 3: This stanza is a direct critique of patriarchy. Women are expected to follow strict and rigid rules about how to live, and these rules invariably divest women of their voice, independence and identity. Some women unquestioningly, not only embrace these rules, but wholeheartedly recommend them as a guide to leading a good life. Some others just float, accepting whatever comes to them in life without trying to control their own path. "He" here stands for the authority/father figure in all patriarchy. Patriarchy wants women to take life as it comes, which basically means the way men or the patriarchy hands it to them. Women therefore, cannot take control of their own lives, so long as men control them.



Stanza 4: Here the “Wise Woman” is an allusion to Proverbs 14:1 in the Bible which says that a wise woman is one who builds her home, basically relegating women to the domestic sphere of home and hearth. However, in an indictment of both patriarchy and religion, De Souza rejects this image and likens it to a woman “smiling vacuously” meaning an empty, hollow smile. She holds out a plastic flower—just as the smile is not real, even the flower is fake. Perhaps De Souza wants to say that women’s smiles are not real, their happiness at being such a “Wise Woman” is not real. And then the woman teaches the child, bequeaths this tradition of patriarchy that she has internalised within herself, to the child.

Stanza 5: She writes here that it is time for her to do an act of charity to herself. Christ had sacrificed his blood for redeeming/saving mankind, but she on the other hand is going to sacrifice/bequeath her heart as an act of self-redemption. By this act, she will rid herself of that organ in her being which is a repository of all pain, frustration and hurt. The comparison of the heart to a kidney reinforces this idea, as kidneys flush out waste products from the human body. This perhaps is the reason why she wishes to bequeath it to an enemy and not to a friend or a loved one. Throughout the poem, religion as represented by the bleeding heart of Christ is interlinked with the rigid conventions prescribed for women - sacrifice, strict obedience to rules, and vacuity - within the patriarchal dispensation. The poet is so wounded by conformity to these rules that in a desperate act to save herself, she decides to bequeath her bleeding heart to an enemy. In this sense, the poem can be read as a confession and also as an act of defiance.

Self-Check Questions-2

1. What does the title of the poem mean?
2. How does the poet critique religion in the poem?
3. How does the poet critique patriarchy in the poem?
4. Critically analyse the final stanza.

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