CHAPTER-III

CONTOUR OF WOMANIST DYNAMICS IN HER NON-FICTIONAL EXPLORATIONS

With fists as well as hands Alice Walker in *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983), uses the term womanism to refer to African-American feminism or the feminism of colour. “I just like to have words that describe things correctly….I need a word that is organic, that really comes out of the culture, that really expresses the spirit that we see in black women. And it’s just …‘womanish’”(1). Walker defines womanist also as a woman who loves other women sexually or non-sexually, appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility and women’s strength. She says that a womanist

Loves music, loves dance, loves the moon. Loves the spirit, loves love, loves the folk, loves herself regardless. Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender”. A womanist is one who loves herself, her culture and who is committed to survival. Womanism is an empowered form of feminism, just as purple is a bold and empowered version of lavender. (1983:xii)
Walker’s concept of womanism thus stresses the sense of solidarity and sharing, the sense of community that brings about a blossoming of self and society…”I am preoccupied with the spiritual survival, the survival of whole of my people. But beyond that I am committed to exploring the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties and the triumphs of black women”.(31)

I went in search of the secret of what has fed that muzzled and often mutilated, but vibrant, creative spirit that the black woman has inherited and the pops out in wild and unlikely places…(ibidem)

*In Search of Our Mother’s Garden* is a collection of the non-fiction writings of Alice Walker, poet and novelist, from 1965-1983. As collection, the writings gathered here, which includes book reviews, speeches, articles and personal statements, cease to be simply responses by the writer to singular events. Instead, many of the individual essays become tangible pieces of history, artifacts. In this instance, however, the re-arranging of the scattered potsherds and pieces have not been left to the chance of some later archaeologist. The artist has taken it upon herself to gather the remnants of her own personal history and piece them tighter as a living gift, anticipating the needs of the daughters.
The recipe begins with the essay entitled, “Saving the Life that is Your Own: The Importance of Models....”(3). It is commonly accepted that there is a basic human need for models that we can imitate, measure ourselves against, and from whom we inherit our spiritual touchstones. In this first essay, Walker recalls the period in her life during in which she discovered that she could not continue her natural evolution as a writer with the models she had at hand – namely, White, European , and /or male. Walker realized that there were valuable lessons in the tragic struggles of a Vincent Van Gogh, in the impeccable style and empathetic morality of a Fannery O’Connor, and in the beauty and simplicity in the flattering romanticizations of a Jean Toomer. However, these people and others like them could not help her to conquer her special dilemma: how to be a black woman and an artist working under “the oppression of silence”. As Walker discusses these various artists and their considerable influences upon her, the reader becomes painfully aware of the dexterity and mental diplomacy that she needed to employ in the reading and interpreting of their work. There is no way diminishes the quality or importance of the work of these artists, but only points up the void that exists for a black woman seeking herself within their sole example. As Walker states it “I don’t know the exact moment I sat out to explore the works of black woman ....but I found I
was in need of something that only one of them could provide”(9). Clearly it was more than mere curiosity purred by the total absence of black woman writers from her college reading lists; it was necessity which started Walker on a personal search which climaxed in her “discovery” of Zora Neale Hurston.

Hurston, a little known black female anthropologist and writer of fiction who lived from (roughly) 1901-1960, became (by Walker’s admission and frequent mention in her essays) a substantial figure in her evolution as a writer, chronicler, and woman. Hurston filled the void of the sought after and missing model. Walker eventually visited Eatonville, Florida, Hurston’s birthplace, to place a stone on the woman’s unmarked grave- a cornerstone experience chronicled in the article ‘Looking for Zora’. This singular act reveals the purpose of this collection of essays: it is taking a step toward breaking the “curse of silence” that has kept black women isolated from themselves and each other, cut off from the seeds to be gleaned from our artistic history. It is a necessary step backward to self-discovery.

Knowing this allows us to understand the phrase “Our Mothers’ Garden” as Walker intends in the context of this collection- as a symbol for all the unacknowledged but rich artistry, tradition, ritual, and stories handed
down by anonymous or scantly known black women of unmarked graves who, through their creativity were rarely preserved in any formal way, managed to keep alive “a notion of song”. The search for these little known, uncelebrated women provides the central consciousness of this collection. In this first collection of non-fiction, Alice Walker speaks out as black woman, writer, mother and feminist in these thirty six pieces ranging from the personal to the political. The essays touch on her own work as well as that of other writers, accounts of the civil rights of the 1960s and the antinuclear movement of the 1980s and include a vivid courageous memoir of the childhood injury to her eyes.

Walker addresses a broad range of issues: artistic, political, and personal. She recalls the tragedy of growing up in a racist society to suddenly “meet” her elders who, through her adult eyes, had lost their stature- appeared diminished, squashed by the unrelenting society. She recounts her own disappointment in her father and the process of forgiving him which involved understanding that he was only a product of his time. She looks at the women of our childhood, no rose colored glasses to soften their flaws, none needed to recognize their beauty and humanity. These portraits sent me back to the pages of recent history to study the photographs of faces I had forgotten- faces implacable and removed from
the prods and dogs—to try to decipher the source of their calm. But Walker is not stirring at white guilt, but establishing the place and time of which she is the physical and philosophical product. And in the course of these essays, which are portrayed as stories, Walker offers logic for the reclaiming of the South as home. Throughout these pieces, it is clear that Walker decided early on not to settle for the creation of beautiful, non-controversial icons. Instead, she has struggles to evolve a philosophy which would transform the ugly. Out of her writing comes a positive approach to life and art which somewhat clarifies Walker’s ability in her fiction to deal with the most damning side of human nature and social politics and still allow her characters to transcend themselves and their era. It is a philosophy which would allow her, an expatriate of the racist south, to reclaim the land which is hers (and ours) as birth right and creative well spring, retain the spiritual wholeness of the men and women who comprise home, and also permit her to interpret the civil right movement, and what it did or did not accomplish on her own terms.

The title essay, “In Search of Our Mothers’ Garden” (231) forms the apex of the collection. It is the metaphor for all of the pieces before and after it: it is the coming of the age of the artist. Within the essays in this third section, certain elements conjoin just as the mature artist is a
combination of all the shards and scraps of the poverty and richness of her youth. Within the title essay, and throughout the section, Walker explores her relationship with the black women artists whose excellence and creative gifts have been all but lost to us, also exploring their weakness in a meaningful context. Walker also takes a long look at how black women have been defined, outside of such context, in literature.

What does it mean to be a black women and an artist? What did it mean in Hurston’s time, Philis Wheatley’s time? In yours or my mother’s times? There is a need to reach back and reclaim the valuable artistic past that has been hidden from us, or that we have made ourselves blind to. Primarily, it is about attaining vision, becoming able to interpret the work of these artists within the context of their lives, becoming able to recognize the art practiced by women who had not the leisure or finances or indulgence of society to paint their pictures on board canvases or sculpt their idea into stone or metal who owned no museums- except their children- within which preserve their wisdom or their history. Walker encourages all to recognize the importance and endurance of our own mothers artistry-even a thing as natural as the stories she repeated often and with care, the stories that shaped us. We should become able to recognize the creativity that women brought to daily activities without
benefit of audience or accolade. As Walker says: “Perhaps (your mother) was herself a poet—though only her daughter’s name is signed to the poems that we know.”(241)

In her powerful essay “The Same River Twice Honoring the Difficult” (1996), which is an evocative, intriguing book about her life, especially after the success of *The Color Purple*. While Steven Spielberg was making the book into a film for Alice Walker, this critical success was also an extremely difficult time as she became the target of attacks both personal and political. Most Black American men saw the novel as an attack on them and an insulting portrayal of Black men. At the same time her mother suffered a major stroke and Alice Walker also fell ill with the debilitating condition in Lynne disease. In her heartfelt and extremely personal account of this time, Walker describes the experience of watching the film being made as she weathered the controversy surrounding it. It is a graceful and searingly honest view of the way public and private challenges mesh and of the integrity at the heart of Alice’s work.

In “We are the Ones We Are Waiting For, Inner light in the time of darkness” (2007), Alice Walker opens with “It is the worst of times, it is the best of times. Try as I might I cannot find a more appropriate opening for this volume. Terrorist attacks, natural disaster, global warning, ongoing
warfare in Iraq and the Middle East, the future seems bleak, yes in this work”(1). Alice presents a culture of hope. She reasserts the power of the individual in making change happen. Looking at subjects such as sending our children to war, the rich, the poor divide, modern gender roles, women in the military set up, Walker looks towards an optimistic view of the future through a more intuitive understanding of the self and the world around us. Recollections of her personal involvement in civil, and political protests for just causes intensifies her belief of the possibilities to make changes in the world. She says “If you have seen happiness, you know what it looks like. The experience of happiness is something one never forgets” (243). The power of the chant of blessing resonates, designed to grow the soul and change the world:

    One Earth

    One People

    One Love  (218).

In her collection of Earthling poems from 1965 to 1990, entitled *Her Blue Body Everything We Know* (1991), Walker dedicates the work of her poetic inspiration as:
Always to you

Beautiful One

From whom

I have come.

And to whom

I shall happily

Return. (vi)

In the short poems titled African images, Glimpses from a Tiger's Back, conjures up amazing imagery of the African mountains and the wild, as she describes herself:

Beads around

My neck

Mount Kenya away

Over pineapple hills

Kikuyuland' Or the tall warrior standing and at his feet 'only elephant bones'.(1991: 8)
Walker brings out the stark vivid images of Uganda and the fusion of mountains, the valley and the zebras running wild:

Uganda mountains

Black soil

White snow

And in the valley


The sharp contrast of the American from Minnesota who speaks scholarly and ‘harvardly’ of revolution with the men of the Mau Mau tribe, their fists holding

Bits of

Kenya earth (1991: 55)

Her recollections of the South in her poem ‘The name of Home’ bring stirring memories of her childhood injury of her eyes-
All that night

I prayed for eyes to see again

Whose last sight

Had been

A broken bottle

Held negligently

In a racist fist (1991:99)

The poem ends on a note of the need to love and forgive and the richness of Nature and God’s love:

God gives us trees to plant

And hands and eyes to

Love them. (1991:99)

Speaking of the impossible kind of love in her poem ‘Mornings’, she tells of the heartache of her love going away and the ‘cloud and threat of snow’ and wishing
On the morning you woke beside me
Already thinking of going away
The sun did not fill my window as it does most mornings
Instead there was cloud and threat of snow.
How I wish it could always be this way
That on mornings it cannot come itself
The sun might send me you.

(1991::119)
Her vulnerability as a woman as someone who loves and is loved, seeps through most of her poems on love. There is also a sense of resignation and acceptance in her recognition that love is transient.

In “Johann” Walker brings in a tenderness in her portrayal of the German lover:

You are the Golden Boy,

Shiny but bloody

And with the ancient martial tune

Only your heart is out of step-

You love’….

But white I think is the color
Of honest flowers,

And blue is the color

Of the sky. (1991:126 -127)

The collection of poems *Revolutionary Petunias and other Poems* reflect Walker’s delight in being once again in a Southern African American environment and her realization that the sincerest struggle to change the world must start from within oneself. She recounts how she was saved from despair many times by the flowers and the trees she planted and the soothing balm of Nature and Mother Earth. The poems are about Revolutionaries and Lovers and about the loss of compassion, trust and the ability to expand in love. She also acknowledges her ancestors because she realizes that ‘we are not the first to suffer, rebel, fight and die’. The grace with which we embrace life, in spite of the pain, the sorrows, is always a measure of what has gone before’. In her poem “In these dissenting times” she says:

I shall write of the old men I knew

And the young men

I loved
And the gold toothed women

Mighty of arm

Who dragged us all

To church. (1973: 156)

In ‘Women’ she extols the strength of mothers and housewives, who managed their homes and taught their children, despite their biggest drawback:

They were women then

My mamas generation

Husky of voice-stout of

Step....

How they knew what we

Must know

Without knowing a page

Of it

Themselves. (1973: 160)
Her philosophy of life seeps through her poetry, particularly in her two poems, “Expect Nothing” and “Be Nobody’s Darling”. In “Expect Nothing” she advises to live frugally on surprise and become a stranger to the need of pity:

Expect nothing.
Live frugally
On surprise
Become a stranger to the need of you
Or, if compassion be freely
Given out
Take only enough
Stop short of urge to plead
Then purge away the need.
Wish for nothing larger
Than your small heart
Or greater than a star
Time would disappoint
With cares unmoved and cold
Make of it a parka
For your soul.
Discover the reason why
So tiny human giant Exists at all
So scared unwise
But expect nothing
Live frugally
On surprise. (1973:191-192)
The poem ‘Be Nobody’s Darling’ dedicated to Julius Lester, speaks of the necessity to be an individual and not follow the general masses. The strength of contradictions in life can be used as a shield like a shawl to protect oneself and keep the warmth of liberty and individualism. She reiterates one should cast away fear and be not afraid to be alone or give contradictory answers that would surprise people. The poem is typical of the belief that she holds throughout her struggles as a writer, poet and visionary for women:

Be nobody’s darling

Be an out cast

Take the contradictions of your life

And wrap around

You like a shawl,

To parry stones
To keep you warm.

Watch the people succumb

To madness

With ample cheer;

Let them look askance at you

And you askance reply.

Be an outcast;

Be pleased to walk alone

(Uncool)

Or line the crowded

River beds

With other impetuous

Fools.
Make a merry gathering

On the bank

Where thousands perished

For brave hurt words

They said.

Be nobody’s darling

Be an outcast.

Qualified to live

Among your dead. (1973: 193-194 )

The futility of a girl’s life in a man’s world is lamented by Alice in her poem ‘The Girl Who Died -2’ where she describes the agonies that women condemned by men go through though like snakes in the grass they call her ‘sister’. There is venomous recollection amidst the tragedy and the imagery of sexual assaults carried out by the so called ‘brothers’. The hypocrisy that exists within the society where the brothers of men follow the
casket of the dead girl vowing vengeance for their own selfish needs is reflected poignantly by the poet:

No doubt she was a singer

Of naughty verse

And hated judgements

(black and otherwise)

And wove a life

Of stunning contradictions,

Was driven mad

By obvious

Professions

And the word

“sister”

Hissed by snakes

Belly-low,

Poisonous,
In the grass.

Waiting with sex

Or tongue

To strike.

Behold the brothers!

They strut behind

The casket

Wan and sad

And murderous

Thinking whom

to blame

for making this girl

die

alone, lashed
denied into her room.

This girl would not lie;

And was not born

To be “correct”. (HBBEWK Pg 208-209)

In her poem ‘A native person looks up from the Plate’ Alice brings out the fear of indigenous people for their land and resources which are gobbled up by corporate giants. The devouring of lands, and its people, artefacts and weavings, indigenous designs and creations, forest resources and environment faces depletion through such invasions. She creates an imagery of threat and fear and the loss of history and destruction of the traces of the community:

They are eating

Us

To step out of our doors

Is to feel

Their teeth
On our throats.

They are gobbling

Up our

Lands

Our waters

Our weavings

And our artefacts.

They are nibbling

At the noses

Of

Our canoes

And moccasins.
They drink our oil
Like cocktails
And lick down
Our jewelry
Like icicles.
They are siphoning
Our songs.

They are devouring
Us.

We brown, black
Red and yellow
Unruly,
White
Morsels
Creating life
Until we die:

Spread out in the chilling sun

That is

Their plate.

They are eating

Us raw

Without sauce.

Everywhere we have been

We are no more. everywhere we are going

They do not want.

They are eating

Us whole

The gling of their teeth

The light
That beckons
Us to table
Where only they will dine.

They are devouring
Us
Our histories
Our heroes
Our ancestors
And all appetising youngsters
To come.

Where they graze
Among the people
Who create
Who labour
Who live
In beauty
And walk
So lightly
On the earth
There is
Nothing left.

Not even our roots
Reminding us
To bloom.

Now they have wedged
The whole
Of the earth
Between their
Cheeks.

Their wide

Bellies

Crazily clad

In stolen

Goods

Are near

To bursting

With

The fine meal

Gone foul

That is us. (ATGE pg 52-55)

Dead men

Love war
They sit

Astride

The icy bones

Of

Their

Slaughtered horses

Grinning.

They wind

Their

Pacemakers

Especially tight

&

Like napoleon

Favour

Green velvet
Dressing Gowns

On the Battle Field.

They sit in board rooms dreaming of a profit that outlives death.

Dead men Love war
They like to
Anticipate
Receptions
And balls
To which
They will bring
Their loathsome
Daughters
Desolation and decay
They like
To fantasise
About
Their rare vintage
Of blood
To be
Served

And

How much

Company

They are going

To have. (ATGE 97-98)

Violence on women and girls by society, whether black or white is reflected in her poem “The Girl Who Died” and the plaintive cry of the young girl ‘I am not perfect, but still your sister’, and the vengeful action of an unforgiving, frenzied society:

But the mob beat her and kicked her

And shaved her head;

Until she saw exactly

How wrong she was. (1973: 205)

Her collection of poems published in 2003 titled *Absolute Trust in the Goodness of the Earth* are poems of maturity and written in her home on the
central coast of Mexico. The poem 'The Love of Bodies' inspired her after the bombing of 9/11 where she prays:

May she know peace

Eternal

Returning to

Her source

And

That her beauty

Lofty..

……..

I send love and gratitude

That Life

Sent you. (2003: 6)

The fear of corporates invading the good earth, destroying its essence and fertility and a generation of people is reflected as:
They are devouring
Us
Our histories
Our heroes
And all appetizing youngsters
To come. (2003: 54)

In “Until I Was Nearly Fifty” the generosity of giving that comes with growing older is revealed as:

But now
As I approach
Becoming
An elder
I find I want
To give all
That I know
To youth. (2003: 81)
The poem “Dead Men Love War” evokes the terrible imagery of dead men grinning and sitting astride ‘slaughtered horses’. Dressed in green velvet almost like Napoleon himself she pictures them ridiculously dressed on the battlefield. She associates desolation, decay and loathsome daughters with these dead men who love waging war on others and bringing destruction through their greed as a strong protest against war. Walker describes in her poem “Thousands of feet below you” the reality and the futility and horrors of war and bombs and the suffering of children and people who live in these war torn lands facing daily threats of death. The dangers of air drops of bombs which has completely destroyed generations of people in many lands is brought out in this strong poem of protest:

Thousands of feet

Below you

There is

A small boy

Running from

Your bombs.
If he were
To show up at your mother's
On a green
Sea island
Off the coast of
Georgia
He's be invited
In
For dinner.
Now, driven
You have shattered
His bones.

He lies steaming
In the desert
In fifty or sixty
Or maybe

One hundred

Oily, slimy

Bits.

If you survive and return

To your island home

And your mothers

Gracious

Table

Where

The cup

Of loving kindness

Overflows

The brim

(and
From which
No one
In memory
Was ever
Turned)
Gather yourself.
Set a place
For him. (ATGE pg 99-100)

Her criticism of the American policy of waging war on weaker nations is strongly built up in this poem where she says if the boy lived in Georgia he would be invited to dinner instead of being shelled and killed:

He lies steaming in the desert

In fifty or sixty

Or maybe one hundred

Oily, slimy

Bits. (2003:99)
Her belief in womanism strongly emerges again in “To be a Woman”, when she says that being a woman does not mean wearing a shroud or facing death. She strongly states that the Feminine is alive, seething with anger and biding her time for change:

The Feminine

is not

Dead

Nor is she

Sleeping

Angry, yes

Seething, yes

Biding her time;

Yes.

Yes. (2003: 107)

Her poem “Falling Bodies” is an elegy for the dead killed in the September 11, 2001 bombing of the World Trade Centre. She laments the senseless killing and loss of innocent people, who were seen helplessly
leaping holding hands as they jumped to their death from the ‘flaming windows’ and the towers:

To these ones

Leaping holding hands

Holding

Their own

I open

My arms. (2003: 119)

The circle of love that must exist between people no matter which corner or part of the world is reflected as:

Consider: the pilot

and the

Hijacker

Might

Have been

Holding
And an appeal for love and better understanding, and a hope it comes in another lifetime ‘if it does not come in this lifetime is reflected ambitiously as:

And if it does not come

In this lifetime

We may be hopeful

For the next. (2003:121)

Her hatred of war is reiterated in her poem ‘Not Children’, where she says war is not a creative response for any society.

War is no

Creative response

No matter

The ignorant

Provocation

No more
Than taking

A hatchet

To your

Stepfather's

Head is

Not to mention

Your husband's.

It is something

Pathetic

A cowardly

Servant

Too base

Emotions

Too embarrassing

To be
Spread out

Across the

Destitute globe.

The only thing we need

Absolutely

To leave

Behind

Crying

Lonely

In

The

Dust. (ATGE pg 151-152)

Another war poem ‘Why War is never a Good Idea’, in which she describes a picture as poem for children blinded in war:

Though War speaks
Every language

It never knows

What to say

To frogs. (2003: 150)

The futility of war and the destruction of all living creatures and the sorrow in every heart resonate in the poem with images that flow like a series of pictures. ‘War has bad manners, war eats everything’ brings out the monstrous effects of war and is a lesson to small children to learn never to like war or become crazy for war.

Patriotic to the core, Walker in her maturity, seems more peaceful with all those around her when she says in her poem “Patriot”:

Love your country

By loving Americans....

Love us

We are the flag.(2003:189)

The acceptance of age and grey hairs and the wisdom that comes with it is reflected in her poem ‘Some things to enjoy about aging’:
The dignity

Of

Silver:

New light

Around

My head.

Forgetfulness: so much less

To recall!

Talking to myself

Amusing company

For me

And

My dog. (ATGE pg 204)

The humour of Alice springs into a surprising poem on ‘Wrinkles’:

Wrinkles
Invited by life

Have

Entered

This house.

Someone

New

Is living

In my

Face. (ATGE pg. 206)

The poem ‘Life is never over’ brings out the pathos of old age and the slow draining of alert energies and the beginning as she expresses, of the journey of vegetation that comes along with old age:

Life is never

Over

After this one

Begins
The journey

Of

Vegetation

Of being roses

Of being trees.

Only after much

Unhappiness

And many

Bad decisions

So long a time

We need

Hardly

Even think

Of it.

Begins
The life

Of dumb metal

Of being

Glancing

Axes

Whining saws

Rust weary

Shears. (ATGE pg. 207)

Her poetry also reveals Alice Walker’s fascination for Maria Sabina, the Mazatec Indian. Healer, priestess, who inspired her to celebrate her womanhood and strength and the beauty of mother Earth. The memorable words of Maria Sabina begin the introduction to her poems and also sums up Alice Walker’s imagery and vision of womanhood:

Woman who thunders am I, Woman who sounds am I,

Spider woman am I, hummingbird am I,

Eagle woman am I
Whirling woman of the whirlwind am I,

Woman of a sacred enchanted place am I

Woman of the shooting stars am I.(2003:226)

Her essays highlight many issues and persons including Hurston. Hurston, a little known black female anthropologist and writer of fiction who lived from (roughly) 1901-1960, became (by Walker’s admission and frequent mention in her essays) a substantial figure in her evolution as a writer, chronicler, and woman. Hurston filled the void of the sought after and missing model. Walker eventually visited Eatonville, Florida, Hurston’s birthplace, to place a stone on the woman’s unmarked grave- a cornerstone experience chronicled in the article ‘Looking for Zora’. This singular act reveals the purpose of this collection of essays: it is taking a step toward breaking the “curse of silence” that has kept black women isolated from themselves and each other, cut off from the seeds to be gleaned from our artistic history. It is a necessary step backward to self-discovery.

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"Living by the Word: Selected Writings 1973-1987" (1998), is an excellent collection of essays and journal entries. In this work, Walker shows the essential union of her political, spiritual, and artistic "selves." She writes about animal rights and the need to protect animals and their lives, the environment and nature in all its glory. Alice also writes about her family and daughter, her father, the problematic legacy of Joel Chandler Harris, pioneering African-American thinker Benjamin Banneker, vegetarianism, Reggae music legend Bob Marley, her trip to China in 1983 and more. fascinating are her thoughts on the controversies surrounding her masterpiece ‘The Color Purple’. The backlash on the release of her book
and the strong reaction of the community around her, both men and society were lessons Alice never forgot. The book is an example of her passion and insight into life and people and the society around her. She does not hesitate to voice out her opinions and her strong belief in the power of women within themselves.

This collection of recent prose reflects Walker’s belief in the spiritual connections among all peoples and between them and the earth that sustains them. It further examines how this precept, and themes of race, gender, sexuality, and political freedom, illuminate her life and the lives of friends, and ancestors. Entertaining and often stirring, it ranges widely, moving from observations made on trips to, Bali, China and Jamaica to Walker’s views on her connection with San Francisco’s lesbian and gay communities and her valuable insights into the controversies surrounding the filming of The Color Purple.

The ability to speak in different, authoritative voices as fictionists, essayists, reviewers, and culture critics is a mark of particular distinction among contemporary writers of African American origin like Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Gayle Jones, Audre Lorde, and Margaret Walker, to name only a few, are the descendants of black women writers who like Anna Julia Cooper, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, and Zora Neale Hurston wrote
across both genre and gender distinctions. In one of the first books devoted entirely to Alice Walker, Donna Haisty Winchell explores the reciprocity between this important writer’s life and work.

In Alice Walker, Winchell constructs a dialogue in each chapter that weaves together Walker’s essays, poetry, and fiction. For example, chapter one ("Survival, Literal and Literary") uses the autobiographical In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens, to chart Walker’s early personal and artistic development through her close familial ties to her mother Minie Lou Walker and to Zora Hurston, her spiritual "foremother,"

Alice Walker’s second volume of essays, Living By the Word (1988), is also an essential part of the conceptual frame Winchell uses throughout the book to contextualize Walker’s poems, short fiction, and novels. The motif that gives form to Walker’s life and art like a jazz riff that keeps changing form is the search for "wholeness": "Walker speaks of her early writing," Winchell claims, "as a means of survival, an alternative to despair. Over time, though her writing has become not only a means of averting crisis but a means of achieving health" (p.27). What is true for the artist is also true for her art. Although not all of Walker’s fictional characters come through their ordeals "healthy and whole," Winchell stresses that "their struggle for wholeness is the stuff Walker’s fiction world is made of" (28).
Wholeness is, in part, a matter of "resistance," of rebellion against an almost overwhelming array of forces racism, misogyny, cultural and dogmatic religiosity, that can produce despair and self-hatred. Winchell's book constructs a convincing dialogue out of the ways that Walker's life and art are informed by these issues. Wholeness and resistance are empowering ideas in chapters like "The Burden of Responsibility, The Flaw of Unforgiveness: The Third Life of Grange Copeland" (chapter four); "Beautiful, Whole, and Free: You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down" (chapter six); and "Harmony of the Heart and Hearth: The Temple of My Familiar" (chapter nine). The ten comparatively short chapters that make up Winchell's work provide a remarkably incisive, multi-voiced discussion of Walker's life and writings.

Alice has ventured into arenas where no one else had dared to question in most of her works. In 'Warrior Marks', (1993), she along with film maker Pratibha Parmar documented through visual art the horrifying tragedy of female mutilation in Africa to bring the practice to public awareness and put an end to such painful experiences of the girl child and women. Female genital mutilation is still widely practiced in Africa, the Middle East and Asia. Walker, whose 1992 novel 'Possessing the Secret of Joy' explored the life of a genitally mutilated African woman, teamed up
with Indian filmmaker Pratibhato make a documentary film about this abhorrent practice. This forceful account of how they filmed Warrior Marks in Africa in 1992-93 include letters, journal entries, photographs, poems and interviews with victims of female circumcision, their families, women who perform clitoridectomies and activists opposed to the practice. Included is a medical testimony suggesting that female genital mutilation may contribute to the spread of AIDS. This remarkable cross cultural collaboration was also meant to help break the deafening silence surrounding a taboo subject such as genital mutilation in a strong patriarchal society.

Alice Walker opened a painful door: where she brought the issue of female genital mutilation, a practice that affects one hundred million of the world's women, to the attention of the reading public. For many readers, this first encounter with a subject previously unfamiliar to them was shocking and unforgettable. Alice Walker decided early in the process of writing her novel that she had not yet done enough to help stop this age-old practice. She resolved to make a documentary film that would further educate people about the harmful, sometimes deadly process of removing the clitoris - and often the remaining outer genitalia - as a means of maintaining tradition and ensuring a woman's "cleanliness" and fidelity.
This book chronicles their odyssey together. Warrior Marks describes a unique filmmaking journey, from Alice Walker’s first letter to Pratibha Parmar proposing the idea of the film to the many journal entries and observations each of them made along the way. From California to England to Senegal, The Gambia, and Burkina Faso, Warrior Marks follows Walker and Parmar as they interview people who are concerned with and affected by the practice of female genital mutilation. The text includes transcripts of their interviews, three new poems by Alice Walker, and over fifty photographs offering a vivid and poignant portrayal of the people and places they visited. For its insights into the collaborative creative process, as well as its perceptions about the politics of filmmaking, Warrior Marks’ is an extraordinary work. It is also the adventure of two remarkable women who together fulfilled a dream and realised also the dream of Alice and her long battle for women’s issues to be taken seriously and heard.

In Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart, (2005), Alice has created a work that ranks among her finest achievements: the story of a woman’s spiritual adventure that becomes a passage through time, a quest for self, and a collision with love. Kate has always been a wanderer. A well known writer married many times, she has lived a life rich with explorations of the natural world and the human soul. Now, at 57, she leaves her lover, Yolo,
to embark on a new excursion, one that begins on the Colorado River, proceeds through the past, and flows, inexorably, into the future. As Yolo begins his own parallel voyage, Kate encounters celibates and lovers, shamans and snakes, memories of family disaster and marital discord, and emerges at a place where nothing remains but love. Walker dedicates this story to her murdered paternal grandmother, might have become.”

An intense commentary on the human spirit and what can happen when it is neglected, Now is the Time to Open Your Heart asks the reader, among other things, to acknowledge the existence of mother earth and her powerful healing power. This theme of being healed by nature is undoubtedly the predominant theme in the book, yet Walker also touches upon other issues including relationships, the wisdom and the seemingly endless current of violence in the world. She writes that when one witnesses the various that occur on a daily basis somewhere on the earth and how far everyone is from peace, and how they get no nearer the longer they talk, this gives an indication of the problem. She also questions humankind that if one sees a human being, really see them ... how could one kill them? Walker writes and targets a multicultural adult audience, with her message that if you get you mind and body right the rest will follow.
The message of universal peace is one that can be understood by people of all ages. The novel is written in the voice of the third person, except for certain segments in italics where the Mother Earth concept (known in the book as “Grandmother”) speaks in first person. The story follows a woman named Kate Nelson whose existence is changing into something unknown. Past her mid-50s and already married many times, she is a loving mother as well as an extensively published and popular author. Still, something is not quite right with Kate’s life. She is beginning to care less and less about the material world. One day she burns several hundred-dollar bills just to demonstrate to herself that these items were not the God/Goddess of her life. She’s no longer worried about her house and all the things about it that need fixing. In fact, she’s even contemplating selling it. She is unconvinced of the need to do anything further with her life.

So when a recurring dream of a river spurs her to go out and find the real thing she journeys, with several other women, to travel the Colorado River, crossing the Grand Canyon. From the very beginning of the trip, Kate undergoes a literal purging as hidden memories and repressed emotions surface, forcing her to confront them and neutralize their
negativity. Eager to continue her personal evolution, she travels to the Amazon on another discovery of the spiritual side of her life.

In the short story “Kindred Spirits” in Alice Walker’s work of fiction, “The Way Forward Is With a Broken Heart,” the protagonist treasures old hats, stroking their familiar brims, finding endless meanings in their stains, wearing them defiantly. This character’s fixation is a fitting metaphor for Walker’s creation of this new book -- a highly personal work -- because Walker’s themes, characters and message surely are old hat to readers by now. Walker begins the collection with a preface that dedicates the work to “all those who love, and who seek the path instinctively of that which leads us to love, requires us to become intimate with what is foreign, and helps us to grow. The middle-aged women who inhabit the book are all from bad relationships, regretting the mistakes made with their lives and demanding understanding. They’re all attractive, successful, wealthy satisfied, reminiscent of the flawless, heroines of Harlequin romances.

The story “To My Young Husband” is written in the form of a diary and explores events largely true to Walker’s own life: her marriage to a white man, their difficult life in the segregated society of Mississippi, that frowned on their marriage, the birth of their child and their committed struggle for civil rights, that changed the thoughts of Americans. The story
reflects much of the autobiographical events of Walker’s own struggles and life and brings to us the poignancy of trying to be a voice for the voiceless women.’ Kindred Spirits ‘is a tale of resentment among family members and the tensions that the protagonist, who is a writer goes through, when they accuse her of appropriating the family’s collective memories in her stories and writings.

The remaining stories are slice-of-life portraits, a scene of a day as a woman dredges her past, makes peace with her present or babbles on in self-awareness. Most of the stories involve “getting in touch” with a thing from the past. In the story “There Was a River,” Big Sister and Little Sister search for the cabin where their Auntie Putt-Putt once lived, searching for the place they ran away to. They search for the house where their aunt was a slave to her husband, which is in sharp contrast to their present freedom as women of their generation. They find the cabin and then celebrate their liberty. In “The Brotherhood of the Saved” -- a woman takes her elderly female relatives, all wearing giant, floppy Sunday hats, to see “Deep Throat.” Alice’s characters here are very vocal about their women. Domesticity creeps into the story “Orelia and John”, which is about two people who get together after all the mistakes of their lives and find peace with each other. In “Cuddling,” Orelia is infatuated with someone else
and she needs the restorative power of cuddling to win John back into her life. In the next story “Charms,” in oscillating flashbacks, we learn the history of the lives of Orelia and John and that she is able to forgive John for his unfaithfulness, which grows with maturity.

"These are the stories that came to me to be told after the close of a magical marriage to an extraordinary man that ended in a less-than-magical divorce. I found myself unmoored, unmated, ungrounded in a way that challenged everything I'd ever thought about human relationships. Situated squarely in that terrifying paradise called freedom, precipitously out on so many emotional limbs, it was as if I had been born; and in fact I was being reborn as the woman I was to become." So says Pulitzer Prize-winning author Alice Walker about her beautiful new book, in which "one of the best American writers today" gives us superb stories based on rich truths from her own experience. Imbued with Walker's wise philosophy and understanding of people, the spirit, sex and love.

**The Way Forward Is with a Broken Heart** begins with a lyrical, autobiographical story of a marriage set in the violent and volatile Deep South during the early years of the civil rights movement. Walker goes on to imagine stories that grew out of the life following that marriage—a life, she writes, that was "marked by deep sea-
changes and transitions." These provocative stories showcase Walker's hard-won knowledge of love of many kinds and of the relationships that shape our lives, as well as her infectious sense of humor and joy. Filled with wonder at the power of the life force and of the capacity of human beings to move through love and loss and healing to love again.

Walker addresses a broad range of issues: artistic, political, and personal. She recalls the tragedy of growing up in a racist society to suddenly “meet” her elders who, through her adult eyes, had lost their stature- appeared diminished, squashed by the unrelenting society. She recounts her own disappointment in her father and the process of forgiving him which involved understanding that he was only a product of his time. She looks at the women of our childhood, no rose colored glasses to soften their flaws, none needed to recognize their beauty and humanity. These portraits sent me back to the pages of recent history to study the photographs of faces I had forgotten- faces implacable and removed from the prods and dogs – to try to decipher the source of their calm. But Walker is not stirring at white guilt, but establishing the place and time of which she is the physical and philosophical product. And in the course of these essays, which are portrayed as stories, Walker offers logic for the
reclaiming of the South as home. Throughout these pieces, it is clear that Walker decided early on not to settle for the creation of beautiful, non-controversial icons. Instead, she has struggles to evolve a philosophy which would transform the ugly. Out of her writing comes a positive approach to life and art which somewhat clarifies Walker’s ability in her fiction to deal with the most damning side of human nature and social politics and still allow her characters to transcend themselves and their era. It is a philosophy which would allow her, an expatriate of the racist south, to reclaim the land which is hers (and ours) as birth right and the creative well spring which retains the spiritual wholeness of the women who comprise home, and also permit her to interpret the civil right movement, and what it did or did not accomplish on her own terms.

Her recollections of the South in her poem ‘The Name of Home’ bring stirring memories of her childhood injury of her eyes-

All that night

I prayed for eyes to see again

Whose last sight

Had been
A broken bottle

Held negligently

In a racist fist. (99)

The poem ends on a note of the need to love and forgive and the richness of Nature and God’s love which also reminds us of her ecofeminist attitude:

God gives us trees to plant

And hands and eyes to

Love them. (99)

Speaking of the impossible kind of love in her poem ‘Mornings’, she tells of the heartache of her love going away and the ‘cloud and threat of snow’ and wishing: “That on mornings it cannot come itself, the sun might send me you” (119). Her vulnerability as a woman as someone who loves and is loved seeps through most of her poems on love. There is also a sense of resignation and acceptance in her recognition that love is transient. In ‘Johann’, Walker brings in a tenderness in her portrayal of the German lover:

‘You are the Golden Boy,
Shiny but bloody

And with the ancient martial tune

Only your heart is out of step-

You love’…….

But white I think is the color

Of honest flowers,

And blue is the color

Of the sky. (126 -127)

The collection of poems *Revolutionary Petunias and other Poems* reflects Walker’s delight in being once again in a Southern African American environment and her realization that the sincerest struggle to change the world must start from within oneself. She recounts how she was saved from despair many times by the flowers and the trees she planted and the soothing balm of Nature and Mother Earth. The poems are about Revolutionaries and Lovers and about the loss of compassion, trust and the ability to expand in love. She also acknowledges her ancestors because she realizes that ‘we are not the first to suffer, rebel, fight and die. The grace with which we embrace life, in spite of the pain, the sorrows, is
always a measure of what has gone before’. In her poem ‘In these dissenting times’(156), she says:

I shall write of the old men I knew

And the young men

I loved

And the gold toothed women

Mighty of arm

Who dragged us all

To church. (156)

In ‘Women’ she extols the strength of mothers and housewives, who managed their homes and taught their children, despite their biggest drawback:

They were women then

My mamas generation

Husky of voice-stout of

Step
With fists as well as hands....

How they knew what we

Must know

Without knowing a page

Of it

Themselves. (160)

Her philosophy of life seeps through her poetry, particularly in her two poems, ‘Expect Nothing’ and ‘Be Nobody’s Darling’. In ‘Expect Nothing’ she advises to live frugally on surprise and become a stranger to the need of pity:

Take only enough

Stop short of urge to plead

Then purge away the need. (191)

Almost the same kind of philosophy continues in her next poem, ‘Be Nobody’s Darling’:

Be nobody’s darling/ Be an outcast.
Take the contradictions/Of your life/And wrap around

You like a shawl,/To parry stones

To keep you warm. (193)

Violence on women and girls by society, whether black or white is reflected in her poem ‘The Girl Who Died’ and the plaintive cry of the young girl ‘I am not perfect, but still your sister,’ and the vengeful action of an unforgiving, frenzied society:

But the mob beat her and kicked her

And shaved her head;

Until she saw exactly

How wrong she was. (205)

Her writings contain diverse issues relating to women’s predicament, both old and new, and her only crusade is to fight for justice and to sing the songs of suffering endlessly until total woman empowerment is achieved.
References


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