

**GOVERNMENT ARTS COLLEGE (AUTONOMOUS),
COIMBATORE – 18
POSTGRADUATE AND RESEARCH DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH**

**WOMEN'S WRITING – UNIT II – POETRY
SEMESTER – II**

UNIT – II : POETRY

DETAILED

2.1 KAMALA DAS' THE OLD PLAYHOUSE

The poem “The Old Playhouse” was written by Kamala Das. She was educated in Kerala. A bilingual writer, she prefers to write in English and fiction in Malayalam. The literary awards she has won includes the Asian Poetry Award (1963) and the Sahitya Akademi Award (1965). Kamala Das is essentially known for her bold and frank expression. The prominent features of Kamala Das’ poetry is use of the confessional mode and acute obsession with love. Against the frustrating emotional experience, guilt and depression expressed in her autobiography, there is a section of poetry where she writes about an idealized childhood and of a nostalgic yearning for her grandmother’s Nalpat House symbolizing freedom, love and protection.

‘The Old Playhouse’ is selected from the book with the same title that deals with Das’ recurrent theme of failure and frustration in love and marriage. It clearly reveals the plight of a housewife who bewails that her egocentric and male chauvinist husband has virtually reduced her full-blooded and aspiring self to a mere entertaining toy. Consequently, the caged wife, with her stifled and crippled spirit, is helplessly destined to witness the pathetic transformation of her mind into ‘an old playhouse with all its lights put out’. The network of concrete and evocative imagery and imaginative symbols transcends an individual’s suffering and makes it a generic experience.

The poem *The Old Playhouse* by Kamala Das reflects the central idea of her poetry i.e. the dominance of patriarchy and her struggle against it. Like many of her other poems including An Introduction or The Looking Glass, *The Old Playhouse* is also a Confessional Poem. The poem is not divided into stanzas. *The Old Playhouse* is also without any rhyme scheme.

ATTACK ON PATRIARCHY

The poem begins with the word *You* that is a direct attack on man and patriarchy. According to the poet, her husband has planned to domesticate a bird (the poet) by holding it in the fake love so that she may forget the seasons (spring, summer, autumn or in other words the joys of her life) and her home which she left behind her for him.

Not only this, but he has also made her forget her nature, her desire to fly or freedom, and to explore the opportunities were also crushed.

HER HOPES & ASPIRATIONS AFFECTED

The poet says that *it was not to gather knowledge of yet another man that I came to you but to learn*. The lines mean that she did not marry him or gave him her body and soul to learn about him or in other words to serve him, but to know about herself.

However, what his husband taught her was about himself. He i.e. the male-dominance was the centre of all the education. In the next line, the poet says that *you were pleased with my body's response* i.e. her husband wanted to quench her lust by exploiting her body.

He never tried to explore her soul and never loved her. Though he succeeds in penetrating every part of her body. He kisses her lips so hard that his saliva would fill her mouth. But he fails to satisfy her soul.

HER JOB AS A WIFE

According to the poet, he called her wife or *the better half*. However, she was not more than a slave to him. She was forced to serve him tea, take care of his medicine.

In the next line, the poet says *cowering beneath your monstrous ego I ate the magic loaf and became a dwarf* meaning that after getting married to him, she was reduced to a slave to his male ego. And thus she lost her desires and thinking that made her act like a fool whenever he would ask her something.

Decaying of Her Desires

The poet says that *the summer begins to pall* i.e. the joy of her life is going to end because her husband has killed her desires. She can hear *the rudder breezes of the fall and the smoke from the burning leaves* i.e. she sees her dreams, desires, quest and her zeal dying like smoke coming from burning leaves.

In the next line, she says *your room is always lit by artificial lights, your windows always shut* i.e. the world which her husband has provided to her is full of fake love and there is no freedom for her. Even in the AC, she can smell *the male scent of your breath* i.e. the dominant patriarchy.

Thus, *the cut flowers in the vases have begun to smell of human sweat* meaning that her desires which have been killed by her husband have rotten. *There is no more singing, no more dance* or in other words, there is no joy in her life.

LEGAL LOVE OF HER HUSBAND

Her *mind is an old playhouse with all its lights put out. The strong man's technique is always the same* i.e. the dominance of patriarchy is always there which never goes away. Her husband *serves his love in lethal doses*.

Here she perhaps refers to the lustful love of her husband which is without real love and rather than giving her life gives a death-like experience. The poet compares the love between her and her husband to *the Narcissus at the water's edge*.

Narcissus was a young boy who fell in love with his own reflection and suffered a fall. Like it, his love will also suffer destruction as it is self-obsessed. For that, it will have to break the mirrors and bring the night. In other words, it will also kill the poet before dying.

2.2 MEENA KANDASAMY'S DEAD WOMAN WALKING

Indian poetry expresses the collective consciousness of India. It reflects the traditions of the country and exposes the glorious past. Poets have become the voice of the commoner. The realities of life across borders have been given life in their poems. In spite of many obstacles women writers have pushed aside boundaries and their poems have made way to the world

out there. Dalit literature has emerged out as separate category in Indian Literature. A young and rebellious woman poet, Meena Kandasamy in her poem collection Ms. Militancy focuses on caste oppression and women issues. The poems in the collection focus on women empowerment and psychological pressures of women and how the poet plans to grant the women an identity. Meena Kandasamy's first poetry collection was published in 2006 named Touch. This paper throws light on two poems of the collection, Ms Militancy and the Dead woman walking. Dead woman walking is a poem that portrays the emotional and physical torments the subjugated of the society face, especially the women of the lower strata of the society.

The poet has brought in the mythological figure, Karaikkal Ammayar who is a voice to the Dalit women who are exploited by the men through various means to satisfy their needs. Karaikkal Ammayar's merchant husband abandoned her for a "fresh and formless wife" in spite of her beauty, magic of her love. Karaikkal Ammayar's devotion and love for Lord Shiva gave a picture to her husband as if she is a mystic. Meena Kandasamy slips into the shoes of Karaikkal Ammayar in order to explain the pain women face when deserted by their husbands, "I wept in vain, I wailed, I walked on my head, I went to god." (Kandasamy 17). In the point of view of the society, Karaikkal Ammayar was a mad woman. Her appearance was terrifying. The bulging eyes, long loose hair, etc were the images which come to the mind when she has to be given an image. Even though she assumed this form after leaving the pleasures of life, it reflects her inner trauma of dejection. The following lines explain this signifying the apt title. I am a dead woman walking asylum corridors, with faltering step, with felted, flying hair, with hollowed cheeks that offset bulging eyes, with welts on my wrists, with creasing skin, with seizures of speech and song, with a single story between my sobbing pendulous breasts. (Kandasamy 20).

The poem having the title of the collection is "Ms. Militancy". This poem includes the protagonist of the story of the first epic in Tamil. The poet sends across the message that women need to be brave and a revolutionary just like Kannaki. Even though Kovalan betrayed his wife, he is welcomed by his wife after he returns from Madhavi's place. Kannaki supports him after his return by handing over her anklets so that they could start a new life. There is a complete contrast of the character of Kannaki in the first stanza of Kandasamy's poem and the last few lines. That is, a submissive and typical Indian wife to her husband at first due to the norms of the patriarchal domination changes when there is injustice done to her. She becomes a rebel and her rage outpours in an enormous way when her husband gets killed. She is bold and reinstalls justice which both the Pandiyan King and Kovalan failed to hold on to. By being a female, this is a huge success for her against the male dominant society thus creating an identity for her. Her anger is subsided only when she burns down the city of Madurai and not by getting only the justice. Kandasamy rightly puts it as, "a bomb of her left breast" (36). Kandasamy herself demands from a woman that when she has to stand up to any injustices she has to do so. The poet is portrayed as an example for subjugated women to look up to as she has given voice to the voiceless through her lines. Just like Mahaswetha devi does to her characters, giving voice to the unnoticed. Ms. Kandasamy takes up the main characters of epics and brings them as common people and highlights the quality

which makes them to stand out of the crowd. Kandasamy herself has got a powerful voice which is capable of breaking boundaries and shattering walls. She does her best to uplift her community. Her poems are a reflection of her strong rootedness to Indian English and Dalit Literatures.

2.3 MARGARET ATWOOD'S THIS IS A PHOTOGRAPH OF ME

“This is a Photograph of Me” opens *The Circle Game*, Canadian writer Margaret Atwood’s 1964 collection of poetry. As the speaker of this **free verse** poem describes a blurry photograph to the audience, the image's implications continuously transform. As such, the photograph becomes a means of exploring the malleability of history and truth, particularly with regard to the suppression of marginalized voices. In doing so, it sets the stage for the rest of *The Circle Game*, which centers female perspectives and experiences that have long been subsumed under male-dominated histories. The poem’s short, uneven lines and stanzas mirror the fragmented, ever-changing nature of history.

The speaker begins to describe an old photograph from many years ago. The speaker notes that, upon first glance, the image appears blurry, all of its fuzzy shapes mingling on the photo paper. The speaker then guides the reader through the photograph, first pointing out a fragment of an evergreen tree that creeps into the frame from one of its left corners. To its right is an incline, which the speaker says should be gradual. Halfway up the incline is a little house whose weight is supported by a wooden frame. The speaker describes the background of the image, drawing the audience’s attention to a lake, behind which sit short hills. The speaker claims, in a parenthetical statement, to have drowned on the day before the photograph was taken. The speaker points the audience back towards the lake at the center of the photo, where the speaker lies lifeless right beneath its surface. The speaker explains that it is hard to make out the corpse’s form—its exact size and position—because light reflects off of the water, warping the body’s appearance. However, the speaker maintains that if the audience contemplates the photo for a while, they will be able to recognize the speaker.

The speaker of the poem describes a photograph, first presenting the whole, blurry image and then calling the reader’s attention to various details within its quaint landscape. However, about halfway through the poem, it is revealed that the speaker’s lifeless body is also pictured, barely perceivable. As the photo’s narrative becomes increasingly dark and complex, the speaker exposes the limitations of recording history. It requires simplification, the poem implies, centering certain experiences as others fade and effectively resulting in the erasure of those with less power. After presenting the reader with a vague image, the speaker points out specific features and a picturesque scene begins to take shape. This initial scan of the photograph reflects the ease with which documents can be used to fabricate an uncomplicated version of past events.

When first introducing the picture, the speaker emphasizes its cloudiness, using descriptors like “smeared,” “blurred,” and “blended.” The speaker goes on to point out one corner of the photograph, from which a tree emerges. In doing so, the speaker subtly hints that one’s understanding of history materializes based on how that history is presented.

Indeed, the speaker says, “At first it seems to be / a smeared / print,” indicating that history is at least as much based on interpretation of records as it is grounded in raw data. The speaker continues to guide the reader through the image, delineating a slight incline and a humble house in the foreground, beyond which lie a lake and hills. The speaker uses soft language to describe the scene, such as “gentle slope,” “small frame house,” and “low hills.” As a result, the scene appears quaint and calm.

This tranquility disappears, however, as it is revealed that the image was taken on the day after the speaker died. The speaker urges the reader to look more closely and identify the corpse submerged within the lake, showing that the speaker’s experience has been obscured.

The speaker’s body is not readily apparent—so obscured, in fact, that even the speaker is unable “to say where / precisely” it is. The speaker’s body will “eventually” emerge only after an extended period of intent observation, indicating that the ugly, complicated realities of the past are harder to discern than glossy, oversimplified narratives.

The speaker also calls the reflection of light off of the lake “a distortion,” suggesting that the photograph misrepresents the scene that it captures. This “distortion” makes the speaker unsure of “how large or how small I am,” signaling that the suffering of “small” or disenfranchised people is easy to write off as insignificant to history.

Moreover, parentheses surround the revelation that the speaker is pictured, indicating that this information could easily be left out. As such, they imply that the speaker’s experience of events is seen as secondary or insignificant. Indeed, the speaker has no input into the photo’s composition, twice saying passively that it “was taken.” Therefore, without this easily-excisable commentary, the speaker’s perspective is entirely absent.

By uncovering multiple truths contained in the photograph, the speaker reveals that historical narratives are often simplified and exclusionary, shaped by whoever is recording them. As a

result, the experiences of marginalized people are often erased from prevailing histories. Still, the speaker's form is at the "center" of the photograph, "just under the surface," suggesting that such obscured stories are central to understanding the past and *can* be accessed.

The poem itself is an example of this—it opens Atwood's *The Circle Game*, which amplifies and immortalizes female perspectives long subsumed under male-dominated histories. Thus, "This Is a Photograph of Me" vocalizes the experiences of those who feel shut out of their own histories and indicates that the poems to come will illuminate such truths.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

The Subjectivity of Truth

Throughout the poem, the speaker provides commentary on the photograph and calls attention to particular details, shifting the reader's understanding of what the photograph represents. By providing multiple readings of the photograph and calling the reliability of even the speaker's *own* interpretation into question, the speaker reveals that one's understanding of the "truth" is always subjective.

As the speaker describes the image, the reader's understanding of what it depicts continuously changes, revealing that even "objective" documents like photographs can be interpreted in many ways. Initially, the image is hazy and difficult to make out—little more than "blurred lines and grey flecks / blended with the paper." This description of the photograph as a "smeared print" is highly abstract and emphasizes the lack of clarity with which it presents its subject.

The speaker then guides the reader through a more detailed analysis of the photograph, using directional language ("in the left-hand corner," "in the background") to point out specific forms. The speaker identifies "part of a tree" and "a small frame house" that sits on a slope, as well as "a lake" and "some low hills." As such, a scenic natural landscape takes shape.

The speaker's use of simple, understated language projects a quaint and benign image. However, the atmosphere shifts suddenly when the reader learns that "the photograph was taken / the day after [the speaker] drowned." The speaker draws attention back to the lake,

which is now regarded as the resting place of the speaker's corpse. As such, the reader is presented with three distinct interpretations of the photograph.

Though the speaker provides a detailed, nuanced analysis of the photograph, many aspects about it remain unknown, demonstrating that the "truth" it captures is never completely fixed and knowable. The speaker is unable to distinguish if the tree in the corner of the photograph is "balsam or spruce" and says that the picture contains "what ought to be a gentle slope," never confirming if the slope is, in fact, gradual.

The precise size and location of the body in the lake are also impossible to determine, even by the speaker. The corpse is obscured due to "a distortion" caused by light reflecting off of the water. The warped image further undermines the photograph's reliability and contradicts the idea that photographs are "objective," as they can create optical illusions. Moreover, the account of the photograph as a record of the speaker's drowning is contained within parentheses, indicating uncertainty about the necessity and significance of the information they contain.

Therefore, rather than providing clarity about what the photograph represents, the speaker's narration offers several different interpretations and calls the validity of each into question. As such, the speaker illustrates that one's concept of the "truth" itself is based on perception—something unfix and easily manipulated.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

Lines 1-26

Line-by-Line Explanation & Analysis of "This Is a Photograph of Me"

It was taken ...

... print:

The speaker opens the poem by noting that its subject is fairly old. The reader understands that the speaker is discussing a photograph, given the poem's title and the verb "taken." Still, by not explicitly naming the photograph or specifying just how old it is, the speaker introduces vagueness—a quality that will pervade the poem. Indeed, the speaker proceeds to describe the photograph as "smeared," or smudged and blurry.

The passive verb form “taken” also indicates that some unnamed third party took the photograph, rather than the speaker. To put it another way, this phrasing presents the speaker as a commentator rather than an active force behind the photo’s production. This term will reappear later (see stanza 4) to clarify that the speaker is the *object* of actions carried out by a more dominant force. However, line 1 also establishes the speaker’s authority, as it is made up of one succinct, straightforward sentence, punctuated with an **end-stop**. As such, the speaker comes across as confident, while the poem's plain, reserved language projects credibility.

The speaker then points out the image’s apparent blurriness. These lines contain **assonant** long /e/ sounds, which emphasizes a few important characteristics of the photo:

At first it seems to be
a smeared

Assonance calls attention to the image's smudgy appearance, while the verb “seems” signals that there is more to the image than initially meets the eye. Moreover, the words that contain assonant vowels receive additional stress due to the poem's **meter**:

At **first** it **seems** to **be**
a **smeared**

Plus, **consonant** /m/ and **sibilant** /s/ sounds create a sonic bond between “seems” and “smeared,”

2.4 SYLVIA PLATH'S LADY LAZARUS

Sylvia Plath wrote "Lady Lazarus" in 1962, during a creative burst of energy in the months before her death by suicide in 1963. The poem which remains one of Plath's most enduring works. "Lady Lazarus," is both the title of the poem, and its speaker—much like the biblical Lazarus, the man Jesus resurrected from the dead in the Gospel of John, the speaker is also resurrected by external forces, and more than once. This resurrection, however, is unwanted—the speaker reveals she *wants* to die in order to escape the profound suffering caused by living in an oppressive, male-dominated society. Instead, the speaker is forced to come back to life, each revival a carnival-like performance for a "peanut-crunching crowd." However, the speaker warns her enemies—the men who bring her back to life—eventually she will return and "eat men like air," demonstrating a complicated dynamic of empowerment and hopelessness. Using metaphors of death and resurrection, Plath provides a dark insight

into the suicidal mind, as well as a critique of society's twisted fascination with suffering, and of the horror of a being a woman in a patriarchal world.

I have done it again. Once every ten years, I manage to kill myself and come back to life. I am a kind of living miracle, with my skin so white it looks like a lampshade the Nazis made from the skin of dead Jewish Holocaust victims, my right foot heavy like a paperweight, and my face, without its usual features, looking like a fine piece of Jewish cloth.

Peel off the cloth, you, my enemy. Do I scare you, without my nose, with my empty eye sockets, and a full set of teeth like a skull? The sour smell of decay on my breath will disappear in a day. Soon, very soon, the skin that decayed in my tomb will be back on my body, and I will become a smiling woman again. I am only thirty-years-old. And like a cat, I also have nine times to die.

I am currently dead, and this is the third time out of nine. What a shame, to destroy each decade like this. See the million flashing bulbs. The crowd, crunching on peanuts, shoves in to watch as my burial cloth is unwrapped from me, like some kind of strip-tease. Gentlemen and ladies of the crowd, here are my hands. My knees. I may be nothing more than skin and bones, but regardless, I came back as the same identical woman I was before I died.

The first time I died, I was ten-years-old. It was an accident. The second time I died was intentional. I meant for it to last, and to never come back. I rocked into a ball, shutting myself off to the world like a seashell. People had to call and call for me to come back to life, and had to pick off the worms, which had already begun to infest my dying body, as though they were pearls that were stuck to me.

Like everything else, dying is an art-form, a skill. I'm extremely good at it. I try to die so it feels terrible, like I'm in hell. I try to die in a way that feels as though I'm actually dying. I guess you could say that dying is my calling (since I'm so good at it).

It's easy enough to die in a cell (like in a mental hospital or prison. It's easy enough to die and stay in one place. It's the dramatic resurrection, the return in the middle of the day to the same place, the return to the same body, the return to the same old loud and surprised shout: 'It's a miracle!' that really tires me out. I charge for people to look at my scars, and I charge for them to listen to my heart—it beats fast and continuously. And there is a charge, a very expensive charge, for people to hear me speak, or to touch me, or to buy some of my blood, or hair, or clothes. So, Sir Doctor. So Sir Enemy, I am your great artistic work. I am your valuable item, like a baby made out of pure gold that, when dying, melts until there is nothing but the sound of screaming. I turn away from you, and burn alive. Don't think I underestimate just don't know how concerned you are for me.

Now I'm just ash, all ash—you poke at the ash, stir it around, looking for my flesh, or bone, but there isn't anything left—just a bar of soap, a wedding ring, a gold tooth filling. Sir God, Sir Lucifer, beware, beware. Out of the ashes, I will rise, my hair red (like a phoenix's feathers), and I will eat men like they are nothing, like I am simply breathing.

Death and Suicide

Throughout "Lady Lazarus," the speaker uses extended metaphors of death and resurrection to express her own personal suffering. The speaker compares herself to Lazarus (a biblical reference to a man Jesus raised from the dead), telling the reader that she has died multiple times, and is, in fact, dead when the poem begins. However, through external forces, the speaker is brought back to life time and time again. For Lazarus, his resurrection was a joyous event, and one might assume that all such resurrections would be happy. But the

speaker of the poem subverts that expectation—she *wants* to die. And so the efforts of those who want to save her—whether loved ones, or doctors, or whoever else—feel to the speaker like selfish, controlling acts committed against her wishes.

Obviously, the speaker is not *actually* dead, but uses this metaphor to demonstrate how unbearable life is and, in turn, explain (and perhaps justify) her suicide attempts. Thus, the reader can interpret the poem as the musings of a suicidal mind, with death being alternately presented as freedom, escape from suffering, and the achievement of a sort of peace.

Throughout the poem, the speaker often contrasts life and death by using imagery that subverts the reader's expectations. Note how the speaker describes life through disturbing images, such as comparing her skin to a "Nazi lampshade," or describing her resurrection as "...flesh / the grave cave ate will be / at home on me." This imagery is surprisingly applied to the speaker's living body after it is resurrected. The speaker describes her experience of living as a kind of torture, almost as a kind of death—when she is brought back to life, her skin is like the dead skin of someone killed in the Holocaust, it is the skin of a dead woman forced back onto her living self. Thus, the speaker demonstrates how living, for her, is what death feels like for most people.

In contrast, the speaker describes death as a kind of calmness. For instance, when the speaker describes her second suicide attempt, the imagery evokes the peacefulness of the sea: the speaker tells the reader she "rocked shut," alluding to the rhythmic, calming waves of the ocean, while the "worms" or maggots that invade a decaying corpse are depicted as "pearls." The speaker also transforms into a "seashell," shedding her skin to become a creature with a hard, outer shell, implying that for her death offers blissful solitude and protection.

For the speaker, skin, which falls away in death, is a symbol that the speaker is still alive. When she is resurrected against her will, the "flesh the grave cave ate" reappears on her. The speaker's disdain for her skin seems to stem in part from the fact that the skin both displays and is the receptacle of the pain and suffering of life. The speaker at one point mentions others "eyeing .. my scars," capturing both how skin is scarred by trauma, but also how skin *displays* that trauma for the world to see. In this way, the speaker's skin subjects her to what she believes is an intolerable invasion of privacy. Death offers protection from that invasion.

When the speaker begins the poem, she reveals that she is currently dead—it can be assumed that she has tried to kill herself. She tells the reader she will be reborn as the woman she was. However, by the end of the poem, the speaker has transformed into a phoenix: "Out of the ash / I rise with my red hair / And I eat men like air." Although this is seemingly a moment of empowerment for the speaker, this turn also conveys the hopelessness the speaker feels about her situation. The phoenix, a mythological creature, is known for its regenerative abilities. Thus, like the speaker, the phoenix dies and is reborn. However, because the speaker has transformed *into* a phoenix at the end of the poem, this could signify that the speaker is stuck in a cycle of dying and being reborn that she can neither escape nor control. In this way, the speaker expresses the intolerability of her life—though, logically, the reader understands that the speaker is not *truly* immortal, the speaker demonstrates that her life is so insufferable that it *feels* as though her life will continue indefinitely, through the exhausting patterns of suicide and being saved and brought back to a life she does not want. This pattern, in turn, also explains why death is so desirable for the speaker: because she feels as though she cannot die, and must suffer forever, death is only solution to end her suffering.

Gender Oppression

"Lady Lazarus," is told from the perspective of a woman in a male-dominated society, and the speaker directly blames her suffering on the men whom she sees as oppressing her. The poem strongly suggests that the men mentioned are the ones—whether loved ones or doctors—who keep bringing the speaker back to life, suggesting how little autonomy women can ever hope to have in a patriarchal world. The poem's metaphors of death and resurrection, then, come to illustrate how society seeks to dominate women's lives and bodies. The implication is that one of the reasons that the speaker wants to die is because, ironically, it's the only way to exercise some semblance of control over her own life—which then makes the fact that she *can't* die all the more agonizing.

Most often, the speaker's oppression takes the form of objectification; society treats the speaker like an object whose purpose is to please others, rather than a complete human being. The speaker even goes so far as to compare herself to a Jewish person in Nazi-occupied Germany. She calls her skin a "Nazi lampshade," her face a "Jew linen." The former is a reference to an urban legend that Nazis made lampshades from the skin of Jewish people murdered in the Holocaust, while this linen refers to the cloth used to wrap the biblical Lazarus in his tomb. Notice also that these are both domestic items—and as such are associated with typical conceptions of femininity. Although invoking the Holocaust is definitely macabre and controversial, this comparison is meant to indicate the extent of the oppression the speaker feels, the degree to which the speaker has come to feel she is seen as a thing rather than as a person.

Later, while addressing her "enemies," the speaker declares: "I am your valuable / The pure gold baby." This metaphor not only reduces the speaker to someone else's "valuable" item, like gold, but also infantilizes her by making this valuable object a "baby." The fact that the speaker's body is so often seemingly put on display for others further suggests how women's bodies are never really their own, but instead used for the benefit/entertainment of other people. The speaker describes her suffering as being a spectacle for the "peanut crunching crowd," which is at once a condemnation of the macabre interest people take in others' pain and more specifically a commentary on how women's pain is particularly commodified; note the sexualized language likening the unraveling of the cloth covering her corpse to a "strip tease." Altogether, it's clear the speaker doesn't feel like she really has much say regarding her own life—and, in her mind, the culprit is the patriarchy.

Throughout the poem, the female speaker expresses particular tension towards several men. The speaker frequently uses [apostrophe](#), directly addressing various figures: God, Lucifer, Doktor (German for "doctor"), and a more general Enemy. She calls them all "Herr," which is German for "sir," indicating that they are all men (and it's also worth noting that Plath's father was of German descent). These men all represent the different kinds of male authority figures in the speaker's life—religious figures, doctors or psychologists, her father—who all work to control her. But the fact that the men referenced span from the prototypically good (God) all the way to the prototypical evil (Lucifer) suggests that these men can also be seen as more generally representing *all* men, or the entire male-dominated society in which she lives. Ironically, the speaker's wish to die might then be interpreted as a desire to escape this world and its oppression—that is, perhaps, to the speaker, death represents a sort of freedom or reclamation of control over her own life and body.

And yet, when she attempts to commit suicide, the speaker keeps being brought back to life! As such, the speaker warns that, when she returns from death, she will "eat men like air." The speaker intends to destroy the men who have forced her to stay alive, and thus will finally be able to die as she wants. The speaker must consume men—and perhaps with them, their power over her—in order to finally do what she wants. Despite the tangible and almost

frightening rage found in this revenge fantasy that ends the poem, though, it never quite pushes past being just a revenge fantasy, and thus seems ultimately not to promise an actual revolution but instead a condemnation of the impossibility of women's liberation in a patriarchal world.

2.5 MAYA ANGELOU'S THE PHENOMENAL WOMAN

Summary of Phenomenal Woman by Maya Angelou

Stanza 1: "Phenomenal Woman" begins with a savage attack on stereotypes. She proudly declares that neither she has an hourglass figure, nor she has a cute face. Her success without essential feminine traits surprises pretty women and they often want to know the secret of her success. She describes her secret saying that it comes from her confidence, the way she stretches her arms, the way she walks, the rhythm of her hips and also the way she smiles. Her entire body is an expression of womanliness. She concludes the first stanza with declaring herself as a 'phenomenal woman'. This phrase is a double-edged sword. The word 'phenomenal' signifies her talismanic physical structure as well as her towering personality.

Stanza 2:

In the second stanza, Maya says that despite her not-so feminine beauty, men used to fall for her, swarm around her like bees. Since she has a body of her own; her glistening smile, movement of the waist, lightness of her feet makes her a champion. Since she knows she is phenomenal, she celebrates what she is and what she has.

Stanza 3:

In the third stanza, she says she remains an enigma to men. Men leave no stone unturned to unravel her mystery but they fail miserably. She indicates to them that her mystery is not obscure but clearly expressed in her body language from the curve to her back, to her smile and rhythm of her bosom. This unresolved mystery, Maya feels, makes her so coveted amongst the men. She says she is a supreme woman, "Phenomenally/ Phenomenal woman/ That's me."

Stanza 4:

In the last stanza, she expects her readers to understand how and why she always walks with her head held high. She tells that she does not need to do anything loud to snatch attention. Rather it is the sound of her heels, the curve in her hair, the palm of her hand making her a 'phenomenal woman'.

Analysis of Phenomenal Woman by Maya

Angelou The poem starts in a conversational fashion where a flock of women, intrigued by poet's popularity amidst male suitors, want to know from her the secret of her success. Despite her strong refusal to fit into beauty paradigm, the poet gets maximum male attention. By her own admission, she is neither cute, nor she has a bottleneck figure. Her physical incongruity makes the questioning women more curious and they have a strong feeling that the poet conceals the secret of her success.

2.6 ALICE WALKER'S SHE

Alice Walker is an American poet and writer. Her first book of poetry was written while she was a senior at Sarah Lawrence. She wrote the critically acclaimed novel *The Color Purple* (1982) for which she won the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. She also wrote *Meridian* and *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* among other works. The collection also contains a scrapbook of poetry compiled when Walker was 15, entitled *Poems of a Childhood Poetess*. Poet, essayist, and novelist Alice Walker was born in 1944, in Eatonton, Georgia, to sharecroppers Willie Lee and Minnie Lou Grant Walker. She earned a BA from Sarah Lawrence College. The author of numerous books, she “is one of the country’s best-selling writers of literary fiction,” according to Renee Tawa in the *Los Angeles Times*. Walker is a feminist and vocal advocate for human rights, and she has earned critical and popular acclaim as a major American novelist and intellectual. Her literary reputation was secured with her Pulitzer Prize-winning third novel, *The Color Purple* (1982), which Steven Spielberg adapted into a popular film. Walker’s numerous poetry collections include *Hard Times Require Furious Dancing: New Poems* (2019), *Taking the Arrow Out of the Heart* (2018), *Absolute Trust in the Goodness of the Earth* (2003), *Her Blue Body Everything We Know: Earthling Poems* (1991), *Horses Make a Landscape Look More Beautiful* (1985), and *Once* (1968). Her many honors include the O. Henry Award, the National Book Award, and fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation, the MacDowell Colony, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Radcliffe Institute.

Upon the release of *The Color Purple*, critics sensed that Walker had created something special. “*The Color Purple* ... could be the kind of popular and literary event that transforms an intense reputation into a national one,” according to Gloria Steinem of *Ms.* Walker “has succeeded,” as Andrea Ford noted in the *Detroit Free Press*, “in creating a jewel of a novel.” Peter S. Prescott presented a similar opinion in a *Newsweek* review: “*The Color Purple* is an American novel of permanent importance, that rare sort of book which (in Norman Mailer’s felicitous phrase) amounts to ‘a diversion in the fields of dread.’”

Jeanne Fox-Alston and Mel Watkins both found the appeal of *The Color Purple* in the synthesis of characters and themes found in Walker’s earlier works, that it brings together the best of the author’s literary production in one volume. Fox-Alston, in Chicago’s *Tribune Books*, remarked, “Celie, the main character in Walker’s third ... novel, *The Color Purple*, is an amalgam of all those women [characters in Walker’s previous books]; she embodies both their desperation and, later, their faith.” Watkins stated in the *New York Times Book Review*, “Her previous books ... have elicited praise for Miss Walker as a lavishly gifted writer. *The Color Purple*, while easily satisfying that claim, brings into sharper focus many of the diverse themes that threaded their way through her past work.”

Walker’s writing reflects her roots in Georgia, where Black vernacular was prominent and the stamp of slavery and oppression were still present. When she was eight, Walker was accidentally shot in the eye by a brother playing with his BB gun. Her parents, who were too poor to afford a car, could not take her to a doctor for several days. By that time, her wound was so bad that she had lost the use of her right eye. This handicap influenced her writer’s voice; she withdrew from others and became a meticulous observer of human relationships and interaction.

An excellent student, Walker was awarded a scholarship to Spelman College in 1961. The civil rights movement attracted her, and she became an activist. In 1963, she decided to

continue her education at Sarah Lawrence College in New York, where she began to work seriously on writing poems, publishing several in a college journal. After graduation, she moved to Mississippi to teach and continue to engage in social activism, and she met and married Melvyn Leventhal, a Jewish civil rights lawyer. The two became the only legally married interracial couple living in Jackson, Mississippi. After their divorce in 1976, Walker's literary output increased.

Walker coined the term “Womanist” to describe her philosophical stance on the issue of gender. As a Womanist, she sees herself as someone who appreciates women's culture and femininity. Her work often reflects this stance, as well as the universality of human experience. Walker's central characters are almost always Black women; Walker, according to Steinem, “comes at universality through the path of an American black woman's experience. ... She speaks the female experience more powerfully for being able to pursue it across boundaries of race and class.” This universality is also noted by Fox-Alston, who remarked that Walker has a “reputation as a provocative writer who writes about blacks in particular, but all humanity in general.”

Walker is deeply invested in revealing the experiences of Black women. Thadious M. Davis, in his *Dictionary of Literary Biography* essay, commented: “Walker writes best of the social and personal drama in the lives of familiar people who struggle for survival of self in hostile environments. She has expressed a special concern with exploring the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties and the triumph of black women.”

Gloria Steinem pointed out that *Meridian* (1976), Walker's second novel, “is often cited as the best novel of the civil rights movement, and is taught as part of some American history as well as literature courses.” In *Everyday Use* (1994), Barbara Christian found the title story—first published in Walker's collection *In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women* (1973)—to be “pivotal” to all of Walker's work in its evocation of Black sisterhood and Black women's heritage of quilting. William Peden, writing in *The American Short Story: Continuity and Change, 1940-1975*, called this same collection “a remarkable book.” David Guy's commentary on *The Color Purple* in the *Washington Post Book World* included this evaluation: “the women [in the novel] are able to extricate themselves from oppression; they leave their men, find useful work to support themselves. ... In *The Color Purple* the role of male domination in the frustration of black women's struggle for independence is clearly the focus.”

Some reviewers criticize Walker's fiction for portraying an overly negative view of Black men. Charles Larson, in his *Detroit News* review of *The Color Purple*, remarked, “I wouldn't go as far as to say that all the male characters [in the novel] are villains, but the truth is fairly close to that.” However, Larson did not feel that this is a major fault in the novel, and he noted that by the end of the novel, “several of [Walker's] masculine characters have reformed.”

This idea of reformation, this sense of hope even in despair, is at the core of Walker's vision. In spite of the brutal effects of sexism and racism suffered by the characters of her short stories and novels, critics note what Art Seidenbaum of the *Los Angeles Times* called Walker's sense of “affirmation ... [that] overcomes her anger.” This is particularly evident in *The Color Purple*, according to several reviewers. Ford, for example, asserted that the author's “polemics on ... political and economic issues finally give way to what can only be described as a joyful celebration of human spirit—exulting, uplifting and eminently universal.” Prescott discovered a similar progression in the novel. He wrote, “[Walker's]

story begins at about the point that most Greek tragedies reserve for the climax, then ... by immeasurable small steps ... works its way toward acceptance, serenity and joy.”

Davis referred to this idea as Walker's “vision of survival” and offered a summary of its significance in Walker's work. “At whatever cost, human beings have the capacity to live in spiritual health and beauty; they may be poor, black, and uneducated, but their inner selves can blossom.” This vision, extended to all humanity, is evident in Walker's collection *Living by the Word: Selected Writings, 1973-1987*. Although “her original interests centered on black women, and especially on the ways they were abused or underrated,” *New York Times Book Review* contributor Noel Perrin believed that “now those interests encompass all creation.” Judith Paterson similarly observed in *Tribune Books* that in *Living by the Word*, “Walker casts her abiding obsession with the oneness of the universe in a question: Do creativity, love and spiritual wholeness still have a chance of winning the human heart amid political forces bent on destroying the universe with poisonous chemicals and nuclear weapons?” Walker explores this question through journal entries and essays that engage with Native Americans, racism in China, a lonely horse, smoking, and response to the criticism leveled against both the novel and the film version of *The Color Purple*. Derrick Bell noted in his *Los Angeles Times Book Review* critique that Walker “uses carefully crafted images that provide a universality to unique events.” The critic further asserted that *Living by the Word* “is not only vintage Alice Walker: passionate, political, personal, and poetic, it also provides a panoramic view of a fine human being saving her soul through good deeds and extraordinary writing.”

Though Walker's fourth novel, *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989) received harsh reviews by critics, novelist J. M. Coetzee, writing in the *New York Times Book Review*, implored the reader to look upon the novel as a “fable of recovered origins, as an exploration of the inner lives of contemporary black Americans as these are penetrated by fabulous stories.” Bernard W. Bell, writing in the *Chicago Tribune*, felt that the novel is a “colorful quilt of many patches,” and that its “stylized lovers, remembrances of things past, bold flights of fantasy and vision of a brave new world of cultural diversity and cosmic harmony challenge the reader's willingness to suspend disbelief.”

For Walker's *Her Blue Body Everything We Know: Earthling Poems, 1965-1990 Complete* (2003), a *Publishers Weekly* reviewer offered high praise, characterizing Walker as “composed, wry, unshaken by adversity,” and suggesting that her “strong, beautiful voice” beckons us “to heal ourselves and the planet.”

Critics celebrated Walker's controversial fifth novel, *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992), about the practice of female genital mutilation in certain African, Asian, and Middle Eastern cultures. Writing in the *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, Tina McElroy Ansa said that taking on such a taboo subject showed Walker's depth and range. The critic also felt that her portrait of the suffering of Tashi—a character from *The Color Purple*—is “stunning.” And Donna Haisty Winchell wrote in her *Dictionary of Literary Biography* essay that this novel is “much more concise, more controlled, and more successful as art” than *The Temple of My Familiar*, and demonstrates an effective blend of “art and activism.”

Walker's concerns about the international issue of female genital mutilation prompted her to further explore the issue, both on film and in the book *Warrior Marks: Female Genital Mutilation and the Sexual Blinding of Women* (1993), written with documentary film director Pratibha Parmar. According to a *Publishers Weekly* contributor, *Warrior Marks* is a “forceful account” of how the two filmed a documentary on the ritual circumcision of African women.

In 1996, Walker published *The Same River Twice: Honoring the Difficult; A Meditation of Life, Spirit, Art, and the Making of the film "The Color Purple," Ten Years Later*. The book focuses mainly on Walker's feelings about, and struggles with, the filming of *The Color Purple*. While having the book transformed into a film by Steven Spielberg was a high point in her life, it was also riddled with difficulties. First, Spielberg rejected Walker's screenplay of the book and implemented one with which Walker was not happy. In addition, the film itself was met with controversy and attacks on Walker's ideas—some people thought she had attacked the character of Black people in general and Black men specifically. Also at the time, Walker's mother was critically ill, while Walker herself was suffering from Lyme disease. Included in the book are fan letters, reviews, and Walker's original version of the script.

Walker's sixth novel, *By the Light of My Father's Smile* (1998), focuses on female sexuality. The main characters are the Robinsons, a husband-and-wife team of anthropologists, and the story is told in flashback. Unable to secure funding for research in Mexico in the 1950s, the husband poses as a minister to study the Mundo, a mixed Black and Native American tribe. The couple brings along their young daughter to this new life in the Sierra Madre. Sexuality is at the heart of the story, though the father reacts violently upon discovering that his daughter has become involved with a Mundo boy. This reaction has repercussions throughout the novel. Again, Walker experiments with points of view, even recounting the action through the eyes of the recently deceased patriarch of the Robinson clan. According to Francine Prose, who reviewed the novel in the *New York Times Book Review*, this novel deals with the "damaging ways in which our puritanical culture suppresses women's sexuality."

In her book *Anything We Love Can Be Saved: A Writer's Activism* (1997), Walker details her own political and social struggle, while in the critically acclaimed short-story collection *The Way Forward Is with a Broken Heart* (2000), she employs fiction in a "quasi-autobiographical reflection" on her own past, including her marriage to a Jewish civil rights lawyer, the birth of her daughter, and the creative life she built after her divorce. For Jeff Guinn, writing for the *Knight Ridder/Tribune News Service*, the 13 stories plus epilogue of this collection "beautifully leavened the universal regrets of middle age with dollops of uplifting philosophy." A contributor for *Publishers Weekly* described the collection as a reflection on the "nature of passion and friendship, pondering the emotional trajectories of lives and loves." This same reviewer found the collection to be "strong ... [and] moving." Adele S. News-Horst, reviewing the book in *World Literature Today*, found that it is "peopled by characters who are refugees, refugees from the war over civil rights, from the 'criminal' Vietnam-American War, and from sexual oppression." News-Horst further commented that the "stories are neither forced nor unnatural, and there is a sense of truth in all of them." And Linda Barrett Osborne, writing in the *New York Times Book Review*, called *The Way Forward* a "touching and provocative collection."

After publishing *The Way Forward*, Walker had, she thought, given up writing, taking time off to study Tibetan Buddhism and explore the Amazon. Fueled by the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, however, she began writing poems. In 2003, she published *Absolute Trust in the Goodness of the Earth*, which includes poems that engage with the attacks on New York and Washington, DC. Guinn described the verse in the new collection as "choppy, with sparse clumps of words presented in odd, brisk rhythms." Such devices resulted, Guinn thought, in occasional "sophisticated thought in simple, accessible form." Short lines in free verse are the skeletons of most of the poems in the collection, many of them dealing with "social and environmental justice, and America's blinding ethnocentrism," as Kelly Norman Ellis remarked in *Black Issues Book Review*. Ellis further praised the poems in the collection as "psalms about the human capacity for great good and ... for unimagined brutality."

Walker's seventh novel, *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart* (2004), is a tale of a successful Black female novelist, Kate, and her search for new meaning as she approaches 60. In a long-time relationship with the artist Yolo, Kate decides to voyage down the Colorado River and then down the Amazon, on trips of self-discovery. Yolo meanwhile goes on his own quest, to Hawaii, and to the woman he once loved. Both Kate and Yolo are changed by their experiences. In *Black Issues Book Review*, Susan McHenry noted that she "started this novel skeptically, fearing a New Age ramble," but found "reading this book a richly rewarding journey." And *Booklist's* Vanessa Bush praised this "dreamlike novel [that] incorporates the political and spiritual consciousness and emotional style for which [Walker] is known and appreciated."