Chapter I

Introduction

A survey of critical scholarship available on the fiction of Alice Walker shows that it has been subjected to a limited range and variety of interpretations. Her critics are sharply and even acrimoniously divided in their opinions about her major concerns, attitudes and achievements as an artist. Though some of her critics have provided illuminating insights into some of her themes such as racism, sexism, black history and traditions and above all the struggle of black woman for a life of wholeness, most of their studies are in the form of reviews and articles. The absence of any major full length study providing a comprehensive and consistent view of all of her novels and short stories has, therefore, resulted in a limited and lop-sided assessment of various aspects of her fiction. The narrowing of focus only on some of the areas of her fictional world has, thus, led her critics, sometimes, to arrive at imbalanced and even misleading conclusions.

One of the examples of such a limited perspective on her works is provided by critics like Lauren Berlant¹ and Calvin Hernton² who tend to force her novels into the framework of their pre-conceived notions and theories. Lauren Berlant, for instance, interprets Meridian and The Color Purple as novels emphasizing the validity of American dream. According to him, "Meridian is Walker's most explicitly
and narrowly 'political novel.'” He feels that Meridian, the protagonist, is impressed by American "nation's self mythification." "To Meridian," therefore, Lauren Berlant observes, "black nationalism must dedicate itself to constructing a political and cultural context in which one might, indeed, enjoy a positive relation to national identity, rather than a negative relation to a race always already marked by its status as a social 'problem.'” Though Berlant does take into account racist and sexist issues as well, he fails to take due note of Walker's strong criticism of the attitude of conformity to concepts and institutions which seek to justify and perpetuate racism.

Certainly, the novel seems to recommend a broad view of social, political and cultural issues of American society; it does so without de-emphasising in any way the importance of black history and culture. Moreover, the novel affirms the values of love, kindness and sympathy transcending all barriers of race, colour and nation. In fact, it is a plea for resistance against all those forces which perpetuate oppression, discrimination and injustice in any form.

A similar limitation seems to characterise Berlant's assessment of The Color Purple also. He declares that "if The Color Purple clearly represents anything, it is the unreliability of 'text' under the historical pressure to interpret, to predict, and to determine the cultural politics of the colonized signifier." Berlant suggests
that *The Color Purple* is a euphoric treatment of the mythic spirit of American capitalism. According to him, Walker's insistence on womanist voice forecloses the possibility of an Afro-American national consciousness. Berlant, it appears, is unable to accept Walker's attempt "to supplant the typically patriarchal concerns of the historical novel...with the scene of 'one woman asking another for her underwear.'"

Calvin Hernton, writing in the same vein, observes that "historically, black narrative literature has been devoted to portraying whites oppressing blacks and the blacks surviving and struggling to overcome that oppression." But Alice Walker distracts attention from the "white-on-black oppression" to "black-on-black oppression" in her *The Color Purple*. The focus on the oppression of the black woman by black man is viewed by critics like Calvin Hernton not only as unnecessary but also as an act of treachery against her race. Walker is, thus, accused of betraying her people by undermining the united front against their white oppressor by presenting the black male as villain. He condemns *The Color Purple* as "divisive to black people." He feels indignant at her for portraying "black men in a 'totally unacceptable' light." He believes with all his might that "it is wrong for Alice Walker to have done what she did. She did exactly what is considered not 'good' for black women to do."

For Hernton, it seems, the only legitimate subject for black
novelists is to deal with the subject of white man's brutalities and the racial conflict. Any deviation from race issue, therefore, is seen by him as a failure of Walker to discharge her responsibility as a black novelist. This tendency of critics like Hernton to assess Walker's novels only in terms of her attitude to the question of racial conflict in America tends to provide a lop-sided view of Walker as a novelist. This only reflects the limitations of their own perspective on her works. These critics, it seems, are unable to view her works objectively and in their totality because of their obsession with the problem of race alone. This also results in their failure to appreciate the wide range and complexity of Walker's concerns and her vision of life. In fact, it is their preoccupation with the question of race which makes it difficult for them to appreciate Walker's courage and honesty evident from the way she has laid bare the realities of the life of black in America. A close and unbiased reading of her novels shows that her portrayals of black men are free from malice and prejudice. She has, it appears, only tried to present a faithful and incisive view of various aspects of her society. She mirrors various ills afflicting her people only with the intentions of exposing their ugly and inhuman aspects and thus to eradicate them. Moreover, her detractors fail to recognise the contribution which Walker makes to further the cause of the blacks by underlining the necessity and importance of black woman's participation in the struggle for freedom from oppression of every kind.
Besides this tendency of interpreting her works in the light of war of races, attempts have also been made to read them from the sexist point of view as well. Almost all of her notable critics have discussed her treatment of the relationships between black man and woman. This has often resulted in sharply divided opinions about her attitude towards the gender issues. A large number of her critics, particularly black males, have accused her of presenting a biased and distorted view of the whole question. Peter S. Prescott, George Slade and Darryl Pinckney, for example, believe that Walker has abused, degraded and even destroyed the black male. Prescott points out that the women in *The Color Purple* have a bond that liberates them from the black male characters. He finds that the black men have been depicted as rude and degrading.

George Stade is even sharper than Prescott in his criticism of Walker when he accuses her of presenting a debasing and dehumanizing picture of black man. Commenting on *The Color Purple*, Stade complains that "it dramatizes, rather the virtues of women and the vices of men." He goes on to assert that for Walker "masculinity is unredeemable; masculinity is radical evil, irreducible, the causeless cause of all that's wrong in the world." He finds that with a few exceptions, Walker's men are "brutal in the flesh because they are impoverished of spirit. They are pitiless when they are not self pitying. They are misogynist and they are pedophobic. They are petty, spiteful, 'hurtful' and treacherous. They are also arrogant,
complacent, lazy, insensitive, incompetent, vain, inartistic, contemptuous of women, but quick to take credit for their work. Above all, they are lechers, mechanical monsters of sexual appetite."\(^{18}\)

Stade, therefore, dismisses the novel as unrealistic a "utopian commune presided over by the heroine and her female lover."\(^{19}\)

Darryl Pinckney's response, too, is not different from that of Prescott and Stade. He feels that Walker is filled with rage against the black male. He concludes that "Walker's cards are always stacked against them (Black men)"\(^{20}\). According to him, "The Black men are seen at a distance—that is, entirely from the point of view of the women."\(^{21}\) Black man, he feels, has not been treated fairly and objectively by Walker. He appears to be especially critical of the writer for depicting violence by men so freely in *The Color Purple*. He observes that "contemporary black women's fiction has always contained scenes of domestic tension and even off hand domestic violence. But in *The Color Purple* this violence is on virtually every page. And through the novel, the color of the villains has changed, from white society to black men."\(^{22}\)

Now the opinions of Prescott, Stade and Pinckney appear to have been characterised by a very limited understanding of Walker's fiction. She has certainly depicted some negative black characters, but she has also created black men who can be termed as positive figures. Even in *The Color Purple*, the characters of Samuel and Adam cannot be described as negative portrayals. The char-
acter of Albert, too, has been shown as a character capable of growth and development. He ultimately emerges as an acceptable companion, free from his earlier brutality, vulgarity and insensitivity. Moreover, the ending of the novel at a positive and affirmative note suggests that Walker has depicted violence in black society without any element of cynicism towards the black male. The criticism of Walker by these critics, in fact, seems to have been provoked by their own failure to accept the realities of black society in America. This imbalance in their assessment of Walker's works is also a result of their tendency to focus on one or the other aspect of her themes and concerns. Their inability to examine all the different characters with varying responses to pressures in their lives has contributed to this lop-sided assessment of her art.

Similar inadequacies and imbalance are noticeable in the interpretation of Walker's works by her female readers. They, too, tend to remain preoccupied with only some of the elements in the thematic design of Walker's fiction. They are often carried away by their feelings of praise for her courage to take up the cause of black women's liberation. Critics such as Mary Helen Washington, E. Kelly, Barbara T. Christian, Betty J. Parker-Smith and Lyndsey Tucker have all subjected her novels to a feminist interpretation. Mary Helen Washington, for example, hails Walker as "an apologist for black women." She describes Walker as a novelist who employs her art in defence of a cause, and the cause is the liberation of black womanhood. Washington suggests that
Walker has powerfully exposed the tendency of men to hold women in bondage and to treat them as mere objects.

Ernece Kelly also expresses similar views about Walker in her discussion of The Color Purple. She in her review of the novel has presented a very interesting analysis of her male characters. Even when she notices some of the positive aspects in Walker's delineation of characters like Samuel, she stresses that the positive traits in them do not appear to be natural and have not been rendered very convincingly in the course of the story. For instance, she observes that "men love too. But they first must struggle through the barriers of culturally transmitted patterns of dominance. Only Samuel, the missionary, is the exception here, but even his ability to love with full knowledge is thwarted because he marries Corrine, who was...so quiet...And she could erase herself, her spirit, with a swiftness that truly startled, when she knew the people around her could not respect it." 29

Kelly's assumptions that Samuel does not have knowledge of true love and that his love is, therefore, without the depths and richness of human passions are not borne out by a close examination of Samuel's character. He loves Corrine deeply, respects her fully, is sensitive to her needs and desires, and suffers immense grief when she dies. Again his attraction for Nettie, his love for her body, mind and soul and his respect for her identity reveal his knowledge of and capacity for love. The fact that these quali-
ties of Samuel's personality escape her notice reveal that her reading of the novel is conditioned by her feminist leanings.

Lindsey Tucker's study is also characterised by similar limitations inherent in an approach based exclusively on a particular theory or ideology. Talking about *The Color Purple* she describes Mr.____ and even Samuel as oppressors of women. According to her, "the text draws attention to the fact that, for Celie, all men are nondifferentiated forces that exercise power over her." Tucker's observation, however, cannot be supported by evidences from the text. For example, Celie is happy to meet Samuel when he returns from Africa. Even Nettie's letters about him speak only about his qualities as a good father, husband, missionary and above all a good man.

Like Kelly and Tucker, Paula Giddings also shows how men in Walker's fiction are responsible for all of the problems of black women. The critic believes that all negative relationships are caused by black males. The analysis of Walker's novel, it seems, is flawed by the tendency to find fault only with Walker's male characters, thus ignoring critical portrayals she has provided of all of her characters—males and females with the strengths and limitations inherent in their attitudes to life. For example, she has not spared even women when she portrays some of them as servile, mindless, passive, escapists and even as blind conformers to traditions and institutions of their own oppression.
A critical examination of the opinions on Walker's treatment of the theme of man-woman relationship shows that most of her critics have tended to take rather extreme positions and have thus failed to arrive at a balanced assessment of her art. Critics like George Stade and Darryl Pinckney have drawn their conclusions without fully appreciating the wide range and variety of Walker's male characters. They have tended to overlook the fact that if she has exposed how black man has wronged his woman and oppressed her through his obsession with sex and violence, she has also shown some of them as kind, understanding, responsible and capable of developing a mature attitude towards life and woman. This will not be unsafe to suggest that this limitation in their criticism is mainly due to their chauvinism as black males. Her female critics, too, are not free from this bias which has led them sometimes to erroneous judgements. Both of these categories of Walker's critics have thus tended to commit errors of over-simplification and generalization about her art. This results in the failure of these critics to appreciate the range and complexity of Walker's characters, her concerns and her commitments to the principles of human equality, freedom and justice, regardless of race and sex.

There is another group of critics who even question Walker's ability to understand fully and render realistically the range and complexity of issues confronting the black in America. Trudier Harris, Paul Gray and James Walcott are only some of the critics who allege Walker of presenting her themes and characters
in an unconvincing manner. Trudier Harris, for instance, feels that "from the beginning of the novel, even as Walker presents Celie's sexual abuse by her step father, there is an element of fantasy in the book." According to her, "Celie becomes the ugly duckling who will eventually be redeemed through suffering. This trait links her to all the heroines of fairy tales from Cinderella to Snow White." Harris concludes that Celie's predicament may be real, but she is forced to deal with it in terms that are antithetical to the reality of her conditions. The critic further asserts that "the fabulistic/fairy tale mold of the novel is ultimately incongruous with and does not serve well to frame its message." What The Color Purple affirms, Harris believes, are "passivity," "silence" and "secrecy" and "saddest of all, the myth of the American Dream." This analysis of The Color Purple appears to be an example of how even perceptive critics like Trudier Harris are, sometimes, carried away by their own strong feelings without taking into account some of the important events and incidents in the novel. For example, Celie's story is distinctly marked by growth from passivity to resistance and from silence to articulation. This change in her personality and responses is fully dramatized during the course of her story. Even when she suffers passively and silently before she meets Shug, the potentials of development in her attitude to life are very much evident in her patience and understanding of her predicament.

James Walcott, too, seems to share Trudier Harris' opinion about
Walker's failure as an artist to present her themes and characters in a realistic manner. Walcott's analysis of *The Temple of My Familiar* is very incisive and he finds it as the "nuttiest novel" he has ever read. He describes it as "many workshops in one." According to him, *The Temple of My Familiar* subordinates fictional interest—character, plot, atmosphere; stuff like that — in order to function as a workshop. The characters, he believes are, "merely mouths at the workshop mikes." He goes on to conclude that *The Temple of My Familiar* does not really get at any junction. Its counter culturalism is too dreamy—floaty to connect with the crackhead immediacies of the times. One of the causes of Walker's failure to create life-like characters and to marshal her ideas and themes into art form, Walcott suggests, is that the novelist assumes the role of "an oracle with a mission."

Paul Gray also feels the same about *The Temple of My Familiar* and observes that "Walker's relentless adherence to her own sociopolitical agenda makes for frequently striking propaganda." He believes that "the cumbersome ideological weight of *The Temple of My Familiar* will lead some, probably many, to praise it as a novel of ideas." But to him, it is "something else entirely and disturbingly, a novel of allegations."

Both of them accuse her of overloading the plots and characters with the weight of ideas and ideologies. They, certainly, have
offered through their analysis some interesting and illuminating insights into the novel but, like a number of Walker's other readers, they seem to ignore Walker's strengths and achievements as an artist. For example, the way Walker has integrated ideas and characters, and has dovetailed different plots into a coherent whole has not received the attention it deserves. This is mainly because most of Walker's critics fail to separate Walker's characters from their creator.

A critical analysis of scholarship on Walker reveals that one of the factors responsible for aberrations in the interpretation and assessment of her works is the inclination of her critics to treat her fiction as a projection of her own life and personality. They tend to confuse the artist with the woman and identify her often with her female protagonist. Even other characters in her fiction are often seen by these critics as mere reflections of the writer's own mind and not as figures existing in their own right. Though this interest in her biography has influenced a large number of critics such as Trudier Harris, Calvin Hernton, Pinckney, James Walcott and Paul Gray, the studies of her works by David Bradley, Philip Royster and Gregory Jaynes can be cited as examples of her critics' excessive preoccupation with the events, incidents and persons in the life of the writer.

David Bradley, for instance, traces Walker's delineation of black men in her fiction to her personal experiences. He expresses his
dismay at Walker's attitude towards the black man particularly the negative portrayal of the black patriarch. He describes it as characterised by "high level of enmity"\textsuperscript{52} towards black male. According to him, this is the direct result of Walker's childhood hatred for her father whom she thought responsible for the misery and poverty of the family. This exclusive concern with Walker's biography has led Bradley to arrive at some of the conclusions which are supported neither by her later observations about her father nor by an analysis of her novels and short stories. Walker's attitude towards her father, in fact, reflects her profound understanding of his predicament. This is evident when she views him as the result of overwhelming forces of oppression and describes him as "a poor man exploited by the rural middle class rich, like millions of peasants the world over."\textsuperscript{53} This clearly indicates that as Walker has grown, she has developed a sympathetic understanding of her father's predicament and suffers from no hatred and ill-will against him.

Again Bradley's interpretation of her black male characters does not seem to be on tenable grounds when he observes that "black men in Walker's fiction...seem capable of goodness only when they become old like Grange Copeland, or paralyzed and feminized like Truman Held."\textsuperscript{54} He goes on to assert that "they are figures of malevolence like Ruth's murderous father Brownfield."\textsuperscript{55} When viewed in the context of the totality of Walker's works, Bradley's
observations again do not appear to be balanced and correct. For example, he seems to ignore characters like Adam, Samuel, Hal, Rafe, Pierre and Ola. He also fails to take cognizance of the fact that there is a large number of black male characters who also change, grow and mature in their attitudes. Grange, Albert, Harpo and Suwelo can be cited as examples of dynamic male characters who move from negative to positive outlook and behaviour. Hence, Bradley's tendency to focus only on Walker's negative male characters and to locate them only in her personal experiences leads him to make certain assertions which are difficult to justify on the basis of the complete body of her works.

Similar limitations seem to characterize Gregory Jaynes' study of Walker's writings when he states that "the word on Walker has always been that the older and more impotent a male character gets, the more sympathetic she sketches him." According to him, this can be seen in characters such as Grange and Mr.____. He asserts that Walker had no positive black role models in her life. This is one of the reasons why there are so many negative black men in The Color Purple. Jaynes cites Alice Walker as saying that "she feels that the men she has drawn in her work, young and old, were drawn truly, and that she has been misunderstood." He concludes that these words of Walker clearly indicate her intentions about black men. Jaynes, like Bradley, does not take into account positive black male characters in Walker's fiction because of his overriding interest in biographical interpretations of her works. Moreover,
some of his observations about Walker's characters seem to be without sufficient textual evidences. For example, she has not drawn all her older characters sympathetically cannot be described as "im-potent".\textsuperscript{58}

The exclusive concern of Bradley and Jaynes with Walker's biography has tended to distract their attention from the writer's attempts to present life and characters realistically and critically. The fact that the representational aspect of her art has not been duly appreciated by these biographical critics is further illustrated by Philip Royster's study of her works in the light of her own childhood experiences. Royster believes that characters in Walker's fiction are "thinly disguised representations of perceptions of herself and her family that began in childhood."\textsuperscript{59} He stresses that "unwittingly she masquerades these perceptions, primarily the fantasies of sexuality and aggression, as the creations of a mature adult awareness."\textsuperscript{60} He views Walker's fantasies of sexuality as projections of her repressed childhood desires and dreams. Royster, thus, identifies Celie with Walker herself and sees the male characters in the novel as projections of their prototypes in her life. Even her depiction of violence, particularly against women, is interpreted by Royster as an expression of her own exposure to it in her society.

Royster's psycho-biographical analysis is certainly interesting and useful; it however remains lop-sided because of his dependence on the limited tools provided by this approach. This explains
his inability to recognise that most of the girls of Celie's age, background and experiences would most probably believe the way she does in the novel. His suggestion that Walker is too much concerned with the themes of wife-battering, incest and rape because of her own traumatic experiences of childhood may sound rather strange to anyone who is familiar with the unspeakable violence black woman has to suffer as an inescapable reality of her life. He, in this way, has not been able to examine Walker's treatment of the realities of life as she perceives them. As a result of this, the range of her themes and the clash of ideas and attitudes depicted on the canvas of her art have remained unexplored and unrecognised.

This brief review of scholarship available on Walker's fiction reveals some of the serious limitations in the interpretation and evaluation of Walker's art. Most of these critics have tended to focus only on one or the other of her works, mainly from her earlier writings. Her later novels—*The Temple of My Familiar* and *Possessing the Secret of Joy*—for instance, are yet to be explored and analysed fully by her readers.

As a result of this absence of in-depth studies of all of her important novels and short stories, her scholars have failed to present a complete and consistent view of Walker as a writer. The survey also shows that most of the studies on Walker have remained confined to an examination of only some of the themes and concerns, neglecting thereby, the comprehensive nature and range of issues, ideas and
attitudes she has dramatized in her fiction. This is evident from the fact that none of her critics has dealt with all the various forms of oppression and how individuals—blacks and whites, men and women, young and old—try to contend with them. Even different dimensions of slavocracy and sexism have not been sufficiently examined. This is largely because almost all of her scholars have approached her works with pre-conceived notions and have tried to force them into the framework of the theories and concepts they have chosen to employ. That is why they appear to have a tendency to take extreme positions, suggestive of some degree of bias in their assessment of Walker's strengths and weaknesses. One of its consequences has been that her critics have arrived at a limited and even distorted assessment of her fiction. The great importance she attaches to the democratic and humanistic system of values has, for instance, been either dismissed as unrealistic or has not been taken due note of. The acrimonious debate on Walker's treatment of black men and women and the issues of class conflict have virtually blinkered their view of Walker's vision of life. They have not been able to appreciate the element of hope and optimism in her affirmation of human potentials for a sensitive, enlightened and courageous resistance to oppression, motivated by broader concerns and values. This analysis of studies on Walker clearly underlines that they are often reductive, lop-sided, biased, limited and even full of gaps.

In order to make a fair assessment of Walker as a novelist, therefore, a detailed study of her themes, concerns, attitudes and
vision of life becomes necessary. This can be done by examining closely not only various situations of oppression, pressures and challenges depicted by Walker in her fiction but also by studying closely the way her characters try to cope with them.

A study of her fiction shows that the world she has portrayed is full of violence, conflicts and tensions of various kinds. She goes even further and provides her reader an insight into the causes and consequences of the situations where oppression is perpetrated on the grounds of race, gender and for the sake of power—political, social and economic. She unfolds the historical, cultural and psychological dimensions of this reality of the life of her people. But her aim like that of any other great artist, goes beyond a simple dramatization of these situations. Her main purpose, in fact, seems to show how men and women, young and old, black and white with varying experiences, capacities and abilities respond to the challenges and pressures they have to contend within their environment. This she does by presenting a very comprehensive picture of her society, particularly the black, using her profound knowledge of human nature and behaviour. She has depicted her characters and the strategies they adopt in the face of pressures so realistically and powerfully not only because of her deep understanding of the historical, social, cultural and psychological aspects of their experiences and behaviour but also because of her personal knowledge of these conditions.

Walker in her own life has known the problems, pressure and
challenges as a black woman. She recalls vividly in her memoirs and interviews how she has grown up in the school of miseries and sufferings often threatening her sense of dignity and identity as an individual. Her account of the ways she responded to these situations, in fact, reveals not only the pattern of her own development as a woman but also lends authenticity and veracity to the dramatization of different responses her characters make to cope with adversities in their life. Walker, for example, remembers clearly her experiences of a life of poverty as a child born in a large family of a sharecropper. The back-breaking work her parents had to do, and the meager food the whole family had to live on gave Walker at an early age an intimate knowledge of the exploitative racist economy. The way it affected her father, who often felt vexed, irritable and got violent, gave her an insight into the psyche of black male, emasculated by the oppressive economic and social set-up of America. They lived in a shack, crowded with eight children, leaving no private space to anyone in the family. Walker, who always yearned for a personal space, felt lonely in the crowded and ugly one-room shack, a feeling deepened further by her awareness that her mother had never wanted her eighth child.

She was only eight when she lost one of her eyes and was left disfigured and ugly by a bullet from the BB gun of one of her brothers. The consciousness of looking ugly possessed and tormented the soul of the child making her feel lonelier and depressed. As a response to this harsh reality of her situation, she tended to have
flights into the world of dreams and fantasies. Unable to accept the fact of her ugliness and disfigurement, she often dreamt of "falling on swords, of putting guns to my heart or head, and of slashing my wrists with a razor." This impulse to escape from aversive situations further manifested itself in her thoughts of committing suicide when she discovered her first pregnancy. She felt sick, lonely and trapped. When all her efforts at finding an abortionist failed, she planned to kill herself.

These experiences provided Walker with a first-hand knowledge of pains and sufferings, fears and frustrations, but also enabled her to look at situations and problems from different perspectives. If she thought of the possibilities of the trap of pregnancy, there was her mother "to whom abortion is a sin." Walker was not "romantic enough to believe in maternal instincts alone as a means of survival." Her mother, on the other hand, believed firmly in the conventional definitions of womanhood based on her role as a mother. Walker's own attitude towards sex was also strikingly different from the sexual morality of women like her own sister. Walker loved her body, "addressed it, pampered it, and led it into acceptable arms." But her sister told her "in forty-five minutes of long distance carefully enunciated language" that she was "a slut." There was yet another kind of response to the problem of her pregnancy. Evincing sympathy and understanding, there were her friends who tried to cheer her up and, thus, touched her
with their kindness and love. This rekindled her impulse of life and she began to feel "the possibility of someone as worthless as myself attaining wisdom." The way her friends stood by her and helped her through her abortion revealed to her the value of friendship and human bonding.

These stressful experiences, exercised a lasting influence on Walker's mind. They enabled her "to really see people and things, to really notice relationships and to learn to be patient enough to care about how they turned out." She also began to understand the crucial nature of relationships between individuals and their circumstances. Her broad perspective and her ability to accept all things human can also be traced to this initiation of Walker into the complexities of human life and nature.

Walker's experiences also initiated her into the knowledge of discrimination in her society based on race, colour and sex. Even as a child, she remembered how in her own family the boys went "unfettered" and the girls were tied to "domestic duty." She also talks about the way her brothers used to intimidate and bully girls like her. Her knowledge of how women were subjugated to men and burdened with duties and responsibilities, resulting in their self-denial, determined her attitude towards the sexist bias in her Afro-American community.

Walker's experiences of her own marriage further revealed to her how different social institutions and conventions try to fetter
the body, mind and soul of a woman, which, she realised, must be resisted in order to live a life of her own. She first married Melvyn Leventhal, a white civil rights lawyer, thus defying the pressures of her own community. She, then, divorced Leventhal and started living with Robert Allen as his friend and companion. She has confronted in her own life hypocrisies of her own people and the undemocratic nature of their customs and institutions.

Like most of the blacks, Walker, too, encountered oppression in her society based on racist and sexist discrimination. This led her to develop a keen interest in and awareness of various issues of her time.

Born in Etonton, Georgia, she observed closely the life of the black in the racist social and political order, condemning them to a life of poverty, discrimination and indignities. She not only learnt about the miseries of her people under the dehumanizing conditions of racism, but also participated actively in their struggle for equality and justice. She joined the Civil Rights Movement and campaigned for voters' registration. She saw people being beaten and arrested for demanding equality with the white. Her involvement in the Civil Rights Movement contributed a great deal to her awareness of race relationships in her society and strengthened her faith in the principle of resistance for democratic values of true equality, freedom, dignity and justice. It was during her participation in the Civil Rights Movement that she realized the necessity of political awareness, solidarity and a struggle for a better
future with hope and confidence. She realized that servitude of blacks had persisted because of their lack of awareness and the resultant failure to struggle as a people for a rightful place in their society. She was impressed by men like Martin Luther King who promised freedom "not a ranch style house and an acre of manicured lawn for every black man, but jail and finally freedom....The courage one day for all families everywhere to walk without shame and unafraid on their own feet." The Civil Rights Movement thus gave to Walker and her people "knowledge and pride," a sense of solidarity and "a purpose for living." It seemed to break the pattern of black servitude and gave them their history, their "heroes, selfless men of courage and strength" and "hope for tomorrow."

Walker's mind and art have been shaped further by her wide range of readings. She read all of the Russian writers she could find in her sophomore year in college. She enjoyed them "as if they were a delicious cake." She read Tolstoi and was deeply influenced especially by his short stories and novels—*The Kreutzer Sonata* and *Resurrection*. They taught her "the importance of diving through politics and social forecasts to dig into the essential spirit of individual persons—because otherwise, characters, no matter what political or current social issue they stand for, will not live." She also read Dostoyevski, "who found his truths, where everyone else seemed afraid to look..."

But the writers who have influenced Walker most are Zora
Neale Hurston, Jean Toomer, Miss Flannery O'Connors, DuBois, Earnest J. Gains, Rilke, Murial Rukeyser and Jean Cooper. She regards Zora Neale Hurston as one of the greatest writers and describes *Mules and Men* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as two of the most important books she has ever read. Walker finds in her a writer who had "immersed herself in her own culture" and "was more like an uncolonized African than she was like her contemporary American blacks, most of whom believed, at least during their formative years, that their blackness was something wrong with them." Zora's racial and cultural pride is evident when she shows to her black readers and audience that they are the "descendants of an inventive, joyous, courageous, and outrageous people." This presentation of the "racial health; a sense of black people as complete, complex, undiminished human beings" is, according to Walker, the most characteristic quality of Zora's work.

She thinks that no other black writer except DuBois has shown the "consistent delight in the beauty and spirit of black people" which distinguishes works of Zora. She declares that Zora's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Jean Toomer's *Cane* are her favourite books. It is Toomer's capability to comprehend the black soul that makes him, according to Walker, "some genius from the South." Both Zora and Toomer were never afraid to let their characters "be themselves." He is different from other black male writers in the sense that "he loves women. He is both feminine and mas-
culine in his perceptions."\textsuperscript{81}

Earnest J. Gains is another black writer Walker read and liked for writing truly about life and people around him. She is influenced by his ability to write "about whites and blacks exactly as he sees them and knows them, instead of writing of one group as a vast malignant lump and of the other as a conglomerate of perfect virtues."\textsuperscript{82} This is the quality which she finds conspicuous by its absence in William Faulkner who believed that whites were "superior morally to blacks; that whites had a duty (which at their convenience they would assume) to 'bring blacks along' politically, since blacks, in Faulkner's opinion were 'not ready' yet to function properly in a democratic society."\textsuperscript{83} But this racist prejudice does not taint the mind of all the white writers. Walker appreciates Flannery O'Connor, a white writer of the South for her "conviction that 'reality' is at best superficial and that the puzzle of humanity is less easy to solve than that of race."\textsuperscript{84} Walker's mind and art have also been influenced by her readings of a large number of poets such as Basho, Shiki, Li Po, Emily Dickinson. But it is the poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks which she has enjoyed and praised most. She believes that if there was ever a born poet it is Brooks: "Her natural way of looking at anything, comes out as a vision, in language that is peculiar to her."\textsuperscript{85} She feels that while reading Brooks her whole spiritual past begins to float around in her throat.

Other writers who have contributed to the growth of Walker
as a writer include Helen Lynd, Rilke, Murial Ruckseyer and Camus. From her reading of Rilke, she came to understand that "even loneliness has a use, and that sadness is positively the wellspring of creativity." Helen Merrel Lynd, according to Walker, was the first person who made philosophy of Camus understandable to her. She showed her, as Walker recalls it how "life and suffering are always teachers." But it was Murial Ruckseyer, who impressed Walker by the "courage of her own life." She taught Walker that "it is possible to live in this world on your own terms."

All of these men and women, with their writings and examples of their personal life, have exercised a great influence on Walker as a writer. They have deepened and widened her knowledge of the world she lives in. This has enabled her to develop an authentic and realistic understanding of the multiplicity and complexity of pressures the individuals have to contend within a society characterized by conflicts, discriminations and oppressions. The experiences of her own life as well as her readings of these great writers and thinkers have further intensified her love of life with all its joys and sorrows, triumphs and failures. Her belief that external forces do not control life absolutely and that human beings can play a major role in determining the quality of their life infuses an element of hope and optimism in her fiction. The knowledge of the relationship between individuals and their environment and the different ways in which they try to cope with the challenges of their cir-
cumstances has made her fiction an image of human life and nature. This is evident from the choice of her themes as well as characters and style in her novels and short stories.

A close analysis of her works reveals that she is committed to "rigorous realism." She very candidly states that she has "strong feelings about history and the need to bring it along." She situates her characters in historical context, exposing them to the drama of their immediate environment. She creates this milieu by reviving their past and also hints at the possibilities of change in times to come. Her characters in this way are confronted with the problems of racism, poverty, dispossession and the resultant social tensions and violence in various forms. But as a woman writer of the twentieth century, she places a special focus on the day to day problems of a woman's real life in her relationship with her father, husband and children, spending most of her time in discharging her domestic duties. The discrimination and oppression a woman, specially a black one, has to face in her own family, community and the larger society appears to be one of the major concerns of Walker in her fiction. She places her characters in situations which in different ways threaten to undermine their sense of self. They often find themselves pitted against forces which seek to deny them even the possibilities of living a life of wholeness with freedom and dignity. But Walker is interested not only in depicting these anti-human forces of discrimination, oppression and injustice per se, but is interested more in examining incisively and dramatizing fully
the different ways and means her characters adopt to confront them. This underlines the necessity of a detailed study of strategies her characters tend to use to cope with the realities of life in order to arrive at a more comprehensive and balanced view of Walker's themes and concerns, her attitudes and vision of life.

The term 'coping strategies' as used for the purposes of this study signifies broadly the way her characters see life, feel and think about it and respond to its challenges. This brings into focus the instincts and impulses, aims and motives which influence the perceptions, decisions and actions of her men and women. This also implies the level of emotional sensitivity, intellectual capacity and the sense of moral responsibility they display in their approach to the issues confronting them. The concept of self, the patterns of relationships her characters develop with people and things around them and their role and place in the scheme of things also reveal some of the important aspects of the manner her characters conduct themselves under pressures.

In her interview with Claudia Tate, Walker states that to her, writing is "about living." Writing permits her "to experience life as any number of strange creations." It allows her to be more than she is and "project other ways of seeing." This enables her to present a wide range of perspectives men and women can adopt in dealing with difficult and testing situations. This is attested by the fact that there is a large variety of characters in her novels
and short stories who emerge as powerfully portrayed individuals with their distinct personalities. All of them have been placed by their maker in challenging circumstances which bring into play the dominant features of their attitudes with their strengths and weaknesses. Though they respond to their conditions of life in their own different ways, yet there appears to be some points of similarity in their responses on the basis of which they can be divided broadly in four main categories.

An examination of her fiction shows that a number of her characters tend to survive by submitting themselves passively to conditions of oppression, degradation and injustice in their lives. They suffer silently violence done to their bodies, minds and souls in the racist and sexist structures of their society. The long history of their dehumanizing experiences seems to have reduced their existence to the level no better than that of beasts. They appear to lack not only intellectual capacity to understand the issues before them but also the will and strength to resist forces of their oppression and exploitation. They tend to benumb themselves to the pains of their slave like existence and stumble through it in a rather hopeless and helpless manner. They do not seem to be in control of their lives and are treated by their oppressors as mere objects. They are just like shadows unable even to think of the possibilities of a better human life of freedom and dignity. Incapable of sufficient articulation and of participation in life, they fail to develop meaningful and satisfying social relationships. Though most of such charac-
ters are minor figures in Walker's novels, their role appears to be very important. They not only reveal the consequences of oppression on the minds of helpless victims, but also hint at some of the factors responsible for the perpetuation of the forces of degradation and exploitation. Walker's insights into the historical, social and psychological aspects of the experiences of the black, particularly black women, become evident from her treatment of these characters and their responses to their conditions of life. They, on the one hand, reveal Walker's deep human sympathies with the poor, the dispossessed and the dehumanized, and on the other, indicate clearly her disapproval of the attitude of servile and passive resignation to the forces responsible for their miseries. This is evident from the way she describes the helpless, hopeless and pathetic nature of the life of plantation workers at Shipley's farm in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*. They cannot even look into the eyes of Shipley, their white master and become reduced to a kind of cypher in his presence. Grange, too, initially tends to become like a stone or a bland mask at the sight of Shipley. It is only when Grange grows out of this strategy of numbness and develops a greater sensitivity, becomes aware of complex realities around him and learns to respond to them with a sense of responsibility that he grows to the stature of a protagonist.

The intense battle Walker's fiction presents between individuals and their environment, their dreams and their frustrations, their desires to gain control of life and their loss of it appears very gripping
and realistic when she portrays those of her characters who either seek to escape or tend to indulge in acts of aggression as a response to the aversive conditions of their existence. She shows how her men and women, possessing some degree of sensitivity and intelligence, tend to sink into states of frustration and despair, losing their sense of self-worth and confidence when their hopes and expectations for a better and happier life are shattered by forces of realities around them. Unable to withstand the pressures and pains of failure, they often seek comfort by their flights into a realm of dreams and fantasies. Their failures to achieve fulfilment through acts of creativity leads them to seek it in the world of make-belief. This is only an attempt of these frustrated and disappointed people to compensate in fantasies for what they fail to achieve in their real life. Though several of her characters can be seen indulging in day dreams, the example of the old woman in "The Welcome Table" illustrates well the features of this strategy of escape.

Another form of escape some of her characters resort to is noticeable in the behavioural patterns of her characters like Margaret and Josie in The Third Life of Grange Copeland. These women when disappointed and deserted by men, turn to promiscuity in search of happiness and fulfilment. The novel shows that escape into mere sex fails to solve any of their problems. On the contrary, this only leads them deeper into frustration and misery. Unable to face the void and the feeling of guilt in her life, Margaret ultimately commits suicide. Josie, too, ends up as a sick and abject figure.
Aggression is another form of response many of Walker's characters seem to adopt in the face of failures. This, in fact, is used as a strategy, sometimes by her characters to escape from the sense of responsibility for their own actions and their consequences. Her fiction reveals that those of her characters who have a negative view of themselves and their world often tend to indulge in a behaviour of violence. It appears from the study of her works that people with low self-esteem and who are unable to think rationally have a greater tendency of aggressing against others. Walker's world, in fact, is full of violence of almost every kind. This provides her reader insights into various forms, causes and consequences of aggression. Her characters like Brownfield can be cited as classic examples of men using aggression as a strategy to cope with pressures, both external and internal in their lives.

Besides trying to survive by submitting passively to oppression or by adopting the strategy of escape and aggression in the face of failures and frustration, the response of conformity is another way often used by her characters to find answers to their personal, social and cultural problems and pressures. Her characters who tend to conform to some external authority often appear to be deficient in self confidence and esteem. They tend to depend on customs and traditions, ideas and concepts, theories and institutions for strength and guidance, evincing a failure to think critically and act independently. This reliance for strength and ideas on sources outside themselves renders them to mere objects not in full possession
of themselves. They appear to lack an adequate sense of responsibility for taking decisions and actions. A study of this pattern of behaviour further reveals that people adopting it are often too innocent, naive and ignorant to understand fully the complexities of the issues before them. Sufficient power of will, courage and determination, guided by a clear vision, so necessary for struggle against conventionalized and institutionalized form of oppression, exploitation and injustice, also seems to be absent in such cases. Though a number of Walker's characters adopt this strategy of facing challenges by conforming to some outside code of thought and conduct, the names of Mrs. Hill in *Meridian* and Tashi in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* offer very illuminating studies in this kind of response to life. These members may seem to have some feeling of being in consonance with their environment. Though it lessens some of their difficulties and problems, it fails to improve in real terms their lot. Walker's treatment of such characters and their attitude of conformity suggest that she rejects this approach in favour of an enlightened resistance to the forces which seek to control and manipulate them.

The strategy of resistance to oppression and injustice motivated by the imperatives of living a life of wholeness is often adopted by a number of Walker's characters especially by her protagonists. Equipped with acute sensitivity and sharp intelligence, these men and women appear to be capable of understanding critically the intricacies of the circumstances they have to grapple with. Their
capacity to bear the pressures of their situations without compromising their essential humanity distinguishes them from other characters in the world of Walker's fiction. They display a remarkable ability to grow and change through their exposure to experiences of life. Because of their participation in the larger life around them and their commitment to improve it and make it more harmonious, they emerge as agents of transformation in the life of others as well. This approach to life based on humanistic set of values has been depicted by Walker as a viable response to the crises besetting our world today. This suggests that Walker is primarily a writer of life and hope, affirming her faith in the possibilities of change, even in the face of dehumanizing forces at work in human societies.

This brief analysis of various strategies her characters adopt to cope with the pressures and challenges of life shows that Walker is a writer who depicts the universal struggle, through the specific examples of the black, for equality, freedom, justice and above all, for a life of wholeness and human dignity. She emerges as a writer of the oppressed who provides insights into various forms of oppression, their causes and consequences. It also emerges from this look into her fiction that an in-depth and detailed study of this theme can enable her reader to appreciate better her view of the world today as well as her vision of life. This can also help her scholars in rectifying some of the imbalances and distortions which seem to characterize a large body of criticism available on
her works. We can also gain new insights into her art of characteriza-
tion, her treatment of the most controversial issues in an artistic
manner and her humanistic approach to life if works are examined
with a special focus on the coping strategies of her characters.

In view of these interesting and rewarding possibilities of arriving
at a better understanding of Walker's mind and art an attempt will
be made here to study this theme in detail.

This study will be divided into six parts, including the first
chapter of introduction and the last one of conclusion. The second
chapter will be devoted to an analysis of the strategy of passive
submission. The strategy of escape and aggression will be discussed
in chapter three followed by an analysis of the strategy of conformity
in chapter four. Chapter five will be devoted to an examination
of the strategy of humanism in her fiction. It is hoped that the
study of coping strategy in this order will enable us to arrive at
a more comprehensive and balanced critical perspective on Walker's
fiction.
NOTES

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