CHAPTER II

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NGUGI WA THIONG’O is one of the leading writers of Kenya, and at the same time, one of the mighty voices of the Post-Colonial literature. He represents not only his own country but also the whole of the third world. He is one who not only believes in the principle of Art for Life’s sake but also incorporates it in his life and literature. He is so deeply rooted in his native soil and its customs and traditions and, as such, he adopts a colour line in his works to mirror what happened with his people from 1920 to 1980. He envisages in his works the whole history of the Colonial and the Post-Colonial Kenya trumpeting the better days for his country and people through their incessant and sustained struggle for their economic, religious, cultural and linguistic emancipation, racial identity, and preservation of their customs, traditions and the reoccupation of their dispossessed lands. Since he is a product of his own times, there are various factors which went into the making of his mind and art – his view of national, global, social and political issues. The colour line in his works aptly asserts:

The one who opts for becoming an integral part of the African revolution, has no choice but that of aligning himself with the people; their economic, political and cultural struggle for survival. Such a writer will have to rediscover the real language of struggle in the actions and speeches of his people, and learn
from their great optimism and faith in the capacity of human beings to remake their world and renew themselves.\(^1\)

Born in a large peasant family, of father, his four wives and about twenty eight children, Ngugi was nurtured not only by his wide extended family but also with his community as a whole for which he developed a strong sense of belonging. His evenings were spent listening to stories on animals and humans told by his elders in his mother tongue, Gikuyu, through which he had learnt many important lessons in life. Close to his heart was the storyline of the hare, his hero, though weak, yet being innovative and cunning, which could outwit other brutes of prey. The victories of the hare were his own victories which made him learn that apparently the weak can outdo the strong. The twin struggles of the hare against nature and other animals reflected the real life struggles in the human world. The stories of animals and their struggles for survival impressed Ngugi with the idea that discord is a part of life and social Darwinism is a reality.

Ngugi was born on January 5, 1938 in the family of a landless squatter in the Kamarithu village in Limuru district of Kenya. It was the period when the colonizers were engrossed in establishing the so-called “White highlands in the heart of Gikuyu country”. The white settlers in Kenya usurped the fertile land and forced the landless men to sell their labour to the white masters. Ngugi’s father also lost his land and became an ‘ahoi’ working on the lands owned by him. Witnessing at close quarters, the intensity of frustration, economic deprivation and dissension between the white owner and the black peasant, infused the conviction in young Ngugi that only by struggle and revolution could the Kenyans get back their land, a mission to forge

unity among the countrymen as also strive for political freedom, for which education, he thought, could be an imperative means.

Drawing on the inferences of the human-centered narratives of his childhood, Ngugi concluded that the colonizers were a ‘man-eat-man two mouthed species’ charged with greed, selfishness, individualism and hatred for what was good for a larger co-operative community. He realized deep down that the strong social and economic strife experienced by his countrymen would result in an immense range of conflicts leading to multiple manifestations of discord within the individual and society. Living in an unprotected environment and discomfiture, Ngugi developed profoundly disturbing psychological nuances that later became the moving spirit behind his works.

The significance of the Emergency period as an early catalyst to Ngugi’s writings is in a summary account of the conflicts in his own family in the preface to Secret lives:

As I write, I remember the nights of fighting in my father’s house; my mother’s struggle with the soil so that we might eat, have decent clothes and get some schooling; my elder brother Wallace Mwangi, running to the cover and security of the forest under a hail of bullets from Colonial policemen; his messages from the forest urging me to continue with education at any cost; my cousin, Gichini wa Ngugi, just escaping the hangman’s rope because he had been caught with live bullets; uncles and other villagers murdered because they had taken the oath; the beautiful courage of ordinary men and women in Kenya who stood up to the might of the British imperialism and indiscriminate terrorism. I remember too some relatives and fellow villagers who carried the gun for the white man and often became his messengers of
blood. I remember the fears, the betrayals, Rachael's tears, the moments of despair and love and kinship in struggle and I try to find meaning of it all through my pen.²

Ngugi's passion for education had a strong impact on his writings. He was admitted to Kamaandura and Karinga schools founded and operated by Gikuyu nationalists, with an aim to provide education appropriate to the African setting. He deeply appreciated the suggestive, magical and musical powers of his language, Gikuyu, reinforced by the games with words, riddles, proverbs, transpositions of symbols, which he had learnt at home and the fields comprising his pre-schooling. He revelled in the fact that the language of his evening teach-ins, the language, through images and symbols that gave him a view of the world, and the language of his formal education and that of the Limuru peasant community, were one and the same. He received his first ovation for a composition written in Gikuyu.

After the declaration of the state of Emergency over Kenya in 1952, all schools run by patriotic nationalists were placed under the District Education Boards chaired by Englishmen. English became the main determinant of a child's progress up the ladder of formal education; and this turned into one of Ngugi's worst nightmares. He recollects many humiliating experiences and the harsh corporal punishments suffered at being caught speaking in Gikuyu in the vicinity of the school. The ingenuity of the teachers in tracing the 'culprits' speaking in Gikuyu at the end of the day, turned children into witch-hunters and in the process taught them the lucrative value of being traitors to one's own community.

The colonial system of education, in addition to its apartheid racial demarcation, had the structure of a 'pyramid'. In order to catapult himself into the narrower university apex, Ngugi was forced to turn proficient in English as this had become the benchmark to measure intelligence and ability among all the branches of learning and was the official vehicle and magic formula to colonial elitedom. Ngugi gradually traces his literary progress. At the Primary level, it was not the ‘Hare’, the ‘Leopard’ and the ‘Lion’ but, Dickens, Stevenson, Oliver Twist, Tom Brown and Jim Hawkins who were his daily companions in the world of imagination. At the Secondary level, Scott, G.B.Shaw vied with Rider Haggard, John Buchan and Caption W E Johns and at Makerere. He read English from Chaucer to T S Eliot with a touch of Graham Greene. Thus Ngugi felt that he was gradually being alienated from himself and his people through language and literature. He rightly opines, “Language and literature were taking us further and further from ourselves to other selves, from our world to other worlds...”

Ngugi’s childhood was full of tensions not only because of his family’s economic struggles but also because of his ambivalent feelings towards the Western education and the imposition of English language on the Kenyans. It was this environment that impressed upon the sensitive mind of Ngugi and he was forced to make the crucial choice of making himself the voice of his countrymen by abandoning English and turning to Gikuyu to adopt it his vehicle for communicating his message to the world. Being an eyewitness to the social indignities faced by the peasants and workers of Kenya and the dashed hopes of the Kenyan youth in procuring higher education, Ngugi severely criticizes the ruthlessly oppressive elements that ravaged the stability of the African family. This in turn made Ngugi develop a preoccupation with the

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theme of discord and his works aim to mirror the conflict his people encountered at intrapersonal, interpersonal and intergroup levels, due to the economic, political and cultural struggles of his society. The experiences of Ngugi’s childhood form the setting against which the events in most of his novels take place. The series of books that Ngugi read, during the collegiate life, influenced him very deeply and paved his way to success.

On completion of his school education, Ngugi joined B.A. (Hons.) in English at the Makerere University College, Kenya, in 1959 and remained there till 1964. It was a conventional course in English Literature that Ngugi pursued at Makerere that gave him an opportunity to study the works of D.H. Lawrence and Joseph Conrad which exerted an early influence on his writings in the making of him as a creative artist.

In an interview with Denis Duerden, Ngugi reveals that he accepts D.H. Lawrence as his literary model, when he says: “I discover D.H. Lawrence and his way of entering into the spirit of things influenced me quite a lot”. He continues to say thus: “When I am reading D.H Lawrence, I feel the spirituality of things very near me as if I am touching the very spirit of things”.

On account of sharing the same world dominated by capitalism, imperialism, and colonialism, Joseph Conrad’s novels appealed to Ngugi and as a result, explains the ‘Conradian echoes’ are conspicuously evident in his works. Ngugi described his interest in Conrad as centering on his own concern with the morality of action. In his own words:

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5 Ibid., p.123.
Reading Conrad one is struck by man's capacity for bearing suffering but much more than this, he questions what appears on the surface. He questions what I would call the morality of action... this kind of questioning has impressed me a lot because with Conrad, I have felt, I have come in contact with other languages whose questioning to me is much more important that the answers he gives.6

During this period, Ngugi met Jonathan Kariara and became the Student Editor of the 'Pen Point'. He worked on Nairobi's 'Daily Nation' and contributed to a column entitled "As I Seek". This apprenticeship in journalism helped him understand the social, economic and political conditions of Kenya, and it also gave an expression to a pattern of thought that resulted in a deepened response to the changing contemporary environment. His participation in a gathering of African writers like Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka and J.P. Clarke, who strove to formulate a definition of African literature and African ethos, left an indelible impression on Ngugi and touched his 'mental proclivities' and sharpened his assertions about the role of a writer. A kind of self-assuredness, a confidence was noticed in Ngugi's writings as he shared the platform with some of the best representatives of the period.

Frantz Fanon exercised a great influence on Ngugi who read Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* and drew thoughts from it. He was deeply impressed by Fanon's analysis of colonialism in Africa and the notion that war is the only antidote to their sufferings. Jomo Kenyatta who tried to interpret Gikuyu culture, also influenced Ngugi. In *Facing Mount Kenya*, Kenyatta says:

> A culture has no meaning apart from the social organization of life on which it is built. When the European comes to the Gikuyu country and robs the people

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of their land, he is taking away not only their livelihood but the material symbol that holds family and tribe together.\(^7\)

This forceful conviction of Kenyatta permeates much of the writings of Ngugi. He was also fascinated by some of the writings of George Lamming and V.S. Naipaul. He says: "I was really overwhelmed by George Lamming. I read him uncritically – almost everything he wrote, from cover to cover."\(^8\)

Asserting his view that literature and politics are closely linked with each other, Ngugi chose as his subject, that 'one single momentous event in the history of Kenya, the Mau Mau Revolution'. He glorified the Mau Mau War as a 'political movement with legitimate goals. He deeply identified with the Revolution on a personal level. His elder brother was part of the Movement, his step brother was killed and his mother was arrested and tortured.

Before graduating in 1963, Ngugi had written his first full length play \textit{The Black Hermit}, which was performed on the occasion of the Independence of Uganda in 1962. Ngugi made his debut as a novelist with \textit{Weep Not Child} (1964), the first novel brought out by an East-African author, and his second novel \textit{The River Between} appeared in 1965. His novels are novels of ideas. Two ideas stand out prominently, faith in one’s own culture and the importance of education. The novels depict a crucial phase in the life of the Gikuyu community, the struggle for repossession of their dispossessed land and political emancipation.


\(^8\) Allan Marcuson, Mike Gonzalez and Dave Williams, "James Ngugi" interviewed by Fellow Students at Leeds University, CUL, 31, 1961, p.129.
Ngugi’s first brush with Christianity occurred when he was studying at the Alliance High School in Kenya. In an interview, he says:

As I see them in their historical role, they have been forerunners of colonist and the colonial administration. As an African, he could be taken in Cambridge but not on the basis of merit, more of a gesture... You must see the universities in Africa. They did not want you to question things or compare western institutions with other systems.  

These lines aptly reiterate the role of Christianity which was used only to accelerate the process of the disintegration of the tribal Kenyan life, to develop an implicit belief in their teachings and to create a class of obedient Kenyans, who could pledge their allegiance to the power or Colonialism. The other major component of the British colonial rule had been the Western system of education which was introduced as a part of church activities to lure and beguile the gullible, bearing the same twin objectives. Education in English, enforced by missionary schools and ‘Siriana Mission School’ occupies a central space in Ngugi’s novels. It is a mirror of the prestigious Alliance School that Ngugi attended in the colonial Kenya.

Ngugi’s association with the Christian church led to further disappointments. This prompted him to question the validity of the church which paid only lip service to the basic human values. A devout Christian in School, Ngugi denounced Christianity after undergoing the Gikuyu rite of passage ceremony and changed his name from James Thion’go, a sign of colonial subjugation, to Ngugi Wa Thion’go, as a mark of honour to his Gikuyu language. Ngugi shaped the relationship between the ‘blind

converts' and their children after his own association with Father Carey Francis at the Alliance High School. His choice over Christianity for traditionalism and the tribal way of life is best exemplified in his novel The River Between, where a choice between traditionalism and Christianity results in utter confusion. He contends that any reconciliation will yield to conflict and his message is clear and forceful: a people's religion and a people's way of life must be one. Each must grow out of the other.

At Leed's, Ngugi became part of Arnold Kettle's group which provided him with a new perspective on various issues – political, social, cultural and academic, as he opines, "Leeds systematized my thinking." It also provided him with an opportunity to participate in a number of conferences in Syria, the U.S.A. and the U.S.S.R. It is in Leeds that Ngugi published his first book of essays The Homecoming and his third novel, The Grain of Wheat (1967). Set in the 1940s and the 1950s, the novel portrays a society in transition with strong overtones of Fanonist Marxism. It graphically explores the dynamics of discord in a community coming to terms with the Kenyan Independence, many realizing, that they have traded one taskmaster for another. Besides embodying the social and political discord, it also explores the conflict between religious messages that Ngugi experienced in his own life.

While pursuing his Masters Degree Programme in English, he expressed, "his skepticism about higher degrees as elitist symbols from his time." Returning home the same year, Ngugi became lecturer in English Department of Nairobi University. He suggested a number of radical changes in the syllabus, recommending the incorporation of literatures written in African languages as part of the Programmes. Ngugi summed up his recommendation thus:
For any group it is better to study representative works, which mirror their society, rather than to study a few isolated classics either of their own or of a foreign culture.... We want to establish the centrality of Africa in the Department. This is justifiable on various grounds, the most important one being that education is a means of knowledge about ourselves.\(^{10}\)

These recommendations were, however, not accepted. Ngugi resigned from his position in 1969, due to the stiff attitude of the University authorities against students who had been forced to go on a strike for raising various demands. Later, it was his visit to the U.S.A. as a Visiting Professor at the North Western University, Illionois, that helped him in recognizing at close quarters, the 'real intentions of imperialism' and what Ngugi himself addresses as ‘black dimension’ to his understanding.

Ngugi was back at English Department in Nairobi University in 1971 when he was able to bring about the desired changes and the Department was renamed as Department of Literature. The period between 1972 and 1977 proved very fruitful in his literary career and saw a maturity in his writings. He published several essays and \textit{Petals of Blood} (1977), his fourth novel.

Ngugi got into trouble with Government authorities in Kenya over some portions of his novel, \textit{Petals of Blood} and his play, \textit{Ngaadhika Ndeenda} (I will marry when I want). The authorities banned its performance and Ngugi was detained without trial for almost a year. During his detention, he wrote on pieces of toilet paper the details of his routine as well as strategies through which he was to keep his ‘sanity’ alive in the face of humiliations and torture, both physical and mental. On being released, he was not restored to his position as Professor and Head of Department of Literature,

Nairobi University. Ngugi shifted to England and settled down as a fulltime writer. Since then, he has published several works.

Ngugi’s political ideas result from an effort to foster an ‘organic connection’ between his past as the child of peasants steeped in tradition and his present as an international author. A spectator of both public and his personal history, the characters in his novels portray his conflict to resurrect the past and reintegrate in the present. Influenced by his parents and supported by his wife in his ideologies, Ngugi developed a strong love for Kenyan’s national languages and was deeply rooted in the traditional structure of African culture that held family and society as a close knit unit. With the entry of Colonial powers, he sadly observed this solidarity held together by respecting one’s ancestors die a slow death. He lamented the shift in attitudes by African women who resorted to the Western way of life that dehumanized the communal structure.

Ngugi exhorts the educational institutions to produce literature in their mother tongue to restore the native environment to the Kenyan child. He has consequently been imprisoned, tormented and exiled for his ferocious tongue and is hailed as “a new voice not crying in the wilderness but is being heard.” His revolutionary ideas and optimistic vision have earned him a well deserved reputation that marks him out as a writer of passionate longing and deep convictions. This has been possible due to his exposure to the world at large. It is this realistic depiction of social facts and brazenly exposing its discords, that has enabled Ngugi to leave an indelible impression on the psyche of not only his readers but those of the world as well.
Alice Walker, an Afro-American womanist, is one of the eminent writers of the twentieth century America. Like Ngugi, she is one of the mighty voices of the blacks the world over. Her writings like those of Ngugi, reveal not only her acute social and political consciousness but also her perspectives on and perceptions of Colonialism, Imperialism and Neo-colonialism. Being a womanist, Walker articulates the concerns of the horrified black women not only of America but also of the Third World. She vividly and ruthlessly exposes how the poor, the illiterate and the black women are victimized and treated as dumb animals, subjected to inhuman cruelties, racial segregation, rape and beating, silenced and gagged by those who rule the roost in the American society.

Being Afro-American by birth, Walker has the intense ability to portray the turbulent lives of the Afro-Americans, their inter-racial and intra-racial relationships and the ensuing discord in the strife of their identity crises in the society. Her creative vision is rooted in the folk wisdom of the Afro-American life and culture, and her powerfully written novels deeply explore domestic violence, sexual oppressions and abuse and the corrosive effects of poverty and racism. Alice Walker writes through her feelings and the morals she has grown with. In all her works, she envisages the black woman's struggle for her spiritual wholeness, sexual, political and racial equality, and religious, economic, cultural and linguistic emancipation for women.

She was the first African-American woman to win the Pulitzer Prize, followed by the American Book Award for fiction for her novel *The Color Purple*. The book was also turned into a successful film, garnering 11 Academy Award nominations. Since she is a product of her times, there are various factors which went into the making of her mind, and her view of national, global, social and feminine issues.
Born in 1944 to Minnie Lou Grant and Willie Lee Walker, sharecroppers, she grew up in a small town of Eatonton, Georgia. Poverty, the foremost quandary for the Afro-American community, and an outcome of racial discrimination, played a fundamental role in the many social ills that plagued the Afro-American community. Witnessing such discrimination at a young age, that denied access to the basic necessities in life, was the moving spirit behind her works. Her mother worked as a domestic help and provided for Walker and her seven siblings, besides growing incredible gardens. From her mother's artistry, Walker learnt that African American women's experience and art are based on spirituality, especially as it relates to nature. Though not admitted to schools and libraries, these women expressed themselves in the media allowed to them: cooking, gardening, storytelling, and quilting.

The long road to fame began for Alice Walker at the tender age of eight when she was blinded accidentally in one eye. As Walker recalls the experience, the scar tissue left her with the psychological trauma of feeling unattractive, isolated, and lonely. However, the turning point came in her life when she decided to observe people, to sharpen her sensibilities, to see the life around her, and make use of her observations in her writings. Though the injury occurred in her childhood, yet from that day, she began viewing life differently. Though partial, her blinding shattered her spirit, fragmented her world and delineated the beginning of her reach – through literature- for the whole sight. Walker could not accept this incident as merely accidental. She asserted that “although he was ten, I had seen my brother lowering his gun after shooting me in the eye and knew the injury had been intentional”. She felt outraged at her family's callousness in providing timely medical aid to her. She also became aware of her father's retreat from his responsibility, her mother's subservience to him, the incomprehensible absolving of her brother's responsibility in
her blindness, and her parents' joint role in branding her responsible for her own injury. It was then that she came to realize how girls were subject to gender discrimination even by her parents.

This was her first true encounter with the violent manifestations of gender bias, which she later called a 'patriarchal wound'. This wounded eye and by extension, the wounded 'I' became her thematic unifier in her later life. Walker associates her eye as the centre of her physical, social, and sexual self. She felt as if she were incestuously assaulted by her brother. She felt the pellets metaphorically penetrating and despoiling her physical sense of completeness, as well as her soul's ability to visualize its wholeness. She associated this childhood injury more directly with violence directed against the poor, black, rural, abused women and children in particular, and later, this became the source of her militant Feminism and activism for human rights, from which issued the central concerns of her writing. This conflict took a form and after many years of pain and confusion, she eventually understood her parents' complete withdrawal and lack of accountability and disregard of this incident as a consequence of racism as she was 'growing up in the fifties in the segregated South'.

As per Walker's description of her father's childhood, 'His mother had been murdered by a man who claimed to love her, when he was eleven. His father, to put it very politely, drank and terrorized his children.' This incident made Walker perceive that the father or father figure, by his presence or absence is the principal agent of the black woman's psychic disintegration. She perceives him as a contaminating agent, and in her subconscious, she is in perpetual flight from him and all that he projects and represents.
In reaction to an unplanned pregnancy and subsequent abortion, she developed suicidal tendencies because of her powerlessness, the shame her family was subjected to and the social acceptance of her abortion. As a young women, she returned to complete her last year of college after a summer in Africa "healthy and brown" and pregnant. She states that she 'felt at the mercy of everything, including my own body.' After coping with an abortion on her own, she states that she 'began to understand how alone woman is, because of her body.' In her essays and novels, she discusses the discord that many writers face when contemplating parenthood. She contends:

For me there has been conflict, struggle, occasional defeat- not only in affirming the life of my own child at all costs, but also in seeing in that affirmation a fond acceptance and confirmation of myself in a world that would deny me the untrampled blossoming of my own existence. 11

Walker's attitude towards violence, women's bodies and pregnancies is prefigured by both Zora Neale Hurston and Harriet Jacobs. Jacobs is not only beaten by her master but is also threatened by "death, and worse than death". Hurston herself admits that her husband, A.W. Price, practised physical violence against her. Walker's own experiences at personal security, property, and freedom caused instability, insecurity and restlessness. Harlem made her acutely conscious and concerned about racial discords and sexual oppressions.

Alice Walker wrote of diverse experiences which grew out of her sojourn in Africa, her ideas about life, love and death, the discords, hostilities and frustrations suffered in the small coastal community of Liberty County, Georgia. Mary Helen Washington writes of an interview with Walker, "Ms Walker spoke of her own awareness of and experiences with brutality and violence in the lives of black women, many of whom she had known as a girl growing up in Eatonton, Georgia, some in her own family."

Walker clearly recalls her father's 'colourism'. "He did fall in love with my mother partly because she was so light, he never denied it". But, her women characters are often dark-skinned African Americans, and they are direct links to the community of their heritage.

Walker also states that, "she has always wanted to explore relationships between men and women to know why women are always condemned for doing what men do as an expression of their masculinity." The powerlessness of women is only a part of Walker's concern with familial relations. At the heart of these relations, and related to women's lack of power, is Walker's concern with the overall effect of sexism. After describing how her father; 'expected his sons to have sex with women,' Walker says she 'was relieved to know his sexist behaviour was not something uniquely his own, but, rather, all imitation of the behaviour of the society around us.' Sexist behaviour on the part of men is a recurring image in her novels.

Walker contends, 'The joy I felt when I could leave each vicious encounter or confrontation whole', in contrast to her tormentors, the 'fragmented souls' as she calls them. Walker traces her survival "Whole" and her creative triumph to the major


13Ibid. p.p.13-16
Influence of her mother, who provided the time and space, for her, to think, to dream, to create. According to Mary Helen Washington, Minnie Lou Walker in order to nurture the creative spirit, insisted on her daughter's "absolute right to her own thoughts and feelings". She allowed Alice to choose her literary pursuits over the household chores and invested her meagre earnings in a sewing machine, a suitcase, and a typewriter, which could be manipulated to serve her daughter's creative needs. These gifts were concrete manifestations of "permission" for Alice to assume "the power to create through language, to define herself by the written word, to become witness to the special sensibility of black women".

In the classic essay, *In search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, Walker commemorates her mother's artistry and skill, and affirms that her mother's life left an indelible impact on her mind. She painfully recounts Poet Jean Toomer's assessment of the black women:

Black women whose spirituality was so intense, so deep, so unconscious, the richness they held, stumbling through their lives; creatures so abused and mutilated in body, so dimmed and confused by pain, that they considered themselves unworthy of even hope...They entered loveless marriages, without joy; became prostitutes, without resistance; and became mothers of children, without fulfillment.

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15 Ibid. p.p.6-7

Walker calls these women as ‘crazy saints’ who stared out of the world, ‘wildly like lunatics – or quietly, like suicides; and “God” who was in their gaze, was as mute as a great storie’. Alice firmly believes that these ‘saints were but ‘Artists’, our mothers and grandmothers, driven to a ‘numb and bleeding madness’ by the springs of creativity in them for which there was no release. They died with their real gifts stifled within them just because the racist Whites were extremely hostile to black literacy, and even more so to the black Americans who wanted to make writing a career. She recalls that when she told a white Northerner that she planned to be a poet, he hinted, ‘a farmer’s daughter might not be the stuff of which poets are made’. This instance in her life indicates how deeply narrow and dark a view the whites hold against the blacks.

Walker credits her mother for handing down a gift, a legacy of respect for all the ‘possibilities that illuminate and cherish life and the will to grasp them’, and opines:

Guided by my heritage of a love of beauty and a respect for strength – in search of my mother’s garden, I have found my own.17

She glorifies the memory of the works of the black writers like, Phillis Wheatley, Lucy Terry, Zora Neale Hurston, Nella Larsen, Bessi Smith and many others who have handed on the ‘creative spark, the seed of the flower they themselves never hoped to see; or like a sealed letter they could not plainly read.’ She particularly praises the pattern of quilting made of bits and pieces of worthless rags by an “anonymous” black woman from Alabama, ‘a hundred years ago’. This quilt reveals the work of a person of powerful imagination and deep spiritual feeling, an artist who left her mark in the only materials she could afford.

Walker exhorts women to end the tyranny of their motherhood and assert their silenced voices by deriving strength through bonding with other women. She strove hard to create an exclusive language, a mode of communication for women to express their feelings and emotions from women's point of view. She affirms that the present language is a tool of patriarchy, with a strong masculine bias and presents only the male view of the world. Walker disrupts and fragments the patriarchal discourse that treats the black women as 'the mule of the world', an object of men's gratification and instrument of reproduction.

From 1965 to 1968, Walker was actively involved in the Civil Rights Movement, including voter registration drives in Georgia and campaigns for welfare rights and children's programmes in Mississippi. She lived on the lower east side of New York City and worked for the Welfare Department, an experience that taught her to preserve dignity and liberty despite hardship and oppression. In 1967, she married Melvyn Leventhal, a Jewish Civil-Rights Attorney; they became the first legally married interracial couple to reside in Jackson, Mississippi. Together, they worked to integrate the Mississippi schools. Blessed with a daughter, Rebecca, they divorced some years later.

Disappointed with the failure of the Civil Rights Movement due to its pseudo-ideologies, Walker uses her experiences in the Movement as well as the experiences of other black women and reaffirms the Movement's vision of freedom, equality and nonviolence and its commitment to the blacks. As a black revolutionary artist, her involvement in the Movement became the subject of many of her short stories, essays and her second novel Meridian.

Walker left Eatontan in 1961 to go to Spelman, a black women's college in Atlanta, and later, to Sarah Lawrence, in the suburbs of New York City. She recalls her years
at Spelman as ‘inhibiting and restrictive’ and at Sarah Lawrence, she felt, she had been ‘miseducated’. Walker discusses her exposure to John Keats, Lord Byron, and Robert Frost and she laments the “blind spots in her education” such as the total absence of Langston Hughes, Arna Bontemps, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Margaret Walker. She remembers the South of Flannery O’Connor and William Faulkner and she deplores the exclusion of W. E. B. DuBois’ *Black Reconstruction* and Jean Toomer’s *Cane* from her reading lists, which would help her assume her duty as a black writer.

Like Ngugi who had recommended the incorporation of African literature as part of the syllabus in English Department of Nairobi University, Walker, frustrated with the lack of literature on the culture and history of the black experience, called upon the educational institutions to create a representative curriculum. She herself took the initiative, created and taught literature devoted to African-American women writers at Wellesley College in the United States.

Walker’s intellectual curiosity led her to recognize and appreciate her cultural forbears, and her startling discovery was Zora Neale Hurston whom she acknowledges as her literary foremother. Walker made a pilgrimage to the town where the great anthropologist and novelist had lived and placed a monument on her unmarked grave. It was a journey that Walker considers as an act of filial piety towards the writer whose novels made her what she could be. She affirms: ‘The novels speak to me as no novel, past or present, has ever done’. She liked and loved Hurston because she had a complete, undiminished sense of self and refers to her as a “cultural revolutionary”. She found in Hurston an unequivocal pride in the totality of her blackness and she fiercely admired Hurston’s independence and her straightforward manner which prevailed as she ‘followed her own road, believed in
her own goals, pursued her own dreams, and refused to separate herself from 'common' people.

Hurston and Walker reclaimed two forgotten territories: the language of black folk culture and the experience of uneducated rural southern women. They discovered in both a wisdom that could transform their communal relations and their spiritual lives. Having read Hurston's *Mules and Men*, Walker argues that Black writers must revere cultural forbears, protect the heritage from its destructive powers and present men as "neither good nor beautiful" but as real human beings.

Walker's works, particularly her novels, have been subjected to severe criticism for fostering antagonism between the genders and unfairly demonizing black men. As a self proclaimed "revolutionary" author, she has never been intimidated by the negative criticism for her polemical fiction. Her mages of young male brutality towards women are not surprising because violence was a fact of life in Eatonton in general, and in her own family in particular and this is best reflected in her novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*. In the afterword to the 1988 edition of this novel, Walker writes:

In my immediate family too there was violence. Its roots seemed always embedded in my father's needs to dominate my mother and their children, in her resistance (and ours), verbal and physical, to any such domination.\(^\text{18}\)

Unwavering in her commitment to exploring the lives and the work of other black women, Walker coined the term "Womanism" in preference to "Feminism" as it honours a long-standing tradition of strength among the black women. For Walker,\(^\text{18}\)

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the battle against patriarchal society and its multiple sins need the 'womanist' spirit of defiance and irreverence, on the one hand, and the desire for social integration, on the other. As Barbara Christian opines, "Walker's work contributes to, and perhaps represents the epitome of, a rapidly – developing theme in Afro-American women's writing: that of female self-development and self-definition." Rather than portraying the growth into womanhood of an average Southern black woman of the 1920s and 1930s, Walker has created, in her image, a contemporary paradigm of the liberated woman. Walker's confident rebellion in the novel, The Color Purple is the culmination of a long struggle against despair, as well as racial and sexual fragmentation.

Walker is thus a writer who admits to 'a rage to defy the order of stars despite their pretty patterns', she constantly approaches the "forbidden" in society as a route to the truth and the most controversial of her subjects is her insistence on investigating the relationships between the black women and men, the black parents and children, with unwavering honesty. In her fiction as in her life, she has an openness to mystery, animism, which she believes, is both the one thing that Afro-Americans have retained of their African heritage and the thing that is "deeper than any politics, race or geographical locations." She, therefore, admires women writers who are responsive to mystery: Chopin, the Bronte's, Simone de Beauvoir, and Doris Lessing. She admires these writers also because they are 'well aware of their own oppression', and 'their characters can always envision a solution, an evolution to higher consciousness on the part of society even when society itself cannot.'

In her name itself, Walker acknowledges slavery as a part of her distant past. Walker knew that her father's great grandmother Mrs. Mary Poole came as a slave on foot

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from Virginia, carrying a baby on each hip. This was the trek that Walker commemorates by retaining her maiden name. In her fiction she depicts the pathetic picture of the black family chained by the system of slavery. Walker considers that family relationships are sacred. Much of her works depict the emotional, spiritual, and physical devastation emanating from the betrayal of family trust. Drawing from her observations in life, the novel, *By the Light of my Father's Smile* (1998), centers on the father-daughter relationship, love, reconciliation, sexuality and spirituality.

Viewing Christmas as a celebration of the solstice, Walker meditates daily and considers herself to be a “pagan” or an “earth worshipper”. She strongly believes that women are in harmony with nature and with their body. Religion is a cornerstone to the African American experience, and the Biblical references imbedded in the novels provide a background of the author’s culture. Yet, she considers that the Southern Christianity is racism reserved for a Sunday. Christianity hardly provided any solace for the emotional and physical rejection she had experienced in her patriarchic family and she considers the white God synonymous with the white oppressor.

Walker has never concealed her love for nature, which was one of the reasons why, when contemplating it, she did not commit suicide. “I realized how much I loved it, and how hard it would be not to see the sunrise every morning, the snow, the sky, the trees, the rocks, the faces of people, all so different.”

Alice Walker travelled throughout the world and delved into her past for the women and men. Perceiving that one’s identity must be created in one’s experience, Walker continually demonstrates her knowledge of the burden of being both a black and a

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female artist in the American cultural environment. As most of the leading feminists were middle class white women, she raises the question, "How relevant are the experiences, truths and priorities of white women to black women?" Walker has criticized white American writers for "ending their books and their characters' lives as if there was no better existence for which to struggle" and says that they tend to thicken their writings with the "gloom of defeat". She felt that the white feminists glossed over their experiences and truths. As Gerda Lerner states:

Black women, speaking with many voices and expressing many individual opinions, have been nearly unanimous in their insistence that their own emancipation cannot be separated from the emancipation of their men. Their liberation depends on the liberation of the race and the improvement of the life of the black community.21

Walker was considerably influenced by her grandparents' long, concrete relationship to celebrate familial bonds and friendship. She strongly believes in keeping alive the "voices of ancestors". In her novel, *The Temple of My familiar*, she concurs that one of the manifestations of heaven on the earth is, "that where there is spiritual union with other people, the love one feels for them, keeps the circle unbroken and the bond between us and them strong, whether they are dead or alive." 22 The watchword, she upholds in her life, is the communion of Time, Nature and Self. She says, "I think my whole program as a writer is to deal with history just so I know where I am. I can't move through time in any other way, since I have strong feelings

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about history and the need to bring it along. One of the scary things is how much of the past, especially our past, gets forgotten.” ²³

Reaffirming, Ngugi’s philosophy that art and politics cannot remain separate entities, Walker firmly believed that her art must be pressed into the service of a political end; the liberation of Black people. The sexual, religious and artistic crisis of Walker’s life has given rise to a single minded devotion to the search for the discovery of the Self.

Both Walker and Ngugi have been victims of socio-political, economic and psychological discords. Being an eye witness to the indignities and oppressive elements that ravaged the stability of the African and Afro-American family, propelled them to make the crucial decision of being the voice of their countrymen. The experiences of their childhood form the setting against which the events of most of their novels take place.