Chapter 1

Introduction

This study attempts to analyse selected fictional works of Alice Malsenior Walker and Leslie Marmon Silko and critically examines how the theoretical concepts of genre, gender and nation are probed in them. Alice Walker’s novels, short stories, poems and essays are testimony to her unwavering faith in the African American people. She writes about the African American women, their emerging power and their perception of nature and history. Numerous studies were conducted on her works, to analyse them as reflections of her womanist spirit. Leslie Silko’s works are conspicuous representations of generic, nationalistic and gender revisions among Native American authors of the post 1970s. Her novels are critical examinations of the cultural damage done by the Euro-Americans. She makes use of folklores and myths to critically reconsider the Native American past.

The works of Walker and Silko were independently studied by many a critic to look at issues related to gender constructs, narrative techniques and thematic development. But only a few of them have compared these two writers on common grounds. Here it is appropriate to list out some of the critical works that analysed these two writers and their works under similar critical considerations. Rachel Stein’s 1997 critical piece *Shifting the Ground*:
American Women Writers’ Revisions of Nature, Gender, and Race is a path breaking work which critically looks at common themes of Walker and Silko related to nature and gender. Analysing the hybridity and cross cultural interaction in American literature, Lindsay Claire Smith brought out a book titled Indians, Environment, and Identity on the Borders of American Literature: From Faulkner and Morrison to Walker and Silko in 2008. The present study, however, aims at investigating their selected novels as testimonies that problematise the concepts of genre, gender and nation. The works selected for the current study include; The Third Life of Grange Copeland (1970), The Color Purple (1982), Possessing the Secret of Joy (1992), and By the Light of My Father’s Smile (1998) by Alice Walker, and Ceremony (1977), Storyteller (1981), Almanac of the Dead (1991), and Gardens in the Dunes (1999) by Leslie Silko.

The United States as an independent nation and a superpower has been structured in the present condition through a series of contests and territorial expansions. Acquiring territories by dispossessing the natives and enriching the nation by displacing the inhabitants was a policy adopted by the Euro-Americans during the colonial conquests. In such a condition it is pertinent to look at the effort of these displaced natives to regain the past that they have lost. Walker and Silko are representatives of the marginal writers who look at the material as well as theoretical concepts regarding genre, gender and nation as acts of resistance. Through their novels they offer counter narratives as well as micro narratives that are at variance with
the views of Western historians and theoreticians. The novels analysed here can be regarded as sites of contestation where the theoretical notions related to genre, gender and nations get reinscribed and modified.

Literary expressions of all periods have worked in alliance with the culture, history, and politics of societies and can be appreciated only by linking them with the factual world. The textual world becomes a locus where ideologies and people engage in contests. Language and narrative play a decisive role in the construction of a ‘nation’ and in defining its gender relations. Stories and songs circulated among the natives and the marginal sections of the American society are unacknowledged emissaries of American history. As a multilayered narrative consisting of stories, songs and dreams, history is embedded in the lives of the people of diverse cultural backgrounds. This is especially true of America, which is home to multiracial communities. Any attempt at rewriting such a history would obviously involve the re-conceptualization of certain critical concepts like genre, gender and nation.

The concept of ‘nation,’ which is the material representation of a geographical locale with specific borders, is very fluid and it conjures up a variety of images in its people. Writing is a strong medium through which such concepts/images are circulated and it is obvious that attempts at representing the ‘nation’ in fiction, especially by marginalised sections, would involve the transgression of generic conventions, particularly those
formulated according to Western principles of genre. Such generic reworkings, when initiated by women writers from different socio-cultural backgrounds, are also bound to be conditioned by issues of gender.

‘Genre’ as a critical concept refers to the stylistic, structural, and thematic conventions that distinguish one type of narrative from another. A genre carries with it the assumptions and ideologies that control the narrative. It is linked to the “horizon of expectations” (Jauss 25) that writers and readers carry with them while encountering texts. Against the mainstream criticism regarding genre where rigid boundaries demarcate specific subdivisions, the novels of Walker and Silko are instances of merging of disparate registers, contested stories and multiple discourses. Every text “participates in one or several genres” in these novels (Derrida and Attridge 230). Jean-Francois Lyotard has said that “no genre can totally saturate all the phrases and gaps in a text” and this becomes meaningful in the case of these novels (94). The vital meanings of a text cannot be contained in a singular genre, and its meaning depends on the “play between its generic categories” (Beebee 249). Walker and Silko, in their novels, which are instances of counter narratives, use subversive strategies so that the texts get the status of autonomous, self reflexive and self instituting corpuses and aid in the rewriting or reinterpretation of historical experiences. Their novels, by making use of myths, stories and songs, re-imagine and reconstruct social and historical continuities. Myths, the
primary language of historical memory, are positioned in this context to
decentre “metanarratives,” and produce texts that are divided and all-
inclusive. They make use of the unconventional modes of oral and written
literature like songs and stories to corroborate their counter narratives. The
letters and verse pieces in their novels are instances of generic manipulations
to recreate histories from their point of view.

Gender, the second theoretical concept that this study looks into is a
cultural construct inscribed in the “political unconscious” of all discourses.
Patriarchal hegemony, steeped as it is in myths of male primacy vis-a-vis
artistic, historic and scientific creativity, ignores woman and turns her into
an object, an ‘other.’ It is such sustained hegemonic control over the literary
canon that has rendered the woman writer and her writing invisible.
Women writers reconstruct the historical ‘othering’ of women by politicising
the act of writing. They make use of their position as women to re-inscribe
the representation of nations in historical documents and other fictional
works disseminated by patriarchal hegemony. Thus in spite of the gendered
world and its binaries, women writers resuscitate untold histories through
generic reinventions. Against the biologically grounded representation of
sex, Walker and Silko use gender categories to reclaim their authority to
speak for themselves and their past. In this process, they make use of their
creative imagination as well as their status as women under oppression to
voice their anxieties regarding their ‘self.’ Their counter narratives
interrogate the role of women and the part they play as storytellers in their culture.

The third concept upon which the study relies is the construct of nation. In the postmodern condition of indetermi(nation), (where an individual’s status is related to his existence in a nation), the nation is inseparable from one’s identity and culture. The existence of any nation depends upon traditions that are exclusivist. A nation’s legitimacy depends upon repeated narrations of its myths and stories and is less concerned about the humanity’s common culture. The nation owes its identity to a shared set of narratives that encompass both inclusions and exclusions. The inclusions are the inscribed historical documents, whereas the exclusions are the tales of unremitting labour and oppression, of pain and insults. It is against such hegemonic narratives of American history that Walker and Silko offer their counter narratives. They look at the concept of nation which has to be re-visioned as a cultural whole that needs both the past and the present to recognize and retell hidden and forgotten identities.

The historian, while elaborating narratives about the nation, applies his own preferences and exclusions, so that history is not a system of “unambiguous signs of events,” but is a system of “symbolic structures, extended metaphors, that ‘liken’ the events reported in them to some form with which we have already become familiar in our literary culture” (White 201). Like some of their characters who regain their lost self and identity
through narration, Walker and Silko use narratives to regain the nation’s lost past. They draw upon oral traditions in writing their fictions pertaining to African American and Native American history. Micro narratives and counter histories come together in their work. They prove that all history begins as stories and in its trajectory some stories gain in importance and others are sidelined. In the words of Abiola Irele, “all history, as narrative, inhabits the space between apprehension and comprehension” (The African Imagination 101).

Walker and Silko, while rewriting histories and narrating untold tales that connect their folk culture and wounded memories, deploy generic restructuring to subvert the Eurocentric concept of the nation. Their novels are not mere representations of nations. They are on the other hand depictions of the role played by women as storytellers and carriers of memory concerning the nation. Their novels can be considered as historiographic representations of nations from the perspective of women who were silenced and suppressed. These representations are evidently against patriarchal and hegemonic conceptualisations about nations, as they are making use of songs, stories, diaries, epistles, and photographs that are all informal agencies of history. The generic manipulations effected by these writers open up the possibilities of such unofficial channels to depict a nation’s memories and histories. In the case of America, as Nell Irvin Painter suggests, “Before the Civil Rights revolution of the 1960s—before black
people began to be seen as truly American people—American history was largely the story of white people. . . . Similarly before the women’s movement of the 1970s—before women began to be seen as equal to men—American history was largely the story of men‖ (ix). Thus these two American writers offer alternative mappings in their novels, textually reconstructing those sections of people who “are imagined as porous and provisional communities, rather than sealed and eternal communities, transcending time and context” (Bell 6).

During their encounter with the whites in America, African Americans and Native Americans used various peaceful and violent means to regain their freedom. For the European settlements in America, it was the Africans who supplied manual labour and the Native Americans donated land for agriculture. Thus the conquistadors built up a nation of their own in the ‘other’s’ land using the resources of another ‘other.’ The white masters failed to recognise the close harmony that the Native Americans had established with the land. For them “exile was the ultimate punishment” (Noble xxxviii). Contemporary American literature encompasses works written by mainstream writers as well as writers from the periphery. It is a blend of writers from Jewish American, Native American, Indo-American, Chinese American, and African American backgrounds. Of this group there are striking similarities between writers from African American and Native American background. Alice Walker and Leslie Silko retell histories of
oppression and discrimination in their novels. Their experiences and vision bolster their generic innovations and gender identities and at the same time help the readers in identifying the similarities between these two writers. Within a dominant Eurocentric discourse their works inscribe a mark of difference. As Amy Kaplan observes, “the ideology of separate spheres in antebellum America contributed to creating an American empire by imagining the nation as a home at a time when its geopolitical borders were expanding rapidly through violent confrontations with Indians, Mexicans and European empires” (185).

African American literature includes works that discuss the role of African Americans in shaping American history by exploring issues related to slavery, freedom, racism, and black consciousness. It is saturated with memories of slavery and echoes with the Blues’ rhythms and carries with it an ancestral matrix of oral stories and songs. African American history is one of trials against social evils like slavery and racism. It contains diverse portrayals of African American experiences, foregrounding questions of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, culture, tradition and ideology. African American writers write from their own personal experiences and understanding of their culture. They realize the devastations brought about by enslavement, segregation and discrimination, and make use of the pain to portray a distinct African American past. In the words of Painter, “In ways that are different from and more passionate than those of historians, black
artists have struggled against the misinterpretation of black people in United States’ history and culture. African American art recreates a people and a story that much in American history would obliterate” (x).

Native American women writers also discuss issues pertinent to their life and culture and try to reclaim a wounded history. They speak about tribal traditions, dynamism and syncretism involved in Native American rituals, and how they are linked to their innate culture. Silko reappraises the myths and traditional songs as a source of life, where generations assemble, where the past wisdom and present progress solve individuals’ identity crisis. Roy Harvey Pearce looks at how the colonists, instead of civilizing the Indians, destroyed them. Their concern with the savage was a product of the tradition of “Anglo French primitivist thinking -- an attempt to see the savage, the noble savage, as European ‘manqué’” (4). The past and the history of America has been forged by the Europeans. Observing an Indian is as significant as studying the past, their culture, and their struggles to survive. Thus the history of American civilization would be “conceived of as three-dimensional, progressing from past to present, from east to west, from lower to higher” (Pearce 49).

Alice Walker and Leslie Silko share a holistic vision of life. In spite of the differences in narrative strategies, there is an underlying similarity in the conceptualization of themes, and in their critical and hermeneutic engagements. They give a counter narrative to contemporary American
history by providing postmodern histories embodying stories of “discontinuity and heterogeneity” (Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* 41). They throw light on the history of African Americans and Native Americans and their persecution as a people, a history that has been repressed by mainstream historians, who ignored or trivialized counter histories and multiple historical interpretations. These two writers grapple with the double burden of writing literature as well as history (histories), and are concerned about the vacuous historical understanding circulating in contemporary American culture. As an attempt to erase the “American amnesia,” (Peterson 4) these writers intervene in official versions of American history and identity by resuscitating counter histories. In a system of racial classification and institutionalised segregation, Walker and Silko unravel the eliminations practised by history. Here, unlike the whites’ “continuum of history,” they speak about the history of the oppressed as a “discontinuum” (Benjamin 395-397).

Walker and Silko rework the historical accounts of African Americans and Natives in their novels and indicate how they are misrepresented by mainstream narratives. As immigrants in America, African Americans were subjected to the pressures of colonization and racism, whereas Native Americans experienced “pre-contact, reservation, and pan Indian periods” (Dorson 3) and moved from cities to reserves. Native Americans were
captive in their own land, whereas African Americans descended from captured Africans transported to New England.

Walker and Silko have explored the cultural and historical antecedents of their homeland and come out with different perspective on America. When Alice Walker started her career as a writer, she was greatly disturbed by racial discrimination and other evils of society. Her mother Minnie’s indomitable presence, which she considers as her “salvation,” helped her to identify her creative spirit. Walker published Goodnight Willie Lee I’ll See you in the Morning (1979), in honour of her mother after her death. Even though she was repelled by the social and political atmosphere of the South, her mother’s beautiful garden with sweet-smelling flowers always attracted her. She says, “I was shortchanged by society, but abundantly fed by nature” (Fitzgerald 25). Walker developed a strong bond of sisterhood with her elder sisters Molly and Ruth. Storytelling, a lifeline for Walker, became ingrained in her thoughts through the stories her sisters, especially Ruth, narrated to her. She explores the areas of female oppression and subservience through these stories. She considers Hurston as the maternal ancestor of African American writers. Her contemporaries include Toni Morrison, Terry McMillan, Toni Cade Bambara, and Maya Angelou. Walker believes in the persuasiveness of the androgynous vision, and relies on the redemptive power of language to reproduce the past. She engages in
meaningful, efficient and creative resistance and is an impassioned champion of nature and African Americans.

In 1984 Walker established a publishing company, Wild Trees Press, to publish creative writings of unknown writers. She introduced the concept “womanism” to bridge the ideological differences between African American and Euro American feminism on issues of race and gender. As a womanist, she expresses her disagreement with patriarchy and its self-centered humanist ideology. Her novels offer powerful critiques of dominant patriarchal theories by articulating a womanist aesthetic that speaks about the social responsibilities of individuals while cherishing one’s history and culture.

Leslie Silko, who concentrates on ethnic themes, motifs and genres, has played a major role in the second wave of Native American Renaissance. From her childhood onwards, she was impressed by Native American stories, folk-tales, and myths. Through the stories handed down by her grandmother and aunt, she became familiar with the folklore of the Laguna and Keres people (Pueblo people in New Mexico). She deals with the disjunction between cultures. Her novels are testimonies to her mixed heritage of Laguna Pueblo, Mexican, and white ancestors. In her fiction she blends western literary forms with the oral traditions of her Laguna heritage and chronicles Native American themes of time, nature, and spirituality and their connections with the contemporary world. Her novels offer a powerful
critique of the Western imperialistic practice which aims at the destruction of nature and the Native. Even though she started her university education by enrolling for the programme on American Indian law at the University of New Mexico Law School, she soon transferred to the programme on creative writing. She is equally talented in film making, photography (her father was a famous professional photographer) and later started documenting many of her stories. She has been influenced not only by stories, but also by the histories and landscape of the places she has inhabited. She combines visual and verbal textures in her novels and stories. Her works are representations of her mixed ancestry and close family ties, and offer a critique of materialism and societal degeneration. She admits that the single most significant influence in her growth as a writer is her habit of “listening to the people and to the way the stories just keep coming” (Arnold vii). Silko’s novels portray the “return of the repressed” (Krupat, The Voice in the Margin 3). They can be understood as hybrid forms arising out of the general tendencies of North American culture for “confrontation, alienation and discontinuity” (Krupat, New Voices 464).

Silko, who appreciates the matriarchal and fluid nature of the gender roles of the Keresan tradition, testifies to the fact that remembering one’s (hi)stories and roots is very crucial for a writer especially where the geographic locale itself has a major role to play. By retelling oral stories, she re-presents the landscape and its people and exposes another side of
American history. She relates with her Native American tradition through storytelling. Silko is considered with Louise Erdrich, N. Scott Momaday, and Gerald Vizenor as the most representative figures of the Native American renaissance.

In the novels discussed here the African American and Native American reality is critically studied from a Foucauldian Perspective. Questions of power and resistance are central to this study. The study of fiction involves an analysis of ideas and issues involved in the birth of texts and their interpretations. In the postmodern condition, where truth and justice are replaced by selfish motives of the multinationals and powerful nations, history and the past are revisited from a different perspective. The novels analysed here are shaped by a continuing dissatisfaction with the established system and a sense of awe and respect for the myths, stories and traditions which are equally significant in analyzing the history of a nation. They self-consciously employ a range of traditional styles to structure their narratives.

Walker and Silko make use of memories, songs and oral stories to reconstruct history and the nation in a new way. Their conceptualization can be clearly linked to Frantz Fanon’s idea of a literature of combat. “It is the fight for national existence which sets culture moving and opens to it the doors of creation” (244). The novels of Walker and Silko can be considered as examples of the literature of combat as they encourage the “whole people
to fight for their existence as a nation” (Fanon 240). They do not advocate the use of violence, but clings onto memories of the past and cherish traditions that prized human relations and universal coexistence. Their works declare that a nation cannot exist without considering its culture and memories. These two writers tailor myths, fables and forgotten stories attached to the African American and Native American past to look at the history and nationalist positions of America. It is the indispensability of the past and the memories attached to the past that give greater authenticity to their works. By reconstructing memories, myths, and stories of the past, these writers articulate the power of women in the nationalist struggle. Through their novels they developed “a nice collaborative tension, a range of readings that engaged the insights of poststructuralist theories of narrative knowledge—textuality, discourse, enunciation—in order to evoke this ambivalent margin of the nation-space” (Bhabha, Nation and Narration 4).

Walker and Silko associate the female with the national in their novels. It is from their political vision and literary language that the nation emerges as a powerful historical idea. Nation is represented as a cultural entity that needs both the past and the present for its existence. Even though these works are categorised as fiction, they are structured as texts that do “not belong to any genre” (Derrida and Attridge 230). Through a variety of stylizations, these texts produce a “proliferation of languages” and a multiplicity of voices and genres (Bakhtin, Dialogic Imagination 263).
The historiography of American literature has never made serious attempts to preserve the African American narratives and Native American tales. It was Brander Matthews who first attempted to include Native American narratives into the genre of American historiography, stating that American literary history ought not to “contribute to the historical erasure of Native peoples but instead ought to commemorate and to preserve history” (Stokes 35). In the course of explaining the long history of “Americanism,” Brander Matthews quotes Robert Lowell who depicts America as “a good country to live for, and a good country to die for” (Matthews 350). Americanism is “rooted less in a shared culture than in shared political ideals” (Kazin and Mc Cartin 1), because many of the African American, Native American and Chicana militants viewed themselves as victims of Americanism. Michael Kazin and Mc Cartin find out: “Many black, Native American and Chicana militants viewed themselves as victims of Americanism, while white New Leftists dismissed appeals to patriotism as a smokescreen for imperialist war and the squelching of dissent” (6). Many critics are of the view that Americanism is a manipulative articulation of the changing disposition of politicians and thinkers and is an imperial strategy to marginalise the African Americans and the Natives. Here we identify the relevance of looking at the works of Walker and Silko as representations which resist the normalizing attitude of whites. These writers write against the grain of hegemony that marginalizes them.
While Walker emphasizes the significance of preserving a corpus of work that helps preserve tradition, Silko pays attention to the land and the oral and written storytelling practices that became part of her life. Their novels are not simply about “giving an oral account or a genealogical naming of the land and the events which raged over it, but a very powerful need to give testimony to and restore a spirit, to bring back into existence a world fragmented and dying” (L. T. Smith 28). The two writers convey their strong sense of history and their commitment to their culture through their novels.

Walker and Silko employ feminine genres like letter writing, diary scribbling, quilting as well as male practices of documenting events systematically, data collection and statistical documentation to accentuate issues related to history and culture. They carry the gusto of a female writer who is “an amalgamator of disparate registers” (Reynolds 37). This study aims at analysing how Walker and Silko retrieve national identities in their novels, even as they reconstruct genres from an androgynous gender perspective. The novels will be analyzed from a social and historical perspective. A three-phased analysis of the selected works of the two writers are done here. The texts are critically examined on the basis of the interaction of genre, gender and nation with the theme, content and narrative strategies deployed by the authors.
The second chapter, “Engendering Genre” critically looks at the texts as exclusive experiments with the idea of a fictional genre. It also examines how the writers’ treatment of various themes revitalise the concept of genre. The mixing and combining of genres help in presenting their arguments in coordination with other traditional, historical and cultural discourses like stories, myths, songs, and photographs. Walker and Silko are involved in a revolutionary programme of rewriting histories on the bedrock of silenced stories and forgotten histories. This makes their novels resisting paradigms of the Euro American genre models. The transgression of genre discourse and cultural boundaries make their act of writing a “socially symbolic” act (Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* 5).

In the third chapter, “Gender Identities” the generic and national constructs are reconstituted in terms of gender and its ideological aspects, and it looks at how gender has politicized the act of writing. This chapter shows how women writers make use of their gender insights to reinterpret the nation and its histories. The Afro American and Native American literature look at gender as a historically modulated paradigm encoding multiple marginalities, double oppression, ethnicities and contested nationalities. The works of Walker and Silko look at gender as an all-encompassing reality that can be productively adapted for reclaiming one’s lost space.
The fourth chapter, “Nations within the Nation” looks at the reconstruction of nation through interpretation of stories and myths. American history includes heterogeneous groups of people with intersecting national histories. A nation is no longer viewed as a political entity but as an “imagined community” (Anderson 25) and a state of mind. The novels under discussion break the continuity of history by presenting suppressed voices and silenced histories, and exposing the “deceptive continuity” of history (Veyne 18). By questioning the western metaphysics of totality, universality, and self agreement, nationalistic histories are revisioned and remodelled. This chapter is an attempt to reconsider some of the significant themes, conceptualizations and topics of African American and Native American historiography.

The concluding chapter looks at how Walker and Silko are involved in the rewriting of history from a perspective that is different from that of the Euro American narrators. It gives a thematic summary of each chapter and reviews the narrative strategies employed by these writers to portray the female subject and the reality they experience.
Notes

1. This idea is based on Walter Benjamin’s view that the only continuum of history is that of the victors, whereas the history of the oppressed is a discontinuum. See Benjamin, “On the Concept of History” in Selected Writings Vol.4. 395-397.