Chapter I

Introduction

Alice Walker (1944-) is representative figure of African American women. Walker’s writings ever since her pronouncement on women have been considered as the representative voice of the people in America, and everywhere, where they are discriminated for being born women, black, poor, or African. The black woman is a hybrid personality combining in her an African ancestry and an American contemporaneousness. Despite the fact that many centuries have elapsed since her transplantation to America, it is her black ancestry, which is more often remembered. The society too tends to forget that she is a part of America, the home of democracy that assures all its citizens Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity. This peculiar oppression that sets her off the other minorities settled in America, matches another grievous discrimination namely, sex, within her own community in particular, and patriarchy in general.

Adversity brow beats the weakness of the black people but winks at the power of the whites. Blacks in American society can be described as endangered animals caught between cruel hands of racism, sexism, poverty, unemployment and heap of other problems. Unlike whites who consider them living as their birthright, blacks have to fight to achieve it. Historically, African-Americans were brought to the U.S.A., in chain. The first cargo of slaves brought in shackles, arrived in America in 1916 at Jamestown, Virginia. After bringing them to the shore of the U.S.A., they were sold on the auction block as commodities, and work horses. After their sale, America, the Promised Land, became a great prison and an
octopus of exploitation for them. During slavery, the black man was separated from his family, forced to do menial work, denied education and made to be an impotent witness to his wife’s violation. He had to suffer all kinds of ill-treatment at the hands of white man. As blacks, they were forced to endure the horrors of slavery; as a worker, they were the object of continuous exploitation occupying the lowest place on the wage scale, and confined to the most filthy and uncreative jobs; as a black woman, her physical image is deformed, and she became a target of the white’s lust; as a slave and also a mother, she is forced to see her children torn from her breast and sold on the auction block into slavery. She suffers the worst, when she is forced to leave her small kids unattended at home, while she attends to the offsprings of the white women.

In spite of their gratifying white’s lust, they were considered as the exotic creatures deprived of their womanhood as well as humanity. Any attempt to treat them as human beings was dealt with brutally. They were beaten, lynched, and burnt alive. In addition to multifarious subservient roles, the black woman slaves served as breeding animals to procreate more slaves. It may be said that slavery is nasty business and also one of the oldest institutions of western civilization. African-Americans were considered fit for nothing but slavery because they were only allowed to be slaves.

American history reveals the travails of African slaves who lived in the alien nation like America and Europe. They were employed at various estates or plantations in groups. They were denied equal status and opportunities and were treated as animals. In the end, they felt wounded in body spirit.
In the absence of sustained and universal advocacy for freedom, redemption came very slowly to the slaves. Democracy and freedom were illusions before they could be aware of and fight for their own right. Mutiny and rebellion became aftermath of long periods of oppression. Even as they are oppressed people of the globe moved into years of freedom, in America, the black race was gained and the slow spread of education roused the black to demand and wrest battle for the betterment of life, emancipation is the process, the means, and not an end.

African American writing has its roots deep in the historical circumstances of slavery. In fact, whether born in slavery or not, most major writers of African American literature before World War I launched their literary careers via some form of the slave narrative. The shackles of physical and spiritual bondage brought forth anguished chronicles of the psychological trauma of enslavement whose primary purpose was to expose the truths and horrors of American slavery in order to speed along its abolition. In fact, African American literature can be described as a documentation of the multi-faceted nature of oppression. Protesting against the commonly accepted sub-human status of black people and the idea of the Old Negro as servile, docile and puerile, much of the literature of the period of enslavement was an assertion of the humanity of the blacks.

In contrast to the cruelty, ignorance and callousness of the pre-Civil War South, these narratives attempted at restoring the individual dignity and personal self-worth of the blacks. They used many of the elements of the oral and folk tradition such as the “trickster” tales popular in folklore, celebrating the power of wit in the face of oppression. Another important influence was the “spirituals” with
their profound expression of suffering and yearning for freedom. Reflecting the abiding forces of racism and discrimination, these traditions came to play a vital role, helping to forge community ties and establish a sense of identity out of which a distinctively black fiction emerged. These slave narratives followed a standardized form of autobiography in which personal memory played an important part. Nandita Sinha asserts that “the narrator portrayed slavery as a condition of extreme physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual deprivation, a kind of hell on earth” (21). This led to the narrator’s decision to escape, precipitated by some sort of personal crisis, such as the loss of a loved one. Followed the arduous quest for freedom and the attainment of which was signaled by a renaming, which symbolized the rebirth of an individual. Most of these narratives carried the subtitle “Written by Himself or Herself”, not only to support the claims of truth but also to assert the capabilities and humanity of these slaves, whose illiteracy was often considered a badge of their inferiority.

Important novels during this period were William Wells Brown’s Clotel (1853), the first novel written by an African American, Harriet Wilson’s Our Nig: or Sketches from the Life of a Free Black in a Two-Storey White House, North (1859), the first novel written by an African American woman, and Harriet Jacobs’s Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl Written By Herself (1861) published under the name of Linda Brent. Jacob was the first African American female slave to author her own narrative. Her autobiography showed how sexual exploitation made slavery especially oppressive for black women. Defiance and flight were important themes in these realistic portrayals of enslaved people. But these were accompanied by a desire for literacy as a part of the demand for freedom and
human rights and a stand against the violence perpetrated against black people. Thus escape for the body and freedom for the soul went together. The importance of this tradition for writers like Alice Walker can hardly be overemphasized.

The 1863 Emancipation Proclamation brought a little change in the social status of the newly freed blacks. The black writer found himself forced to conform to social conventions and European literary models that declared white society as just and humane and in the case of black women writers, a literary tradition grounded in the piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity of their white counterparts. Black women joined in the movement for equal rights for women and for civil rights for all African Americans and their activism resulted in the formation of the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) in 1896. However, much of their prolific writing went unnoticed and has been resurrected only in recent times.

Important writers of this century include Charles Waddell Chesnutt’s *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900), James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), and W.E.B.DuBois’s *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), and the poet Paul Laurence Dunbar. These writers chart the frustrations, inner turmoil and sense of ‘*doubleness*’ of a newly emancipated people even as they celebrate their resilience, industry and ingenuity.

African American literature still lacked a clearly definable group of creative writers whose writings would reflect a broad range of African American life. In fact, Hurston’s term “*niggerati*” for the Black “*literati*” intelligentsia of that period reveals her sense of the ambiguous status of Black literature. This gap was
filled with the renaissance in African American letters which came to be known as the Harlem Renaissance. The term refers to the burgeoning of writing about race and identity and the African American’s place in the artistic, social and cultural life in America during the early 1920s and 1930s. Harlem occupied a special place in the African American imagination in the early twentieth century owing to its status as a black community in which decent housing was affordable, where employment and social opportunities for black residents were abundant in comparison to the South, and as a centre of many important black institutions.

When in 1925, Alain Locke wrote “The New Negro” which appeared in an issue of The Survey Graphic dedicated to Harlem and which became the Harlem Renaissance’s founding document, he argued in effect for the elevation of black elite of artists, intellectuals and literati, whose cultural achievements should be seen as on par with those of the white dominant culture. The new Negro, according to Locke, will no longer accept being treated as one apart from the mainstream of American life. He is the man who has been transformed from a dependent ward to a self-reliant, self-respecting citizen of the democracy. The new Negro is intellectually dynamic and quite literally on the move, migrating not just to escape the South, but rather to embrace the new freedom that awaits him in the North. The new Negro is symbolic of an awakened racial pride fostered not only by his American heritage, but also by his African roots in a race of warriors and kings. Locke’s prediction that out of this new consciousness would come a blossoming of the arts, with an emphasis on craftsmanship and new forms of expression, was fulfilled in the 1920s, the decade of the Harlem Renaissance. It was a time of reclamation of the African heritage and celebration of the folk roots of African
culture, an age of exceptional black writers, male and female—Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer, Countee Cullen, Clude McKay and Jessie Fauset, Nella Larson and Zora Neale Hurston, whose novel *Their Eyes were Watching God* (1937), reclaimed in the 1970s as a black feminist text, was an important influence on Alice Walker’s writings.

The Great Depression of 1929 ushered in despair and misery for Americas in general. The bitterness engendered by economic deprivation and social alienation and the pain of existing in a world that would deny one’s existence become themes in works of writers like Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952), Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1940), James Baldwin’s *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953) etc. Many of the writers began their writing careers as journalists and they travelled round the country to document what they understood to be the final crisis of capitalism and recorded the ravages of the depression in the lives of working people. They witnessed violence and acute poverty. Hence, the documentary realism of their style and the use of language is an instrument in the struggle for social change.

Throughout the 1950s and the early 1960s, African American authors perfected their craft. The Civil Rights Movement that had emerged in the 1960s to overturn the color bar and to lobby for equal rights legislation for all was in full swing, and women became active on their own behalf, as they chafed at being sidelined by a largely male-dominated movement. On the one hand, they were being offered political images of autonomy, equality and community. On the other hand, they were being ignored or mistreated. This was especially true for Black
women, for whom the movement offered little. Black women were silenced not only by the oppressive assumptions of white women and white men, but also very powerfully by the sexism of Black men.

The movement, which was actually several different movements for black liberation-the Civil Rights Movement, Black Nationalism, the Black Panthers, the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, all grouped together as the Black Liberation Movement-though ostensibly for the liberation of the male. A strong sexist bias showed utter disregard for the humanity and equality of black women. Freedom was equated with manhood and the freedom of blacks with the redemption of black masculinity. These assumptions disregarded the human need for integrity and liberty felt by women as well. At the same time, the women’s liberation movements of the 1970s seemed to say nothing to Black women, because they operated within discourses which separated sex from race and from class and were established by white women for whom race was invisible as a structure of sexist oppression. The relatively privileged socio-economic position of white women liberationists, as well as their tendency to universalize their own condition had alienated many Black women. They distrusted it as a movement for white self-advancement.

In 1973, the National Black Feminist Organization was born which help to restore voice and identity to the black women. Black feminist writing provides an incisive critical perspective on sexual political issues that affect Black women, for example, the issue of sexual violence. It generally depicts the significance of Black women’s relationships with each other as a primary source of support. Black feminist writing may be classified as such because the author identifies herself as a
feminist and has demonstrated commitment to women’s issues and related political concerns. An openness in discussing Lesbian subject matter is perhaps the most obvious earmark of Black feminist writing.

With Black women refusing to be silenced, they raised their voices in some of the mostly fiery writing of the era. Their struggle was aided by the writings and work of progressive black artists who focused on destroying the myths and images which had crippled and degraded black people and the creation of new myths and images that would liberate and empower them. This was the ideological basis of the Black Aesthetic or Black Arts Movement. Their works reflect the rise of a new revolutionary consciousness and militant spirit which assessed the values and standards of the contemporary social order and rejected whatever militated against a wholesome self-definition. The new writers also promoted a revival of interest in, and a commitment to, the African American folk heritage and the African past.

The decade of the 70s represented another renaissance in black women’s writing. The issues that were addressed included gender, sexism, black womanhood and black female identity, mother-daughter relationships, sisterhood, sexual orientation, black heterosexism, domestic violence, family, community and culture. The writers insisted that a fully integrated self is grounded in cultural, communal and ancestral truths. Poets such as Nikki Giovanni, Audre Lorde, Sonia Sanchez, and novelists like Toni Morrison, Toni Cade Bambara, Maya Angelou, Alice Walker, Jamaica Kincaid, Gayl Jones, and Gloria Naylor created a body of literature that has been canonized and accepted as part of university curricula. Moreover, as Dickson-Carr argues, since 1970:
African American women authors have become dominant forces in creating and contributing to the larger tradition after many decades of being virtually silenced by outright neglect from publishers who considered them irrelevant. As with so much literature by and about women, that silence has been broken, giving to the infinite complexities of African American women’s lives, including women’s roles as leaders, creators of culture, mothers, lovers, among many other. (2)

Octavia Butler becomes a successful science fiction author and Lucille Clifton, Virginia Hamilton, Rosa Guy and June Jordan are popular writers of children’s or young-adult fiction. Other signals of this renewed interest in and success of black women writers are the fact that Rita Dove is made Poet Laureate of the United States twice and that it is Maya Angelou who reads poetry at the inauguration of Bill Clinton as president in 1993. All these factors have lead critics to speak of a New or Second Renaissance and a “New Black Aesthetic” in which female authors take up a special place. As Bell says:

Based on their commercial and critical success on best-seller lists, in literary awards, in canon reformation in new anthologies, and in college classrooms across the nation, critical and poetic neo-realism as well as modern fabulation in novels by primarily black women became the dominant African American aesthetic of the late 1980s. (256)
Many of them, like Alice Walker and June Jordan, prove to be successful essayists on several subjects. In addition, as Dickson-Carr further argues, the time is characterized by the “rapid inroads that both African American women and men are making into the academy” (19). This has not only implied that attention is drawn to contemporary works by black authors, but also and possibly more importantly, that the work of previously ignored or denied authors is recovered “in order to create a stronger, more complex black identity.” (20)

Race and gender is an important aspect of a black woman’s identity. Many black female scholars have pointed out that although it is certainly true that black people are faced with racism as a community, black women are faced with sexism not only from outside, but from within that same community. According to Hooks:

It is obvious that most Black men are not in positions that allow them to exert the kind of institutionalized patriarchal power and control over Black women’s lives that privileged white men do in this society. But it is undeniable that they do exert a lot of power over Black women and children in everyday life. (124)

An example of this is the domestic violence that is not common in black homes. Patriarchy, the institutionalized structure of male dominance, encourages males of all races and classes define their masculinity by acts of physical aggression and coercion toward others, women and children. With racial equality being fought for by several different organizations, sexism should be addressed by a specific Black Feminist Movement.
African American women writers have always tried to assert the unique nature of their experiences, which they felt were distinct from the white women’s situation, since they had to battle on many more fronts against white patriarchy, against white women’s racism and against the sexism of Black men. They have always militated against the tendency of white feminists to take their own situation as the paradigm of women’s position. They take the view that white women have not had to interrogate wither their whiteness or their heterosexuality as political institutions which have cushioned them against the worst effects of racist and sexist violence.

Black women’s writing is shaped by history in that it involves reconstructing the development of the character’s individual personality in relation to the historical forces that have shaped the migrations of her race and the struggles of her community. The idea of culture gives substance to this writing, for it is a body of work devoted to the retrieval of the African American tradition, the language, songs, dance, cuisine and all the practices such as quilt making, baking, gardening that have shaped the daily lives of black people. In fact, the point of view of Black feminist writing may be termed Afrocentric, as opposed to Eurocentric-i.e. it has its roots deep in African culture, it draws on the religion, values, and language of Black communities and on an interdependence of orality, culture and community activities and in particular, on the cultural significance of mothering and female bonding. Their texts are different from white feminist texts, because African American women writers share a collective legacy of racist and sexist domination in addition to an awareness of historical continuities. Initially Black feminist writing used the form of the autobiography to explore the evils of a
patriarchal, slave-holding society in which even white women, while subjugated, were still as oppressive as white men. After Emancipation, these writings articulated the sufferings of African American women and the entire African American community in a sexist, classist society. Later, Black feminism manifested itself in the tradition of Colored Women’s Clubs that developed as a psychological and social response to the evils of the larger society.

Alice Walker is a womanist, in *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens: Womanist Prose*, published in 1983 uses the term “womanism” which refers to African American feminism or the feminism of women of color. As she explains:

> I just like to have words that describe things correctly. Now to me ‘black feminist’ does not do that. 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’. (ISMG 66)

This is a folk term peculiar to the African American tradition, which refers to a characteristic of boldness, premature adulthood and a spirit of inquiry inappropriate to children, particularly female children, but which also suggests capability, responsibility and leadership. Walker defines it thus:

**Womanist:**

1. From womanish (opposite of “girlish” i.e. frivolous, irresponsible, not serious).

A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, “you acting womanish”, i.e. like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered “good” for one. Interested
in grown-up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression “You trying to be grown”. Responsible, in charge. Serious.

2. Also: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or non-sexually. Appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility (values tears as a natural counterbalance of laughter) and women’s strength. Committed to the survival of and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally, universalist, as in “Mama, why are we brown, pink and yellow, and our cousins white, beige and black?” Ans: “Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented”. Traditionally, capable, as in: “Mama, I’m walking to Canada and I’m taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me”. Reply: “It wouldn’t be the first time”.


4. Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender. (ISMG xi)

The two terms, black feminism and womanism can be seen as interchangeable because both are concerned with the struggle against racism and sexism by black women who are themselves part of the community’s efforts to achieve equality and liberty. She is, Walker says, purple-purple with rage, purple as restored royalty, purple blossoming wild in an open field. Therefore, according to Walker, womanism is an empowered form of feminism just as purple as a color could also be regarded as a multifaceted erotic symbol, a sign of the indomitable female spirit and an encoding of the joyous vitality of the female spirit.
The Universalist philosophy that Walker invokes as part of her womanist theory is expressed by her metaphor of the garden where room exists for all flowers to bloom equally and differently, co-exists yet retaining their cultural distinctiveness and integrity. In its practical application, a dominant characteristic of womanism is sisterhood that opposes the practice of certain women to exploit feminism in pursuit of their own opportunistic ambitions in a male dominated society. The sisterhood inherent in womanism values the advancement of the entire group.

In these aspects of the concept of womanism, one can see the complementary nature of one’s personal life in relation to one’s political life. From the personal, the striving towards wholeness individually and within the community, comes the political, the struggle against those forces that render individuals and communities unwhole. The personal is the political especially for black women.

Walker’s idea of Womanism has a definite impact on the theme of her novels. It reflects her intention to champion as a writer the causes of black people, especially black women, in her *In Search of Our Mother’s Garden*: Womanist Prose, she says, “I am preoccupied with the spiritual, the survival whole, of my people. But beyond that, I am committed to exploring the oppression, the insanities, the loyalties and the triumphs of black women” (ISMG 250-51). Her work confronts such issues as racism, intra-racism, sexism, neo-colonialism, imperialism, and poverty, in order to transform both society and the individual. She says: “I believe in change, change personal, and change in society” (ISMG 252). This process of political changing, of social transforming is central to her work.
Generally speaking, feminist novels are centred on the themes of women’s oppression and women’s resistance. Chikwenye Ogunyeme in “Womanism: The Dynamics of the Feminist Black Female Novel in English” defines the feminist novel as an openly propagandist protest against sexism and the patriarchal power structure. For Walker, feminism, and black feminism especially, “involves the bonding of women as “a continuation of the struggle for self-definition and affirmation that is the essence of what African American means” (ISMG, 289). She thinks of these women, who love other women, sexually or not, as being “whole”, from “wholly” or “holy”. Or, as she says, “round women” who,

Also have concern in a culture that oppresses all black people for their fathers, brothers and sons, no matter how they feel about them as males. My own term for such women would be “womanist”…. A word that said more than that they choose women over men. More than that they choose to live separate from men. In fact, to be consistent with black culture values… it would have to be a word that affirmed connectedness to the entire community and the world, rather than separation”. (ISMG, 81)

Walker’s concept, thus stresses the sense of solidarity and sharing, the sense of community that brings about a blossoming in self and society.

Alice Malsenior Walker is born on February 9, 1944 in Eatonton, Georgia as the eighth child of Willie Lee Walker and Minnie Tallulah Grant Walker. Her father is a sharecropper there. When she is eight years old, her brother shoots her with his BB gun, leaving her scarred and blind in her right eye and turns the young Alice into a timid and reclusive child. So this solitary attitude leads her into writing to express herself.
After graduating from high school as the valedictorian, Walker begins her higher education at Spelman College in Atlanta. During the years, she is active participant in the Civil Rights Movement and Georgia voter registration movement of the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee. In 1963, she transfers to Sarah Lawrence College in New York, to complete her education. It is while at Sarah Lawrence that Walker writes her first collection of poetry, *Once*, published in 1968.

Alice Walker moves to Mississippi to work as a teacher and civil rights advocate. In 1967, she marries Melvyn Leventhal, a Jewish civil rights attorney in Mississippi. They are the first legally married interracial couple to settle in Jackson, the state capital.

Walker’s first novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970), introduces many of her prevalent themes, particularly the domination over powerless woman. Walker’s next novel, *Meridian* (1976), a tale of perseverance and personal sacrifice based on the Civil Rights Movements, is generally regarded as one of the best novels depicting that era. Walker’s third novel, *The Color Purple* (1982), placed Walker among the most important contemporary American writers and made her a literary celebrity. It is a story of a poor Southern black woman, Celie, who is victimized physically and emotionally both by her stepfather and husband. Walker’s fourth novel, *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989), is an ambitious novel recording 500,000 years of human history. Her fifth novel is *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992). Walker’s political stance is manifest throughout this novel. She is unyielding in her claim that infibulations (cutting of the clitoris) is a form of
mutilation, and that its ethnic identity is quite unacceptable. Her recent work is *By the Light of My Father’s Smile* (1998) and *Now is the time to open your Heart* (2004).

Walker is also considered an accomplished poet. Walker’s first collection is *Once* (1968), her second volume is, *Revolutionary Petunias* (1968), and a few other volume are, *Good Night Willie Lee, I’ll See You in the Morning* (1979), and *Horses Make a Landscape Look More Beautiful* (1985). In addition to her novels and poetry, Walker has also published two volumes of short stories: *In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women* (1973) and *You Can’t Keep a Good Woman Down* (1981); they expand her womanist philosophy. *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1984), and *Living by the Word: Selected Writings* (1973-87), are collections of essays written throughout Walker’s career and relate to issues and problems concerning the environment, animal rights, nuclear war, and includes several autobiographical pieces. Walker is also the author of two books for children, *Langston Hughes: American Poet* (1974), and *To Hell with Dying* (1988).

The literary criticism on Walker’s work is generally focused on influences, literary forms, the use of folklore, and the themes of religion, race, class, and most commonly, gender. Influences have been identified under two categories: personal and cultural. To the former, Mary Helen Washington, and Barbara Christian have added considerable commentary to the role of black women, especially those of earlier generations who have played in Walker’s thinking and writing. These are the women that she talks about in her *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens*, and the critics have noted the effect on characterization and on the kinds of stories.
Walker’s first novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, received a considerable amount of comment than her poetry. It is the story of three generations of a black sharecropping family whose brutal experience leads to abandonment, promiscuity, self-hatred, abuse, and even murder. The Southern landscape, with its harsh working conditions, racism, economic oppression, and frustration of black dream, offers little hope for the characters. Yet, ironically, out of this same environment come possibilities; those emerge in two elements consistently important to Walker: African American folk culture and the Civil Rights Movement.


*Meridian*, Walker’s second novel is, in a sense, a continuation of the story of Grange Copeland. Meridian Hill can be seen as Ruth Copeland grown up and involved with the Civil Rights Movement that so much fascinated her. Meridian, however, has her own difficulties to overcome as a young woman. In fact, womanhood itself is problematic in this novel. As the novel opens, one can learn the story of a woman who was killed by her husband because she refused to simply “lay back and be pleasured” (M 7). At least her body was displayed as part of a freak show. Also, it tells the story of Louvine, who had her tongue cut out for telling stories so well that a white child died of fright.

*The Color Purple* (1982), her third novel, is the work that made Alice Walker, a celebrity. Some of its reputation can be explained by interpreting it as a classic American success story. Its protagonist begins her life in a world of deprivation, violence, and family problems, but through determination and love, achieves financial success, self-confidence, and a reunited family. The tale is set in the exotic spaces of the black rural South and Africa. The fact that the protagonist is a woman who struggle against the cruelty of a male-dominated world and achieves her goals through the aid of strong sympathetic women makes an effective appeal to female readers. The voice of Celie that turns pathetic, angry, wise, and funny, on occasions, is an effective narrative device.

Reviewers have been consistent in their opinion about the strength and weakness of *The Color Purple*. Celie’s voice, with its folk speech patterns and its precision, pathos, and humor, has been regularly praised. Many critics approve of
the characterization, especially of the female characters, as well as the religious elements in the book that offer a sense of hope. Weaknesses are found in Nettie’s letters from Africa, both for their relatively colorless Standard English and imposition of an ideology not apparent in Celie’s correspondence.


W. Lawrence Hogue reads *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* as an example of feminist discourse, which makes the argument that the social order dehumanizes black men who then abuses their families. He also asserts that Walker sacrifices character development when it is necessary to prove her point. Barbara Smith offers the most laudatory reading by showing how the emphasis on women enables Walker to see through the myths surrounding the lives of black women and to reveal the hardities of married life.

Walker’s fourth novel *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989), has also received a considerable amount of criticism. Ikenna Dieke views the theme of monastic idealism in *The Temple of My Familiar*, which appeared in African American
Review. Madelyn Jablon observes the memory, dream history, and revision in Walker’s *The Temple of My Familiar*. Also she finds the same idea in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*. Roland Walker reads the dialectics between the act of writing and the act of reading in Alice Walker’s *The Temple of My Familiar* and compares it with Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day*, and Toni Morrison’s *Jazz*.

Walker’s fifth novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992) is widely read for her concern for women. In this novel, she voices against the injustice done to poor women in the name of female circumcision. Continuing a thread from *The Color Purple*, the story chronicles the life of Tashi, the Olinkan woman, who marries Celie’s son Adam. Tashi chooses to undergo the female initiation rite as a sign of solidarity with the vanishing Olinkan tradition, but her fateful decision condemns her to a life of psychological and physical pain. In this novel, Walker attempts to expose her readers to the horrors of mutilation and invigorate the movements to ban it worldwide. Angeletta K.M.Gourdine observes the postmodern ethnography and the womanist mission in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. R.Alyson Buckman considers the body as a site of colonization in Walker’s *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. Elizabeth Bakers focuses on the female genital excision in this novel. Among Walker’s recent works are *Anything We Love can be Saved* (1997), essays which deal with subjects such as female circumcision, Cuban communism, the murder trial of Winnie Mandela, tributes to the poet Audre Lord and others in whom Walker discerns a leftist/progressivist activism.
Walker’s sixth novel, *By the Light of My Father’s Smile* (1998) has not much but reviews. Some critics continue to object to her portrayals of black men and other aspects of her writings. Some critics have found fault with Walker’s fiction for its flattering portraits of black men. However, her lyrical prose, her sensitive characterization, and her gift for rendering beauty, grace, dignity to ordinary people and places are most applauded. Her latest work is *The Way Forward is with a Broken Heart*, published in October 2000.

Her next novel, *Now is the Time to Open Your Heart* (2004) is a heart-warming tale of identity and a life at the crossroads. The protagonist of the story is Kate, who has always been a wanderer. A well published author, married several times, she has lived a life full of adventure. But now it is time for her explore new territory. She leaves her lover Yolo and embarks on a mesmerizing journey down the Colorado River; then to the heartlands of the Amazon Jungle. On her travels she encounters Shames and the mysterious spiritual world of the native Indian. Yolo too begins a journey as he travel to Hawali and meets a former lover. As Kate and Yolo gain shifting insights into their lives and the world around them. Their paths will lead back to each other. Though she remains a controversial writer, she occupies the central stage in any discussion on African woman.

Over more than three decades of her writing life, Alice Walker has immersed herself in protest, civil disobedience, writing, speaking, travelling and filmmaking on behalf of numerous causes. The civil rights movement of the 1960s involved her in demonstrations, the voter registration campaign and defiance of Mississippi’s racist laws during her marriage to Leventhal. The 1970s saw her as a
regular contributor to *Ms* magazine and a friendship with Gloria Steinem. The 1890s brought international attention with *The Color Purple* and Spielberg’s adaptation of the book into a film. In the 1990s, she spoke out strongly against the Gulf War and defended Castro’s Cuba, as well as initiating a vigorous campaign against female circumcision.

The panorama of interest in her works, during the recent years, shows her feminist voice in different tenors. They are mostly fractured and incomplete, and they are not unified expressions of her art. The comments are spontaneous, and also sporadic. The criticisms are mostly about self, past, vision, etc., and they are exigent remarks made every time after the publication of a new book. Present feminist discourses are inclusive of Walker’s womanism, which is a vital manifestation of racial consciousness. The symbiosis of Africanism with womanism is not comprehensively dealt with in any major criticism written about her. Her standpoint in the matter of motherhood has provoked much outcry. Alice Walker explores black women’s relationship through the framework of family and community, and their preoccupation with the redefinition of man-woman relationships after liberation from their slave past. Other themes Walker deals with are: the conflict between mother and daughter, devaluation of color, and the destruction of their romantic illusions. They are in a way related to their quest for selfhood, and affect their loves, sex, and personal relationships in marriage or outside marriage. Indeed much of her works portray “the spiritual devastation that occurs when the family trust is violated” (175). Her several non-fictional articles that vociferate African American womanism are illustrated, dramatized, and realized in her novels. The novels altogether form the statement of her concept of African American woman’s experience.
Any African American who has made America his/her home believes that his/her salvation lies in the faith in Christianity and political redemption in adherence to the American constitution. Any revolt against African American is construed as impatience rather than apathy towards the system. In the multicultural society that America cradles, seeking freedom, fraternity, and happiness is the dream of the people of pure and mixed blood. This is a continuing dream, and to realize it, struggles used to be the practice of life.

The struggle to fight for basic needs, recognition, identity, etc, forms the history, especially, of African American man or woman. In this context, Alice Walker’s struggle for gaining freedom from the racial and sexual forces without violating the American socio-political parameters makes the study of her novels highly profitable. Her struggle for racial equality in pluralistic society, and gender equality without jeopardy to the social fabric, and her attempt to revise the native matriarchal system with family as the basic unit, prove to be the interesting area for the present research work. Though a study of class makes an integral part with race and gender, it is conveniently left out. In the struggle for existence, the move formidable forces are those of race and gender, since they cannot be sloughed off as easily as the class could be. Her novels explore the prospect of bridging the race and gender divide that may help in the peaceful co-existence in pluralistic society. Attempts are made to trace the evolution of her African American womanism that may be able to address some of the racial and sexual issues as evident in her novels.
The present thesis entitled “A Study of Racism, Sexism, and Poverty in the novels of Alice Walker” makes a modest attempt to study the lives of black people who are suffering in the hands of political injustice. It analyses and evaluates Walker’s ideology about black racism, sexism, and poverty from the womanist perspective.

Pain is the one thing that man would never have bargained for on his birth. But this is the one thing he gets often till his death. This is general truth. Regarding the lives of African Americans, pain is born with them in the form of racism, sexism and poverty. In this line, Alice Walker’s novels, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, *Meridian*, *The Color Purple*, *The Temple of My Familiar*, *Possessing the Secret of Joy* and *By the Light of my Father Smile*, comprise the primary source for discussion. The introduction to Alice Walker tracing her lineage to various African American writings beginning with slave narratives, the development of the Civil Rights Movement fusing with the African American womanism, the contribution of Alice Walker to the growth and development of the African American literature, and the critical interest in her novels, and the need, and the premise of this thesis form the first chapter. The second chapter Racism documents how black men and women who have felt the sharp edge of racism and could not escape castration at the hands of whites during their life time. These experiences color their vision of life and all of them feel embittered by the injustice meted out to them. The third chapter Sexism analyses, and evaluates the domestic violence unleashed on women as the manifestation of the racial repression. Mem and Margaret in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, Celie in *The Color Purple* are victimized physically and emotionally both by their men. The fourth chapter
Poverty analyses how economic struggle is linked to racism and sexism for the people she focuses or are southern sharecroppers. In *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, she visualizes different color of South and proves her views through the examples of the main character Brownfield who is suffered from physical and spiritual poverty.

The last chapter finds Alice Walker as the principal star in the galaxy of African American woman writers and also she is a fighter as well as a meditative poet and a lyrical novelist. She has taken part in the struggles her people have waged, and she knows the struggles they must yet face in this greatest of the world’s democracies. She also knows that not even ample bread and wine or power and the applause of one’s country men can give anyone the calm, the freedom that comes with a mind’s acceptance of its own worth. Her artistic mind gives a shine the truth so that if reflector on. It is the hand maid of taste and talents, posed or exposed. The beauty of her works is that it can present reality in a microcosm or in polychrome. It is difficult to say if here works follow taste or taste follows her works. But the muddle is there somewhere in the middle.