Chapter V

Conclusion

The year of 1993 was a landmark year for African American women writers. Toni Morrison was awarded the coveted Nobel Prize for literature; Rita Dove was officially declared poet Laureate of the United States and Maya Angelou was chosen to recite the celebratory poem “On the Pulse of the Morning” at President Clinton’s Inauguration Day. Twenty years earlier, in 1974, Poets Adrienne Rich, Audre Lord and Alice Walker accepted the National Book Award. This signals the marked end of a long journey of Black women writers who finally won for themselves a place in the American sun.

The most significant poet of the post 50’s is, Alice Walker, internationally acclaimed as a writer of fiction. The poet, novelist, short story writer, critic, and essayist, is essentially an apologist for African American women. The undercurrent of all genres of writings is indicative of her concern for their lives. Probably and most importantly, throughout the collection of her essays, Walker refers to black people as a community and thus consisting of men and women, both equally important. Although she does not hesitate to state that she is primarily concerned with the black woman’s case, Walker proves that she certainly cannot be called separatist. As she puts herself, she is preoccupied with “the survival whole of my life” (ISMG 250). Formulating it less seriously, she says: “Personally, I am not giving up Stevie Wonder and John Lennon, no matter what” (ISMG 279). Such statement reminds the reader of her definition of womanism in which she says a womanist is “(C)omitted to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female” (ISMG xi).
She is obviously greatly influenced by both the Civil Rights Movement and Dr. King. She seems to value both for similar reasons that are moreover also connected to her view on black people as a community. About Civil Rights Movement she says:

If the Civil Rights Movement is “dead” and if it gave us nothing else, it gave us each other forever. It gave some of us breed, some of us shelter, some of us knowledge and pride, all of us comfort. It gave us our children, our husbands, our brothers, our fathers, as men reborn and with a purpose for living. It broke the pattern of black servitude in this country. It shattered the phony “promise” of white soap operas that sucked away so many pitiful lives. It gave us history and men for greater than presidents. It gave us hope for tomorrow. It called us to life. Because we life, it can never die. (ISMG 128-29)

The movement created the sense of community among black people that Walker thinks is so essential. About Dr. King she says:

He gave us back our heritage. He gave us back our homeland; the bones and dust of our ancestral, who may now steep within our caring and our hearing. He gave us the blueness of the Georgian sky in autumn as in summer; the colors of the Southern winter as well as glimpses of the green of vacation – time spring. Those of our relatives we used to invite for a visit we now can ask to stay.... He gave us full time use of our own woods, and restored our memories to those of us who were forced to run away, as realities we might each day enjoy and leave for our children. He gave us continuity of place, without which community is ephemeral. He gave us home. (ISMG 145)
This study of her novels reveals that she is a spokesperson for African American people especially women and her womanist concern sometimes transcends the narrow margins and envelops all creations who suffer owing to discrimination of one sort or another. This study also highlights the views of the South through the wide lens of her characters whose progress is blocked by the insurmountable issues of Racism, Sexism and Poverty. Only a few relevant novels have been chosen for this study and the limitations of this study that study excludes the major portions of her non-fictions work and poetry. Though Alice Walker can be analysed through different lenses this study examines her objectively with major social issues as Racism, Sexism and Poverty.

Walker has intended her works to effect something in the world, like the process of political changing or the envisioning of social transforming. Her forms, themes, imagery, and critiques are marked by her belief in a coherent, yet developing philosophy of life which has some relationship to external reality. Her novels prove to be not merely her fiction but the history of the life and condition of African American people, of whom she is also one. She says in her interview to John O’Brien, “I believe in listening to a person, the sea, the wind, the trees, but especially to young black women whose rocky road I am still travelling” (211). Moreover, her sense of personal identification with black women includes a sense of sharing in their peculiar oppression. Throughout the interview to John O’Brien, Ms. Walker speaks of her own awareness of and experiences with brutality and violence in the lives of black women, many of whom she knows as a girl growing up in, Eatonton, Georgia, some in her own family. The recurrent theme running throughout that interview and in much of her other pieces on women is her belief, “Black women.... are the most oppressed people in the world” (7).
In her *In Search of Our Mother’ Gardens* Alice Walker defines a womanist vis a vis a feminist, underlying the unique stance black women took in response to the trifold oppression of race, gender, and class. Loving the humanity of all people, a womanist is concerned with ‘survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female’. This commitment to the wellbeing of all people reflects womanist global concerns, as the womanist theologian Jacquelyn Grant states, “To speak Black women’s tridimensional reality... is not to speak of Black women’s exclusively, for there is an implied universality, which connects them with others “(217). Accordingly, referencing the literary portrayals of womanist interest in the world’s condition, Alice Walker contends,

I create characters... who are not passive but active in the discovery of what is vital and real in this world. Characters who explore what it would feel like not to be imprisoned by the hatred of women, the loves of violence, and the destructiveness of greed taught to human beings as the “religion” by which they must guide their lives.(ISMG 4)

The marrow of Walker’s works clearly reveals her focus on African American people. This focus may seem a simple one. But to probe the reality of black women’s conditions and the state of the American society, she must focus upon a complexity of vision. In looking at what it means to be a black woman in America, she confronts the vortex of racism, sexism and poverty issues are interrelated. The part of the whole can hardly be separated, as revealed in the discussion presented in the preceding chapters.
Walker’s fictional characters attempt to illuminate invariably one part of this vortex, racism, primarily because of its tremendous oppression, African American women and men have endured. In doing so, these characters have discovered the salient fact that racism is most invidiously expressed in sexist terms and that often the forms used effectively by racist institutions are based on this relationship. The present study has mapped the issues that afflict these characters in their search for wholeness. Their being black as well as female is peculiar impediments, which marginalize them doubly.

The racism, sexism, and poverty co-exist in a traumatic alliance in the life of the black people is vindicated beyond doubt from the discussions presented in the fore-gone chapters. For the African American women, racial discrimination together with gender discrimination proves to be a lethal combination. As a distinct phenomenon, the dual oppressions are found to have existed right from the beginning of human existence. The difference between gender oppression and racial oppression is so thin that at times it is indistinguishable. The black woman’s problem is very often hidden in the larger framework of race. The persistent question asked at any feminist for equal justice is, about the state of the colored women. Therefore, the emergence of a woman’s perspective has become vital for understanding the life of the African American woman as shown in this study.

Racism, as a distinct phenomenon of the American socio-political scenario, is clearly rooted in that period of history wherein the first cargo of Africans was brought as cheap labor onto the American work force. As has been already pointed out, the dispensation of justice on the basis of race is inhuman. Walker showcases
the inhuman acts of discriminations in the lives of Brownfield, Grange Copeland, Celie’s lynched father, and Sofia, Josie, etc., in her novels, The Third Life of Grange Copeland and The Color Purple. What Calvin Hernton says about race is the essence of the experience of Walker’s characters:

Racism is a man-made, man-forced phenomenon [...] may be defined as all of the learned behaviour and learned emotions on the part of a group of people towards another group whose physical characteristics are dissimilar to the formal group; behaviour and emotions that compel one group to conceive of and to treat the other on the basis of its physical characteristics alone, as if it did not belong the human race. (175)

For instance, In The Third Life of Grange Copeland, Ruth very early comprehends the destructive power of racism, she learns that racism is not limited to whites. As a sixth grader, she receives a new world history textbook – new to her but previously used and discarded by students in the all – white school. Inside the cover of the book she finds a draining of “The Tree of the Family of Man”, Which features white People at the top and the label” Scientist” ; at the bottom, after Oriental and American Indians, is the Caricature of a black man as a slave, with a bone through his nose, sitting in front of a pot of boiling water as if he was waiting to cook “a visiting missionary”. Written in the hand of the white student who had the book before are the words “a nigger”. At that moment her teacher, a black woman, accuses her of not paying attention to what are clearly the empty Platitudes that pass for her history lesson; “You’re Just like the rest of them ….
You’ll never be anybody because you don’t pay attention to anything worthwhile!” (TLGC 187). By “them” the teacher clearly means uneducated, lower – class blacks.

Racism, as such, a life-threatening or non-nurturing force exists even today, thus becoming the vortex of all forms of violence that threatens the peaceful existence of humankind. Black writers of both sexes have dealt with this theme extensively either directly or indirectly. Male writers such as Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, and Paul Lawrence Dunbar find in racism a major theme for their novels. Alice Walker’s novels are built on racism, and the injustice it has done towards the African Americans.

Women writers like Nella Larsen, Ann Perty, and Toni Morrison also talk of this basic reality. But the story of a woman’s racial persecutions takes a concentric ramification in the form of child labor, third world countries, sexual discriminations, etc. So, racism, sexism, and poverty are equally loaded in propositions for the women novelists like Alice Walker, in her novels, elaborate upon the mutual impact of sexism and racism and economical depression on African American communities. Her insistence on the validity of her honest experience as well as the experience of other Southern black women, repudiates counter to the popular notion that racism is the only evil that affects black women. Her novels specifically demonstrate the interconnectedness of African American sexism and racism, since they are both based on the notion of dominance and on unnatural hierarchical distinctions.
Walker is certainly conscious about demonstrating the relationship between these oppressions and hence she insists on placing African American people at the centre of her work both as subject and as audience. In portraying the gender issues that exist in African American communities and demonstrating their relationships, she speaks to her community about itself and its fallacies. Her view is an important political one, a breaking of silence which throws the oppressive stance fostered by racism that white people are responsible for all the miseries of African Americans and the latter are not to blame and have no responsibility to themselves, their families, and their institutions. To blame whites for all kinds of sufferings of blacks is the major issue in her novels.

This sense of abnegation is the cause of sufferings for most of her characters. In *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, by tracing the history of the Copeland family through three generations, Walker demonstrates the relationship between the racist sharecropping system and the violence that the men, women, and the children of that family inflict on each other. This novel most emphatically located in the rural South, rather than the Northern urban ghetto, and the characters as Southern peasants rather than Northern lumpen, help her to point out that much of the African American population is still under the yoke of a feudal sharecropping system.

This study of Walker’s novels, though not many in numbers reveal that the struggle which woman characters undergo is based on the documentation of the real predicament of the black women. This is the secret that authenticates the terrible and chilling violence of all her stories. Her novels are about several
generations of African American women whose lives are severely limited by sexual and racial oppressions. First slaves, then sharecroppers, then part of the vast army of the urban poor, their lives were lived out in slow motion, going nowhere, a future not yet within their grasp.

Born to sharecropping parents in Georgia, Walker breaks the taboos such as that of “speaking about sexual abuse within the black community” (160). The women in Alice Walker’s fiction are miserable creatures, mainly the protagonists are presented as uneducated, inarticulate, deprived, abused by their family and usually trapped by circumstances, which they seem unable to control. Celie, the protagonist of the novel The Color Purple represents this type of character. As the novel is written in the form of letters, the very first letter reveals Celie’s confused state of mind because of sexual abuse she endured from the man whom she calls ‘Pa’. As a result of repeated rapes by ‘Pa’ she gets pregnant and as a child of fourteen years, she is unable to understand what is happening to her “And now I feel sick every time I be the one to cook. My mama fuss at me an look at me” (TCP 3). Her innocence as well as powerlessness can be seen by the way she writes to God and wants to know what is wrong with her “May be you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me” (TCP 3). She is the powerless that the only person she can talk to is God, that also write rather than pray. However, traditional religion has distorted the image of God. She conceives God to be a big, old, tall, and graybeard white male who is far removed from her suffering: “he wear white robes, go barefoot… sort of bluish gray eyes. Cool. Big though. White lashes (TCP 201). Such God does not listen to colored folk’s problems because the white mayor never listens to “anything colored say” (TCP
On the bases of racism and sexism, God is associated with the colonizer because he is a white male. The fact that God is a man makes him no different from men who are seen as abusers, for the notion of God is further distorted by Fonso’s warning: She cannot tell about her sexual abuse to any one in her family, not even her mother. Her failure to sign at the end of the letter reveals that she has neither a voice nor an identity.

For the most part, they do not understand the complexity of their life since their limited worlds cannot assist them. Therefore, they are destined to operate haphazardly. They vacillate between the liquor and the Bible, and spend much time in prayers. The distinctive feature of these women is the tremendous quality with which they endure their suffering, like the mule, like Celie, Margaret, Mem, Meridian, Irene, and Wilie Chile etc. Some, like Ruth, are generous, proud, forgiving, and even love men who mistreat them. Their silence and hesitation to protest are the marks of their trust in men, however, they prove to be unworthy. The new women overcome insurmountable odds to change their condition. They are all resilient to a point. All of these qualities of her woman characters, found in her novels, make the essence of her definitions of womanism.

The struggle of black people, especially their women, their claims for their own lives, and the contention that this existential struggle emanates from a deepening of self-knowledge, and love are all the principle issues of Walker’s work. Yet these issues alone are not the essential quality that distinguishes her work, for these characteristics might be said to apply to any number of contemporary black women writers such as Toni Morrison, Paul Marshall, and
June Jordan. Walker’s peculiar sound, and the specific mode through which her deepening of self-knowledge and self-love come, have much to do with her contrariness, her willingness at all turns to challenge the fashionable belief of the day, to re-examine it in the light of her own experiences and of dearly won principles that she has previously challenged and absorbed. There is a sense in which the forbidden in the society is consistently approached by Walker as a possible route to truth. However, at the core of this contrariness is an unwavering honesty about what she sees.

Walker’s affirmation of blackness uses racially specific traits not only to define the form of black racism but also to delineate the black woman. Susan Willis says that “black is the color of the underclass” (126). And all Walker’s women are illiterate and peasants, from Celia in The Color Purple to Ruth’s mother and grandmother in The Third Life of Grange Copeland, and Meridian’s female forbear in Meridian. Bound to the land and their husbands or fathers, won by toil in the fields and the demands of childbearing, these women are the underclass of the underclass.

This is the reason why literacy and education are so crucial to the way Walker depicts the process of liberation. The ability to raise questions or to objectify contradictions is only possible when Celia begins writing her letters. Similarly for Meridian, education offers the means for confronting social and sexual contractions that she, as a black teenage mother, would not have been able to articulate the spread of education, remaining firmly with the proponent of the Civil Rights Movement. Only in Walker, a writer of the Southern black experience,
readers come to understand how psychically important the Civil Rights Movement is, not that it has solved anything can ever be the same. In *Meridian*, the protagonist’s mission is to help discover the shape of her future with active involvement in it. The movement sets a tone of protest against every sort of injuries.

Walker’s novels address anew the Black Nationalism, as an anodyne for her people afflicted with racial and sexual maladies. *Meridian* addresses directly the need for national identity among African Americans. *The Color Purple* retains the positivity of *Meridian* towards national identity but also reproduces the negative, anti-patriarchal, and anti-elitist articulation of African American identity for an aesthetic or symbolic construction of the new national subject. At the forefront of *The Color Purple*, Walker also addresses the problem of representing the complex of racial, sexual, and national issues. Brownfield’s statement, “Mem [...] you know how hard it is to be a black man down here, [...] Mem, baby, the white folks just don’t let nobody feel like doing right [...] What can a man do?” (TLGC 93) clearly shows the racial oppression, and the black man’s helplessness, which no doubt is transmitted on his women in myriad forms of sexual abuses. Sexism and patriarchy define the role of Marilene. Her husband has provided her with all the luxuries of life and she is expected to play the roles of “obedient daughter”, “devoted wife” and “adoring mother” to perfection. But she goes wrong and has an affair which calls upon her the wrath of husband and society. Her husband Henry O’Shay believes that he creates a new identity for her. He wants his wife to become a sign of his prowess. When she breaks away, he kills her and he is forgiven by one and all. Not content with murdering her and her
lover, he turns his wife’s corpse into a mummy to make some fast buck and also for permanent possession reminiscent of the Duke in “My Last Duchess”. Karen F. Stein points out:

He has also shaped his dead wife into yet another stereotype of womanhood: the fallen woman. Browning’s Duke enshrines his murdered wife in a veiled portrait, and in the same manner, O’Shay carts his mummified victim around as a warning to others. (132)

Responding to O’Shay’s action, Byerman observes:

His own grotesque behavior is aided and abetted by that of society. At all levels, it reinforces his belief that she is merely a piece of property to be handled in whatever way pleases him. In sanctioning his definition of marriage and womanhood, in forgiving his crime, and in paying to see the freak show, the social order deifies Marilene. The exhibition itself functions in the same way as a cautionary tale: for both men and women, it demonstrates the permissible limits of female behavior. (147)

Thus in *The Color Purple*, the role of male domination in the frustration of black women’s struggle for independence is clearly the focus. In this novel, Walker’s choice and effective handling of the epistolary style has enabled her to tell a poignant tale of women’s struggle for equality distinguishes Alice Walker in her role as an apologist and chronicler for African American women as a series of movements from women totally victimized by society and by the men in their lives to the growing developing women whose consciousness allows them to have control over their lives.
Walker, in all her novels, explores the limitations placed on women’s definitions of self and their often fruitless battles for physical security and psychological health. Man is a puppet in the hands of fate. It is deaf, blind, and fickle and the helpless man is forced to dance to the ever changing tunes of fate.

Fate of racism is the root cause of all problems of black people including poverty. It is man’s inhumanity to man that makes countless thousands mourn. In America, the incidence of poverty is heaviest among non-whites due to sharecropping system. This is particularly true of the way in which the system of Southern sharecropping destroys Brownfield’s family. Racial and economical oppression in the South make the African American as a destructive force for their family. In *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, Walker elucidates the methods of surviving suffering of the main characters, Grange and Brownfield. Brownfield is physically and psychologically abusive towards his wife and children and even murders his wife Mem due to his masculine power and lack of self – examination. He represents death and destruction and everything that comes in his way wilts: Mem once a “plump” beautiful woman who loved to sow flowers in the garden, slowly decays literally at the hands of Brownfield into a “skinny” and “ugly hag;” the unnamed “albino” baby dies at the hands of Brownfield; his family is destroyed with Brownfield’s murder of Mem; and Brownfield’s entire life is an endless line of death, destruction, and decay. This novel illustrates that there is danger to the black male as well in adopting someone else’s definition of self.
Grange Copeland being poisoned by the dehumanizing effects of the Southern sharecropping system begins to accept that he is somehow less than human. When all men or the whole society talk about him so, he has no reason to resist the animal within him. A man who is denied power over his life finds it easy to disavow the evil he does, even when the target of his abuse is the woman he loves. Walker believes in the inviolability of the human soul, and that belief is at the heart of her first novel. In her afterward to the novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, she writes:

I believe whole heartedly in the necessity of keeping inviolate the one interior space that is given to all. I believe in the soul. Furthermore, I believe it is prompt accountability for one’s thoughts, behavior and actions, that makes it powerful. The white man’s oppression of me never excuse my oppression of you, whether you are man, woman, child, animal or tree, because the self that I prize refuses to be owned by him. or by anyone. (TLGC 318)

This is the lesson Walker wants her black men to learn. In Walker’s novels, the woman characters struggle to get those things that should most logically come first – love, fulfillment as women, and peace of mind. Few of them are totally successful in their search. Only in her later works like *By the Light of My Father’s Smile* Walker creates women richer in life, intangible and more fulfilled according to their own definitions of selfhood.
This study which has attempted to bisect the African American women into the African American and the women, and study some of the issues related to her race and gender separately, finds that the issues are interdependent and they lap-over each other, since both the issues are at core one and the same, and emanate from her struggle to live as a woman in the most unfavorable socio-economic and political condition. Alice Walker’s revelation of the trauma of her woman characters bears the marks of her womanist concerns with relation to their race, gender, and many other aspects of their life.

Alice walker is likely to stir interest and controversy as her career continues. She has aroused strong support and deep antagonism, even among other writers. Many aspects of her work remain to be explored in more traditional critical terms. Further research can be done in Walker’s focus on Civil Rights Movement, her narrative technique, and anthropology.

The true empathy Alice Walker has for the oppressed woman comes through in all her writings, short stories, essays, poems, and novels. Raising an axe, crying out in childbirth or abortion, surrendering to a man who is oblivious to her real name – these are the kinds of images which most prompted critic Carolyn Flower says that Walker has the true gift of revealing the authentic heart of woman in her stories. The strength of Alice Walker’s writings evolves from the authors’ inexorable recognition of her place in history; the sensitivity of her work, from her profound sense of community; its beauty, from her commitment to the future.
Survival, the value of all life, the right to happiness, are increments in an ever expanding philosophy of walker’s fiction and for her these goals can only be imagined as possible, pursued and believed in, and undergo the process of struggle historically, personally, and collectively necessary to make women physically, passionately, spiritually healthy. Further, for Alice walker, the Black men and women must understand each other for themselves and if the unnatural hierarchies of racism, sexism, and economic exploitation are to be eliminated.