Chapter 2

Engendering Genre

The term "genre" refers to the stylistic, structural, and thematic conventions that distinguish narratives from one another. As a theoretical construct it dissects literature and categorizes it into different categories. In the texts analysed here singular narratives and voices give way to multiple voices and narratives, where the strict compartmentalization of different genres becomes irrelevant. Fiction has certain underlying presuppositions as an artistic genre. But in the hands of some writers it moves beyond the conceptual horizons of a genre. With their policies of cultural destruction and language enslavement; the texts discussed here become sites for "decentralizations and disunifications" (Bakhtin, “Unitary Language” 272).

Alongside the centripetal forces that argue for political, national and cultural unification of the verbal-ideological world, centrifugal forces also work together with “heteroglossia” as a conscious process to decentralize the supposed uniqueness of unitary languages (Bakhtin, “Unitary Language” 273).

Against the poetics of “the one language of truth” of the medieval church, and the Euro American historians who narrate reality from their perspective only, the writers discussed here make use of generic combinations in their narratives. The opposition between the “discourse of
the real” and the “discourse of the imaginary” becomes significant here. The writer reworks history, digs out the untold and kept-away realities, making use of generic ramifications. Based on the presupposition that generic remodulation is a kind of exploration, generic reworking can be regarded as a cultural tool for social change. An interrogation of the postulates of generic constructs in the novels under discussion brings out critical arguments that are convincing, and crucial.

The novels discussed here are social constructions created by Walker and Silko to bring forth the silenced histories to the reading public. The generic constructions change over time as they are time-bound and relational. Genres are representations of the configurations of textual features which evolve as social knowledge that creates meaning. Along with that, the context also plays a major role in moulding a genre or generic permutations. ‘Genre theory’ considers contexts as “dynamic environments that simultaneously structure and are structured” by story-tellers. A context is not simply some space “outside of text” (Schryer and Spoel 253).

Following Carolyn Miller’s definition of genre as a typified social action that is associated with a recurrent situation, genre can be regarded as constantly in flux. In this process pre-existing genres interact and contextualize the social and cultural, whereby genre proves to be “situational” (Devitt 22) and rhetorical. Through such situational variations transforming national identities get reflected in the novels.
The tradition of African American literature dates from the nation’s early history. Slave narratives, oral and written that were the initial expressions of African American creativity, gave way to the literature of activism and now, after a series of generic interventions and revisions, African American literature has evolved into an entity that can accommodate writers of all social and cultural backgrounds. Memory and narrative are the central concerns for African American women writers. The role of memory in shaping a narrative, and of the “narrative in shaping memory” (narrative and genre) are really significant. They contextualise memories which are a “multiauthored, textual and contextual event,” (Chamberlain and Thompson xiii) by linking narratives that concatenate the past, the present and the future. The richness and power of oral stories are evinced through the cultural and imaginative inclusions that shape the individual’s perception and memory, which recall and recount, describe and interpret, argue and explain one’s past and history.

Native American literature is also associated with political activism. It has emerged in the academic world as marginal and ethnic literatures with the Native American Renaissance of the 1970s. Moving around such themes as white/red conflict, and nature/culture opposition, Native American literature has now started discussing the conflict between “local knowledge and global knowledge” (Kidwell and Velie 8). Local knowledge includes oral histories, stories, myths and folksongs associated with Native American
culture and history, whereas the academic knowledge about Native American history, (western oriented) anthropology and religion are coalesced under global knowledge. The local knowledge and its streams are considered as counter narratives to the western tradition. The painful memories of the Reservation period bleed through the stories of a Native American writer, through generic rescriptings.

Alice Walker looks at ethnicity as a discourse of foundations, origins, memories, stories (oral and written) and histories, which are resources of imagination to create an ethnic interpretation. Like others subjected to European colonialism, Native people have been portrayed as uncivilized primitives lacking in authentic history and political structures. In spite of their heterogeneity they have been treated as a monolithic group. In her essay “Black Writer and the Southern Experience,” Walker speaks about the black Southern writer who inherits a sense of community and along with it the responsibility to speak for that community, to “give voice to centuries not only of silent bitterness and hate but also of neighborly kindness and sustaining love” (In search 21).

Silko enriches the traditions of her foremothers and nourishes the Native American culture, history and values, by invoking a cultural and generational continuity through her stories. The characters grow from a fragmented and estranged self and achieve wholeness and develop a sense of community by accepting the essence of their own self. They get to know
their heritage. Silko narrates the stories through imageries of weaving. The weaving metaphor is sufficient to capture the collective voice of the people whose voice has been silenced by western historians. Her narrative strategies proclaim that history of the world can be restructured. Silko’s stories are reflections of circularity. They are polysemic; they move, and ultimately it is word that circulates through such stories. Elizabeth Meese is of the opinion that stories are co-extensive with memory, and they “(in) form what we ‘see’ as our ‘vision,’ just as they conceal the equally powerful figures that we are unable to read. Our stories make what we see (as) ours” ((Ex)tensions 46).

The generic constructions emulated by these writers are suffused with reflections of the pristine culture inherited by Walker and Silko. John Van Maanen urges that “ethnography should be open to contingency and interpretation as is the concrete social experience upon which it is based” (119). Instead of creating an illusion, the authentic ground of ethnographic truth should be maintained in the narrative. Walker and Silko subvert Western patriarchy’s representation of the colonized as an exotic and uncultured barbarian. On the contrary, they are posited as the victims of colonial exploitation and misrepresentation. This misrepresentation is illustrated by Buell when he speaks about the cultural pluralism of America as a farce (144).
Women’s fiction which is revolutionary in character can be read as instances of genres located within genres. The boundaries of genres, which emerged over time, are always shifting. Fredric Jameson considers the novel to be “the end of genre” (*The Political Unconscious* 137), because of its ability to accommodate so many fluctuations and great moments in history. This ability imparts to women’s fiction the power of transcending generic differentiations, an idea that is captured by Bakhtin’s concept of “novelization” (*Dialogic Imagination* 39).

Western formulations on genre are constructed upon political, cultural, and linguistic foundations which are racialised. In the novels discussed here, we witness how histories shape the flow of the narrative and how they replace social, political and cultural tensions. Internal stratifications of genre occur within the novel which, instead of presenting a unified worldview, proves to be a site of heteroglossia. Walker, for example, through her novels offers multiple narratives and histories from different perspectives.

Generic reworking becomes a means of communicating gendered silences in these novels. The novels become a collage of open-ended stories, where multiple speakers come and interact, where versions of folk-tales and myths are repeated and reworked. We come across open ended stories, where different voices speak simultaneously. Novels also incorporate fragments of stories, discontinuous narratives, letters, songs, photographs,
maps, and historical documents, which link the readers to the struggle waged outside. Erasing western conceptualisations of linear narration, these works, replace it with structures that are more innovative and realistic. The novels are trumpets of change that represent the truths of history, and writing becomes “a simulation of what has been lost to it” (Elam 80). Walker and Silko reject the view of history as an all inclusive and encapsulating narrative. Their stratified and heteroglot discourse transforms these narratives into a hodgepodge of overlapping and contending languages.

African American literature can be comprehended as a response to the displacement of African Americans from their homeland. Walker emphasizes the woman’s role as a storyteller, as one who passes the rich tradition and heritage of the lost homeland to the next generation. She uses the metaphor of “quilting” to elaborate women’s creativity and presents seamstress figures in the novels The Color Purple (1982) and The Temple of My Familiar (1989). This is a symbolism she borrows from the Native American imagery, where weaving implies to interlace, to form a pattern or design, to structure a tale or a poem. In many cultures weaving has been the central metaphor for creation and for the existence of life. Native Americans believe that Spider Woman is the supreme creative deity.

History, being a conceptual container of hybridity and syncretism of cultures, is the backdrop of all the novels that are discussed here. Walker’s
texts are situated within an African American literary and matrilineal artistic tradition. Western literature, which is extremely masculinist and individualistic in its outlook at nature, is criticized by both Walker and Silko. Whereas *The Temple of My Familiar* makes use of fantasy genre to depict histories from multiple points of view, *The Color Purple* makes use of the power of letters to reclaim one’s voice and identity. Celie, the protagonist of *The Color Purple* creates new meanings for her emotional experiences and relations, and letters become a metaphor for her artistic expression. Using black English she transgresses the rules of the hegemony of the white male and decentres meanings. Walker considers personal letters and pages in the diary equally significant as documents of history.

The letters are arranged like the pages of a diary. There are several situations where Nettie tries to teach English to Celie. Celie uses the very same language to write her letters, and she creates new meanings through this language. Rather than the adventure of writing letters, which is similar to Philomela’s song, “her letters shape her experience and thus transform it,” (Fifer 156) and are similar to sewing, and quilting as agencies of self expression. Thus she becomes yet another representative of artists created by Walker. Through her appalling and unstructured language she shocks her readers. History is incorporated into the narrative through Celie’s letters, where Walker tries to stretch its links to the readers by touching their conscience.
By introducing various intertextual elements into the novels, Walker adds to the significance of the theme “blackness.” Bessie Smith, the popular American blues singer, is introduced indirectly through Shug Avery, the blues singer whose song is entitled *A Good Man is Hard to Find*. It is the title of one of the short story collections (1955) of Flannery O’Connor, and the same song was once delivered by the band Morphine. *The Color Purple* is an epistolary fiction, but for Celie it is also a book of revelation. For her, Nettie’s letters are like pages of a history text book that reveals the details of her sad and bitter life. At times the letters written by Celie and Nettie intersect each other. At one point Celie concludes her letter by saying “Amen” as if these letters were her supplications before God. It is in one such letter that Nettie introduces Tashi, Adam’s lover. Later Tashi appears as the protagonist in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. In one of the letters written to Nettie, Celie discusses why the Olinka people chase the blacks out of their land. It was because God found Adam and Eve naked that He cast them out of the Garden of Eden. Here in Olinka the blacks are wearing the colour black, whereas the whites are naked, no black colour to cover their nakedness. “They said anybody looking at white person can tell they are naked, but black people cannot be naked because they cannot be white” (Walker, *Color Purple* 240).

The novel concludes with Celie’s letter which addresses the whole cosmos. She addresses God, stars, trees, the sky, the people, and so on.
Celie’s holistic vision is evident when she narrates the story of her silent fight and her ultimate victory. Walker considers writing and quilting as artistic expressions that link the human and the divine. Memories gain a lot of prominence in this situation, as they link the past, the present and the future. This link is enriched by the richness and power of oral stories.

When Celie addresses the cosmos as “Dear God, Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God” (Walker, Color Purple 249), she regards language as a means to assert her sense of freedom that crosses human boundaries, whose borders cross the horizon. She reincarnates herself as a creator in a new spirit. Byerman justifies this articulation when he speaks about Celie as one who gives a concrete history to her self, her people and her place. “Celie writes herself into humanity and thereby contradicts the stipulation that she be a mere cipher” (Fingering 163). Here Celie is ready to accept and identify the animistic spirit which recognizes God everywhere. Gay Wilentz too agrees with this when she says that the tragic history of Celie is transformed “through this spirit of creation and endurance, the acknowledgement of one’s African heritage, the communication with one’s ancestors, the acceptance of one’s community” (Binding Cultures 79).

The character of Celie in The Color Purple is derived from Walker’s great grandmother. Even if Celie’s letters to Nettie are unread most of the time, the purpose of the letters is accomplished through readers who are the
real bearers of the stories. Thus story telling becomes a collective experience. Walter Ong, who considers the written word as a residue says that the “oral tradition has no such residue or deposit. When an often told story is not actually being told, all that exists of it is the potential in certain human beings to tell it” (11). The letters written by Celie to God are echoes of her outcry. Celie and Nettie gain greater insights into their own nature by articulating their thoughts in the form of letters; their command and power over the language kindle their spirits. Letters and shared experiences bond them, whereas for Shug and Celie, it is the sexual love and the craft of quilting that perpetuate their relationship. The letters help Celie to expend her energies and enable her to examine herself by capturing the world through her words. Celie and Nettie articulate their identity through letter writing, which is a prayer for them. Nettie reveals to Celie a prosperous history of the black race through her letters.

Americans celebrate the 4th July as their Independence day, the day on which Celie also gets liberated from her blindness and ignorance concerning identity. Here the letters work as agents of liberation. Walker produces a multiple text by using various literary strategies. The novel reflects the culture of the society from which the text emanates, and, at the same time, it functions as its critique. Karla F. C. Halloway uses a term “plurisignation” to elaborate the element of polyphony in this and other novels of Walker. The characterisation, the presentation and settings of
events, according to her, are “multiple and layered rather than individual and one-dimensional,” and they illustrate the “dimensions of vision and language” of the writers belonging to this tradition in contemporary literature (618).

While in The Color Purple the epistles strengthen the character of the protagonist, in Meridian (1976) the protagonist gains strength through the stories narrated. The protagonist learns about the Native American culture through her father’s stories, and uses her creativity to pass these stories to the next generation. Walker introduces yet another storyteller, the West African slave woman Louvinie, who weaves “intricate tales with which to entrap people who hoped to get away with murder” (Meridian 42). Her tongue is chopped of as a punishment and is then planted in a garden, from where sprouts a magnolia tree.

In Meridian we find a happy union of spirits and the physical forces. Here Walker pays her respect to an ancestor, Margaret Walker. When Meridian suddenly realizes the change that she received after her encounter with the Native American Sacred Serpent she quotes a Margaret Walker poem, “Let the martial songs be written, . . . let the dirges disappear!” (Walker, Meridian 195). She feels proud of Harriet Tubman, in whose lineage she too belongs, and proclaims that Tubman is “the only American woman who’d led troops in battle” (Walker, Meridian 110). The fictional genre effectively fuses aspects of the society and politics of the time by presenting
characters from multiple perspectives. Characters like Meridian Hill, Trueman Held, and Lynn Rabinowitz blend with the Native American background through the stories narrated. The novel reaffirms Walker’s faith in the process of writing as a “visitation of spirits” (Brown 127).

Through Meridian, Walker brings forth the spirit of her literary foremothers as an act of veneration, those who enkindled the revolutionary spirit that she instigates in her characters. Walker aims to emphasize the role of woman as the agent who passes the African heritage from one generation to the other by describing her womanist perspective as one “that flows from surviving as [black] women in a society based on inequalities” (Townes 10-11). Walker reinstates in this semiautobiographical novel, personal and political themes, whereby it becomes a “retrospective on the social, racial, sexual upheavals that the Civil Rights and the Black Power era produced” (Dickson 217).

Walker’s *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1983) is the story of an old man who helps his granddaughter in the process of her empowerment. The text deals with the psychological growth of Grange and his self awareness which he hands down to his granddaughter Ruth. Walker presents two aspects of language and its power, to bless and to curse others. Brownfield who falls in love with Mem finds in her “another mother, the kind of his own had not been. Someone to be loved and spoken to softly” (Walker, *Third Life* 66). Brownfield realizes the ideal purpose of language through Mem.
Language is not just a channel to express one’s wants and demands, but has its own tenderness. Mem wants to teach him her language of conviviality. She tries to teach him the basics of grammar and syntax, but without any use. Brownfield who suffered the torture of his master cannot tolerate the linguistic corrections imposed upon him by his wife. Walker makes an attempt to reverse the story in Bernard Shaw’s play *Pygmalion* where Mem takes the role of Professor Henry Higgins and Brownfield that of the cockney flower girl Eliza Doolittle. The relationship between Mem and Brownfield can also be considered as a reversal of the male-generated myth of *Pygmalion*. Here Mem is reconstructed by Brownfield by his linguistic rules. Walker says: “He was her Pygmalion in reverse. The first thing he started on was her speech. They had begun their marriage with her correcting him, but after a very short while this began to wear on him” (*Third Life* 80).

This novel describes violence in the family, and uses this theme as a metaphor for racial violence. Walker uses personal bondage to comprehend the dimensions of political bondage. Towards the end, Grange realizes that “the possibility of ‘surviving whole’ resides not in his hatred of whites but in his love for his granddaughter, his reverence for the land, and his African American Southern heritage” (Christian, *Women Writers* 5-6).

While *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* conveys a political message, *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992) deals with the issues of tradition and
culture. It discusses the story of Tashi, who is ready to undergo female circumcision. Walker beautifully portrays the angst and pain suffered by her foremothers, and speaks about the significance of oral storytelling and traditional folktales. The unbearable conditions of the blacks fuse with traditional stories in this narrative. Different voices narrate the novel, and this allows the reader to participate actively in decoding the text. This is the reason why Walker claims that “there is no story more moving to me personally than one in which one woman saves the life of another and saves herself” (Living 19).

We get to know about Tashi’s story through a series of memoirs. These fragmented stories are the building blocks to construct a woman’s crusade. Here Walker presents a testament for the black female creativity, and the characters speak in a “plurality of voices.” As Gwendolyn Henderson has pointed out “Glossolalia” associated with “speaking in tongues,” emphasizes “the particular, private, closed, and privileged communication between the congregant and the divinity” (22). Through the characters, Tashi, Amy, Evelyn and through anthropological and historical details, Walker brings before us the true history of the practice of clitoridectomy. The message that Walker wants to convey through the novel is emphatically presented in its dedication and prologue. The novel’s dedication goes like this: “This Book is dedicated with Tenderness and Respect to the Blameless Vulva” (Walker, Possessing iii). And the prologue is:
“When the axe came into the forest, the trees said the handle is one of us—Bumper Sticker” (Walker, Possessing ix). Walker deconstructs the idea of masterpieces of world literature which often provide quotes for novel prologues by using words from a bumper sticker to introduce her novel.

Walker retells history by voicing the suppressed agonies of the blacks and by breaking the rules of genre construction. Writing for her is inherently a political act with a transformative power. By transforming personal stories, songs and anecdotes into the substance of the novel, she also politicizes subjectivities. The stories she knows about female circumcision and female bondage are stories emanating from kitchen spaces and women’s circles. Through stories based on real life incidents, Walker turns language and memory into instruments of political change.

By re-remembering stories, the characters remake history. Grange in The Third Life of Grange Copeland re-writes history. The stories that he narrates to his granddaughter, and the painful and agitating memories that he carries with him, question the epistemological validity of the history written from a white perspective. Walker illustrates her philosophy of history by blending facts and fiction through multiple narratives.

By the Light of My Father’s Smile (1998) is another novel where history is treated with a tinge of magical realism to bring about a different perspective. Another father-daughter relationship gets disentangled in this
story, where dreams and reality fuse. The readers cannot distinguish whether the novel is a dream narrative or a realistic piece as “the boundaries between genres are shifting and becoming more permeable” (Abercrombie 45). When the novel begins, Senor Robinson’s spirit is shown to be casting its eye on his daughters and their love life, and even on her dreams. In the first chapter of the novel, spirits and angels are the characters.

Senor Robinson, anthropologist and missionary, has come to Mexico to study the Mundos, a mixed-race tribe. His daughters Susannah and Magdalena possess strikingly different characteristics. After his death Robinson’s soul emerges in the afterlife of the Mundo. In the novel Walker deals with the topics of the spiritual power of the blacks, female sexuality and the reconciliation of spirits. As in Ceremony, here also one can see inserted in the novel Mundo songs that proclaim the holistic vision and the ever active spirit of Afro-American culture. One song goes like this;

*Anyone can see the earth*

*is grandchild of*

*the moon*

*and the moon is mother*

*of the night sky.*

*When you die*

*this is the song*

*that will carry you*
The novel deals with some of the disturbing problems of Afro-American community, especially those connected with gender oppression. Through her magical realist narrative Walker explores the “liberating power of human sexuality — in all its orientations — which is always threatened by the dual spectres of patriarchy and traditional, organized religions” (Dickson 219). The novel integrates both songs and dreams for narrating the events and presents living and dead characters as part of the story. The novel is not merely about sexuality, but it also examines the sociohistorical relevance of the Mundos and their culture. Walker experiments with forms and strategies of narration incorporating into this novel elements of myth, history, and fantasy.

The novel’s narrative art is strengthened by its framework of orality. The folktales and moral fables supply a broad and regulated point of reference for the pre-colonial African life articulated in the novel. As Abiola Irele observes, the historical element in Walker’s novel is “endowed with a powerful symbolic charge; history is felt as part of a primordial, organic order of experience” (Narrative History 160). Her innovative narrative style highlights the fact that self realization and self knowledge are the greatest impetus for individual survival. By the Light of My Father’s Smile is the first novel of Walker where a sudden shift occurs in the perception and presentation of the story.
While Walker’s novels are like prayers or supplications, Silko’s are like a ceremony dealing with the cosmic relationship between living beings. Each of Silko’s novels has a unique structure. The characters convey the message of holistic and spiritual integrity that is essential for the existence of living beings. They seem to believe in the centrality of the environment. Her novels are the media through which Silko shares with her readers her personal as well as historical and fictional memories and experiences.

We define each tribe in Native America through their language and their traditions. Their literature comprises songs, tales, jokes and stories that are passed orally from one generation to the next. Native Americans’ life and culture are permeated with elements from religion, hunting strategies, lullabies, prayers, dreams and so on. Their oral literatures unite them. Their literary history is a fusion of memories, fantasies, prayers and rituals. They believe in the holistic power of words. They consider words as spirited beings to spread the light of life everywhere. They believe in the power of storytelling, which helps in the bonding of people. People share their views, values, beliefs, and ideas in storytelling, which realizes “the bonding and animating powers of words—to invoke and actualize the world through a language of experience.” Words are “beings, incantatory, with spirits and bodies.” People look at the stories, songs, visions and names “for power, identity, beauty, peace and survival” (Lincoln 18).
A concern with generic conventions is important in Silko also. Genres guide the audience and readers “to naturalize the ideologies which are embedded in the text” (Feuer 145). This relationship between genres and ideologies arises out of the link with the society, and ultimately “different genres are concerned to establish different world views” (Livingstone 155). This is clearly evident in Silko’s works, Ceremony (1977), Storyteller (1988), Almanac of the Dead (1991), and in Gardens in the Dunes (1999).

Silko’s Ceremony looks at the emotional chaos and physical strain that one undergoes, which is directly linked to political and social questions. Here Silko unfolds her hero’s memories through a series of thoughts, nightmares and dreams. Here it is the memories of the protagonist rather than the story proper that speak and provide the background to the novel. Tayo’s thoughts are narrated along with the traditional Pueblo myth regarding the Thought Woman, and the songs of the humming bird. Tayo’s thoughts beautifully link the story with hidden myths and Laguna beliefs.

In “Discourse in the Novel,” Bakhtin discusses the various obstacles that an individual faces in forging an authentic voice when confronted with the dialogic nature of language. He states that language is not a neutral medium where the speaker’s intentions and feelings move in and out, but is populated with the intentions of others also. The word in language uttered by a person is someone else’s to some extent. The speaker personalises it by investing it with his own thoughts and intentions. Authors appropriate the
language of the master, but adopt it with the semantic rules and intentions of their own language and use it as a medium to present their stories and myths. In a way there is nothing like impersonal or neutral language. “It exists in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions” (Bakhtin, “Unitary language”278).

To cure Tayo of his mental disorder, he is taken to Betonie the medicine man. The medicine man reflects on the significance of ceremonies that are part of the Indian folk culture. These ceremonies have later been appropriated and manipulated by whites for attracting the tourists. Betonie says that it is the Indian witchery that has helped the whites to become masters in colonial conquests. Silko uses songs to teach history to Tayo. Stories and songs remake Tayo’s memories. There is a song like this, which rewrites the historical view about the European empire as the supreme master:

Long time ago
in the beginning
there were no white people in this world
there was nothing European.
And this world might have gone on like that except for one thing:
witchery.
This world was already complete
even without white people

There was everything

including witchery. (Silko, *Ceremony* 132-133)

Silko’s creative vision in *Ceremony* has been moulded by the land and by a multiple range of oral and written story telling performances that come as part of her life at Laguna Pueblo. Cultural anthropologists consider Laguna as one of the most adaptive Pueblo communities in the South West. Many of their folktales and narratives exemplify how they preserve the oral tradition through complex strategies of defiance and acculturation. Like her native Laguna, Silko’s work is a study in cultural mediation and spirit transformation. Again and again her creative vision celebrates the “transformative power of story and place, working together for life in creative way” (Nelson 245). The several intertextual elements in the novels of Silko are related to what Mikhail Bakhtin calls double-voiced discourse, which includes parodic narration and the hidden polemic. He expatiates on the topic by putting it as a hidden attack, where the author’s discourse is aimed at another discourse, which is another “assertion, on the same topic” (Gates 111). This is an instance of “discourse with an orientation towards someone else’s discourse” (Bakhtin, *Problems* 199).

Tayo listens to the old language during his encounter with the medicine man. He “had to strain to catch the meaning, dense with place names he had never heard. His language was childish, interspersed with
English words, and he could feel shame tightening his throat” (Silko, 
*Ceremony* 34). The politics of colonization is reflected in the 
institutionalization of the natives as a noble savage or as an uncouth 
barbarian who doesn’t know anything about civilization. Such notions will 
serve the political purpose of the colonizers. Silko uses stories and histories 
in her novels to write the vision of an alternative future. She depicts the 
historical growth of witchery in the world and the various stages that the 
world has gone through in its history. She comes up with a song that would 
remind one of Yeats’ *Second Coming*. A different version of the song 
reappears in *Storyteller* also.

*They will poison the water*

*they will spin the water away*

*and there will be draught*

*the people will starve.*


*Corpses for us*

*Blood for us*

*Killing killing killing killing*


*Stolen rivers and mountains*

*the stolen land will eat their hearts*
It’s already turned loose.

It’s already coming

It can’t be called back. (Silko, Storyteller 134-137)

*Ceremony* is a lyrical novel, whose story for a greater part is narrated through songs. When Tayo is taken to Ku’oosh, the medicine man is heard chanting traditional songs. Tayo’s displaced mind can identify the living spirit in Ts’eh who later appears as Spider Woman in the cliff. The fate of the Yellow Woman and Silva in Silko’s short story *Yellow Woman* is repeated in the case of Tayo and Ts’eh. Silko creates a narrative maze out of her stories, which connects the tradition of myths, with the land and the people. Through such narrative mazes and imbroglios Silko parodies the Western discourse of literature in an act of insurrection against the white’s dominance.

We can find resonances of the *Almanac of the Dead* in *Ceremony*. The arrival of the whites and the spread of Christianity troubled the fifth world; Silko repeatedly stresses this idea in these two novels. In *Ceremony* she says, “all of creations suddenly had two names: an Indian name and a white name” (*Ceremony* 68). In her view, it is Christianity that separates the people from themselves. Tayo’s painful memories are interwoven with stories related to Native American deities. In her stories human beings, animals, big and small, insects, trees and plants all dwelled together peacefully, where the relationship between the land and the people was one of holistic
coexistence. Tayo’s old Grandma remembers the days when “things were different, [when] the animals could talk to human beings and many magical things still happened” (Silko, Ceremony 94-95).

Silko winds up her novel with a reference to the tradition of storytelling. Tayo realizes the power of storytelling and sees how his story as a war veteran is related to the story of the land and how the stories cross the boundaries set up by human beings based on colour, race and nation. Tayo is cured of his trauma through stories. He realizes towards the end that everything in this world is interconnected, that “all the stories fit together—the old stories, the war stories, their stories—to become the story that was still being told” (Silko, Ceremony 246).

He realizes towards the end that there is no need to be ashamed of the past. No memories are painful. He learns to gain strength from memories through the help of stories that connect him back to his land and the people. For him, “The ear for the story and the eye for the pattern were theirs; the feeling was theirs: we come out of this land and we are hers” (Silko, Ceremony 255). This realization of everything related to the earth is typical of the Native American holistic faith, which gives utmost significance to the land and its people. The novel ultimately is about stories and ceremonies. With the help of stories, the people ward off illness and death. The Natives believe in the absolute power of stories:
You don’t have anything
if you don’t have the stories.
Their evil is mighty
but it can’t stand up to our stories
So they try to destroy our stories
let the stories be confused or forgotten. (Silko, Ceremony 2)

Silko writes at length about this long tradition of storytelling and its power to disturb spatial and temporal boundaries. The Native Americans consider stories as an integral part of their existence. Stories create a maze which interconnects the past, the present, the future and all the ceremonies and traditions of their culture. In her essay “Language and Literature from a Pueblo Indian Perspective,” Silko writes that “anthropologists and ethnologists have, for a long time, differentiated the types of stories the Pueblo people tell. They tended to elevate the old, sacred, and traditional stories and to brush aside the family stories. . . . But in Pueblo culture, these family stories are given equal recognition” (Yellow Woman 85). Thus storytelling for her is a domestic as well as a public act.

James Ruppert comments on the social discourse that has been transformed into myth in the Ceremony. Even though the novel begins with the Laguna discourse, it suddenly switches to a fragmented narrative that reflects the troubled and stressed condition of Tayo. Ruppert observes that the text advances in the linear fashion, even though it is not chronologically
organized. In spite of its fragmented narrative, the text and the content have coherence in narrating the story. The textual pattern of the western psychological novel is adapted to tell the story of the Native American healing. “As Tayo heals and the fragmentation of his life and of the text retreat, he emerges fully into the world of myth and ceremony, seeing the web of stories” (Ruppert 79). Tayo reads his life as part of the Pueblo myth. It is stories that keep the people alive. They create a web which weaves the individual into the myth and culture of the community. The personal is not only political, but it is also mythical in Silko’s Ceremony.

As a storyteller, Silko’s place in Native American literature is undisputed. Storyteller is a strongly polyphonic text, where we listen to the stories and voices of other native and non-native storytellers. We find visual stories and talking pictures, as well as different versions of the same stories here. Silko provides the background of some of the stories narrated to her by Aunt Susie and Aunt Alice. They “would tell me stories they had told me before but with changes in details or descriptions. . . . There were even stories about the different versions of stories and how they imagined these different versions came to be” (Silko, Storyteller 227). She speaks about the theories behind the stories by coalescing epistles, voices of Native American deities, traditional figures, modern day incarnations of ancient figures.

Silko’s novels help in the wider circulation of Native American stories. Stories which have so far remained static with reference to time and
space are displaced and presented before a wider audience through her novels. Stories are taken from their immediate surroundings and placed before an audience who are new to it. The Navajos believe that their mythology will retain its power and vitality only as long as it stays within the community. Silko takes the stories out of the community and shows the world that there is power in the stories even outside the community. There are also photographs in the novel which discharge the same function as that of the stories narrated by Aunt Susie, Grandma Amooh, Grandpa Hank. The photographs provide a fusion of memory and imagination, and as Bernard A. Hirsch comments,

> The Photographs, however, as Silko uses them, do more than provide a survival record. As we shall see, they involve the reader more fully in the story telling process itself and because they are part of many of the stories and because many of the stories can be traced in the photographs . . . they expand the reader’s understanding of individual works and also suggest structural and thematic links between them. (152-153)

The photographs serve as productive representations. They reproduce elements of the pre-existing world and establish a discourse which constructs “whatever is in the image as object of consumption—consumption by looking as well as often quite literally by purchase” (Kuhn
These photographs help in contextualising the backdrop of the narrative and connect the novel to history and reality.

Walker’s *The Color Purple* and Silko’s *Storyteller* can be read as instances of resistance to attempts at linguistic colonization. The novelists use language as a medium to mount their protests against the Euro-American masters. Through these novels they create alternate cartographies and alternate histories. We come across varieties of American discourse through their writings. They urge a turn towards native modes of thinking about culture, history, and literature. These narratives can be included among “hundreds, thousand of little dissident narratives of all sorts . . . produced in spite of all attempts to repress them . . . circulating inside or even initially, outside the boundaries of the totalitarian state” (Caroll 75).

These native stories also link the writers to the family and tribe. For them most of the stories are like prayers, and there is a spiritual link between their stories and their exegesis. Storytelling is an act of survival for these writers. As Kimberly M. Blaeser points out, Native American stories are about “intricately linked relationships,” and “intersections.” The Native American life reflects a fluidity that disallows “complete segregation between experiences of life and death, physical and spiritual, past and present, human and nonhuman. Thus they are reflected in cycles that involve return, reconnection, and relationship” (557).
Silko’s comments on the structure of expression reveals the difference between the narrative strategies of Native writers and master narrators:

“The structure of Pueblo expression resembles something like a spider's web— with many little threads radiating from a center, criss-crossing each other. As with the web, the structure will emerge as it is made, and you must simply listen and trust, as the Pueblo people do, that meaning will be made” (Silko, “Language and Literature” 54). Thus this narrative style is linked to their culture and lifestyle. They know of no aesthetics that is removed from their myths and culture.

Silko’s respect for storytelling is evident in her art. It is revealed through her dedication on the first page of the novel _Storyteller_. She dedicates this book “to the storytellers/ as far as memory goes and to the telling/ which continues and through which they all live/ and we with them” (Silko, _Storyteller_ v). She emphasizes the significance of storytelling in the Pueblo tradition. She says that stories always bring people together, “keeping this whole together, keeping this family together, keeping this clan together. ‘don’t go away don’t isolate yourself because we’ve all had these kinds of experiences’. . . . This separation not only endangers the group but the individual as well—one does not recover by oneself” (Silko, _Storyteller_ 86). Silko introduces her Aunt Susie as a keeper of the long tradition of storytelling, a tradition that disseminates an entire culture of oral history.
Silko observes that history itself is a combined effort of listening and remembering of those stories. In the chapter “Storyteller,” we see both the storyteller and the listener tell stories, thereby making it difficult to decide who the real storyteller is. Silko gives an explanation to this in another story when Aunt Susie says that this kind of storytelling practice is quite natural in her culture. Silko moves against the white theorists and their generic formulas and patterns. The oral practice of storytelling gives more freedom to the teller and each modification is with the definite object of amusing readers and listeners. The story within the story technique adds a metafictional touch to the work. Just like Ceremony, which can be regarded both as a war narrative and a piece of metafiction, Storyteller can be considered both as an anthology of stories, songs and photographs and also as a critical work. Silko indirectly justifies this when she says, “that is the trouble with writing . . . /You can’t go on and on the way we do/when we tell stories around here. /People who aren’t used to it get tired” (Silko, Storyteller 110).

In all her novels Silko experiments with oral storytelling practices. She invites the reader to participate in the story by filling in the gaps. Albums, diaries, silences, and poems are inserted in the stories. The novelist uses strategies that disrupt the dominant style of historiography. These strategies definitely instigate the readers to participate in the act of storytelling. Her stories can be read as illustrations of Wolfgang Iser’s views
on reading. Iser says at length about the reader’s role in unravelling the patterns of the text. Writers use various “perspectives,” which “awaken the responses within the reader” (Iser 51). It is through the interaction between the reader and the text that the text receives its value. The true pleasure of reading lies in engaging “the reader’s imagination in the task of working things out for himself, for reading is only a pleasure when it is active and creative” (Iser 51). Several of Silko’s works can be said to corroborate this observation regarding the active co-operation between the writer and the reader.

We can read six different versions of the Yellow Woman story in Silko. Caught in the web of storytelling, she invites the reader to enjoy the passion of reading stories. She proves that words have the power to “make things happen, ritualized in song, sacred story, and prayer.” Language has an empowering role and it connects “people with their native environment” (Lincoln 43).

In the “Story teller’s Escape,” Silko acknowledges stories as the sole support of Native Americans. She says in an interview: “We make no distinctions between stories—whether they are history, whether they are fact, whether they are gossip,—these distinctions are not useful when we are talking about this particular experience with language” (Yellow Woman 60). People’s stories have the same share in the construction of Native American history as the stories of war veterans and heroes. That is why Silko says:
The storyteller keeps the stories
all the escape stories
she says “With these stories of ours
we can escape almost anything
with these stories we will survive.” (Silko, *Storyteller* 247)

Silko speaks about the evolution of the visual image in her essay
collection *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit*. This is a justification for
her inclusion of photographs in her novel *Storyteller*. “From the spoken word
or storytelling comes the written word, as well as the visual image. The next
part of this book is caught up with representation and visualization of
narrative, of storytelling; Mayan folding books, murals, and finally
photography with narrative are explored” (Silko, *Yellow Woman* 21). The oral
nature of the story makes it interactive and allows it to transgress the
author’s authority over the text. Silko says:

Thus stories about the Creation and Emergence of human
beings and animals into this world continue to be retold each
year for four days and four nights during the Winter solstice.
The *hummah-hah* stories related events from the time long ago
when human beings were still able to communicate with
animals and other living things. But beyond these two
preceding categories, the Pueblo oral tradition knew no
boundaries. (*Yellow Woman* 31)
Writing and ethnography are both narrative acts. Silko’s retelling of old stories involves structural changes which also lead to a “radical shift in the social context” (Bruner 151). New stories emerge when there are new realities to be presented. These new realities are not a result of anthropological field work and research, but emerge from conditions of the world, from history. The narrative structures change to accommodate new political changes and views. Thus “new narratives open up new spaces in discourse” coming in the wake of the “gaps and silences of the previous era” (Foucault, Order of Things 207). The stories are incomplete and get their meaning from the present, and will be considered incomplete in the future too. These ideologically imbued cultural narratives prove that truth in the ultimate analysis is a “culturally defined” category (Clifton 24).

Silko’s Almanac of the Dead (1991) is a supreme example of a novel that presents no individual hero, but becomes an account of the life and struggles of the Native Americans. This novel is political in nature, its plot spread over a collective space. Silko presents a host of characters from a variety of viewpoints. The novel is a narrative of estrangement that depicts the shattered social climate of a colonized culture. Memory is a significant issue in this novel that reclaims and retells the past from a new perspective. Memory which is socially constructed transforms and is transformed by history. This turbulent and riotous novel goes against the discipline of linear narration. The title of the novel itself is a clear pointer to this. It begins with
the map of Mexico. It presents the ancient tribal text of the ‘Americas,’ and foretells the future of America. There, the ancient prophecies foretell the arrival of Europeans in America and also the disappearance of everything European in the course of time.

*Almanac of the Dead* begins with the story of the dispossessed and displaced people of America. Almost all the characters in the novel are haunted by the past and the cruel memories of the past. The novel’s overall scheme and narration is like an almanac, where historical details and landmarks are compiled through different narrators, which include both human beings and animals. The central character of the novel, the Giant Serpent, appears in Book Five of Part One, where we get a glimpse of the almanac, and the message of the Spirit Snake.

Lecha, the custodian of the Almanac, listens to the story narrated by Yoeme. The spirits authorize the children to carry the Almanac to the North. And the native people believe that if they are successful in preserving at least a part of their almanac they can return to their nation and regain it someday. “They were told the ‘book’ they carried was the ‘book’ of all the days of their people. These days and years were all alive, and all these days would return again. The ‘book’ had to be preserved at all costs” (Silko, *Almanac* 247). Later out of hunger one of the girls secretly chews and sucks the edges of the brittle horse gut pages. They make stew out of its pages. The
Almanac thus becomes the life-giving, life-sustaining source of the Native people.

The novel prophecies the reassertion of Native values as Native people take back the colonized land. The Almanac carries with it immense prophetic and magical qualities. It possesses countless physical and spiritual properties to guide the people and strengthen them. Silko structures her novels like a spider’s web. Her novels always begin with the land and after much meandering will ultimately return to the land. There is a strong relationship between human identity, imagination and storytelling in her novels, which she elaborates using the metaphor of ‘The spider’s web’ in *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit* (1996). Her novels, she says, are “inextricably linked to the land, to Mother Earth, just as the strands of the spider’s web radiate from the centre of the web” (*Yellow Woman* 21).

*Almanac of the Dead* (1991) is structured like an encyclopaedia, where numerous stories and histories come together. The conventions of linear narration followed in Eurocentric historical practices get subverted here. Daria Donnelly speaks about Silko’s historiographic practice as one that involves a “struggle for domination between competing stories” (245). The old man in Part Two of the novel believes that the sun and the stars come from a deep blue darkness called the Big River or the Milky Way. The old man presents a different version of American history, which in effect is a deconstruction of the western notion of history. He tells Menardo:
The ancestors had called Europeans ‘the orphan people’ and had noted that as with orphans taken in by selfish or cold-hearted clanspeople, few Europeans had remained whole. They failed to recognize the earth was their mother Europeans were like their first parents, Adam and Eve, wandering aimlessly because the insane God had sired them had abandoned them. (Silko, Almanac 258)

While the First Part of the novel introduces the plight of Mexico through the eyes of characters like Sterling, Lecha, Zeta, Seese and others, the Second Part introduces stories of love and deception, along with the political and economic history of Mexico. This history is woven into the main narrative through the character Tacho, who is an Indian driver.

Edward Mendelson defines a novel of this dimension as an “encyclopaedic narrative” (9) which “renders the full range of knowledge and beliefs of a national culture, while identifying the ideological perspectives from which that culture shapes and interprets its knowledge” (162). While delineating the features of an encyclopaedic work, Mendelson says that “[e]ach major Western national culture, as it becomes fully conscious of itself as a unity, produces an encyclopedic author” (161). The novel becomes an encyclopaedia of the life of the Native Americans, which simultaneously becomes an encyclopaedia of literary styles.
Silko’s storytelling places the incidents in the wider terrain of Pueblo history. She speaks about the strength of the natives who have survived five hundred years of genocide. She implies that the strength of native culture lies in its ability to absorb and transform European culture. She illustrates how Native storytelling and the oral tradition theorize the world. *Almanac* constructs spiritual, literal and metaphorical landscapes. Thus Silko recreates old genres to represent contemporary history. The narrative thread interweaves themes of storytelling, history and prophecy as well as oral and written traditions. She believes in stories and their power to portray reality. These stories help to preserve the continuity between the past and the present. Edward Hufstetler has a lot to say about Silko’s narration of history as a continuity between ancestral spirits, the living community and the land: “The spirits that inhabit it from the very fabric of the what Silko calls 500-year resistance, the 500-year war of indigenous peoples, and all those characters in the novel who help create that fabric understand its spiritual nature” (14). The novelist looks at the significance of the stories, the value system and the cultural traditions of Native America in order to re-evaluate the very basis of American culture and its dependence on indigenous knowledge.

In *Almanac* Silko has recreated the sacred Maya story of Popul Vuh, taking her readers on an epic journey through the contemporary underworld of America, moving from Alaska to New Mexico and beyond. She
places the appearance of Europeans on the shores of Mexico and the subsequent genocidal history within the Native story of witchery and prophecy. The Native people themselves sometimes misinterpret old prophetic stories. Silko gets the story right by transforming an old narrative into modern time and space. It is Silko’s warning to a world on the threshold of destruction. She uses narrative “to shift the reader’s experience of time and the meaning of history as stories that mark certain points in time.”

Myths are incorporated into the stories as they alter the readers’ experience of time and reality without affecting the story “made of myths—all sorts of myths from the Americas including modern myths” (Silko, Yellow Woman 140).

*Almanac* documents five hundred years of colonialism, genocide and racial discrimination in the new world. Silko connects that suppressed history to the present social policies of a group of nation states with in the Americas to highlight the significant political issues of the day. She disrupts patriarchal and Eurocentric narrative strategies and declares the authenticity of indigenous narration by calling forth Aztec and Mayan libraries to challenge the modernity claims of Euro American cultures. In Part Two of the novel she highlights the cultural significance of the stories. For the Native Americans stories and histories have always been sacred. They are related to their being and existence. For them history is the sacred text. The most complete history is the most powerful force. Uncirculated stories are
lost forever. The natives summoned their ancestors’ spirit by these stories. Even Marx recognized that “within ‘history’ reside relentless forces, powerful spirits, vengeful, relentlessly seeking justice” (Silko, Almanac 316).

In Part Three entitled “Africa,” where Silko’s narrative is both descriptive and poetic, Clinton speaks about his ideas and thoughts about Africa. In Clinton’s notebook we find both verse pieces and prose pieces. “The Americas” includes Angelita’s opinion about Marx and his faith in stories. She says that ancestral spirits will come wherever the Native American stories are told. Silko delineates the power of stories in history using Marx as an agency. Angelita describes how Marx gathered details about factory workers, believed to bring into being a powerful and magical assembly of stories. Marx really believes in the immense strength and impetus possessed by these stories. In Angelita’s words: “Marx, more tribal Jew than European, instinctively knew the stories, or ‘history,’ accumulated momentum and power. No factory inspector’s ‘official report’ could whitewash the tears, blood, and sweat that glistened from the simple words of narratives” (Silko, Almanac 520).

Indians cannot define their identity or their existence without referring to the land they inhabit. They retain connection with their land and their native earth through the art of storytelling. This power of storytelling can spin webs around “otherness and loss in ways that are creative, meaningful and ultimately healing” (Salyer 268). Storytelling and healing
together weave a web in a ceremony that commemorates the living and sacred spirits that are pagan in the European eye. The art of storytelling is a living tradition for them. Ridington justifies this when he says that “they lived in a world of storied experience. They have lived in a conversation with the spiritual. They have brought a world into being through discourse” (149). He points out that the Native American stories are not linear but are circular; they do not begin and end like the lines of words that make up a book. On the contrary, “they stop and start at meaningful points within a circle. Stories, songs and ceremonies constitute a body of tribal literature passed down from generation to generation” (Ridington 112). These stories are their life breath. They are the fountainhead of their life. As the novel says: “If the people had not retold the stories, or if the stories had somehow been lost, then the people were lost. The ancestor’s spirits were summoned by the stories” (Silko, *Almanac* 316).

In the chapter “Angelita La Escapia Explains Engels and Marx,” Silko describes how Marx is criticized by the stories of exploitation and misuse of power. As El Feo says in the succeeding chapter, it is the land that matters most of all. True leaders will always demand the return of the land, whereas fake leaders will give all sorts of excuses and promise free gasoline, free generators, free automobiles and so on. These are tricks with which the leaders fool the people. This recurring strategy of the first world nations continues in the twenty first century when we speak about such things as
the global village and global economy and, at the same time, lose no
opportunity to exploit third world nations. But for the Native American, the
land is what matters most. “First the land. Without the land there was no
need for chain saws or motor cycles; without the land, there was no place to
set the generator or TV” (Silko, Almanac 524).

There is yet another chapter in the same part titled “On Trial for
Crimes against Tribal Histories.” For a moment the novel appears like a
historical document where Angelita lists out a series of dates and events. So
the book is exactly an almanac and a history text which digs out the details
of a suppressed and untold history. After the European invasion, Native
American resistance gained a new vigour and momentum. European
historians are reluctant to include these uprisings and revolutions in any of
their history textbooks. Because in Angelita’s words, “Indigenous American
uprisings had been far more extensive than any Europeans wanted to admit,
not even the Marxists, who were jealous of African and Native American
slave workers who had risen up successfully against colonial masters
without the leadership of a white man” (Silko, Almanac 527).

In the following chapter we come across references to Albert
Hamilton Fish who is an American cannibal and a sado-masochistic serial
killer. He is a child molester who prepares dishes out of human flesh and
blood. Beaufrey is making a life study about Albert Fish and the European
mind set of killing people. According to Beaufrey, there is a connection
between human cannibals and the aristocracy. Albert Fish belongs to a wealthy family; Beaufrey links this idea of aristocracy and cannibalism to the ideology of sangre pura, which is same as the one propagated by Hitler during the Nazi Holocaust. The novel reveals the Masters’ mindset to the readers and indicates its connection with the mind of a criminal. Beaufrey thinks: “In the beginning, European aristocracy had risen above the common soil; the royalty had been superior beings who had survived the test of combat’s fire and steel. But two world wars had consumed Europe’s best blood; after the First World War, true aristocracy had virtually been annihilated” (Silko, Almanac 535). Silko compares the attitude of European aristocracy to the attitude of a criminal and belittles the significance of European masters and their power. It is a parodic comparison, which is yet another strategy of the writer’s polemics.

In the Fifth Part of the book many characters who have already appeared re-appear and disappear. We find a cyclical pattern in the narration. Silko truly transgresses the strict divisions of genres. While describing the nature of the Native American spirits, she brings before us the myth of the Buffalo Man, who seduced the Yellow Woman, and whose spirit moved effortlessly from the human body to the buffalo bull’s body. Through Wilson Weasel Tail, the novelist gives us the reasons to use verse pieces in her novel: “The people needed poetry; poetry would set the people free; poetry would speak to the dreams and to the spirits, and the people would
understand what they must do” (Silko, Almanac 713). The novel lays bare
Silko’s attempts at generic reworking and modifications. The characters
justify the writer’s view and her freedom in suggesting modifications to the
conventions of genre.

Gardens in the Dunes (1999) is a supreme instance of a novel that
symbolically presents natives’ urge to reconstruct a nation exploited by
Euro-American imperialism. Silko accomplishes this by making use of
nineteenth century gardening ideologies and strategies of the U.S. as
contrasted with the subsistence farming practices employed by Sand
Lizards’ (a native tribe in America). The novel presents the story of the
journey of Indigo, who has been driven out of Sand lizards and is forced to
travel through different places. In an interview with Ellen L. Arnold, Silko
makes clear why she chooses this topic concerning the aesthetics of
gardening to speak about imperialist policies. She says:

But I try to have Indigo see the gardens without all the
baggage that comes along with them . . . And that is one of the
recurring things in it—gardens, innocence, safety. But also
gardens can mean betrayal, plotting. The wicked old Popes
used to go into the garden to plot the deaths of Bishops and
Cardinals they didn’t like. Jesus got betrayed in the garden of
Gethsemane. That’s intentional, to have the range of possible
ways of looking at the gardens. (Arnold 183-184)
Gardens are symbolic representations of women’s creativity. In her novels Walker makes use of forms of artistic expression specific to women like writing diaries and letters. Gardens in a way are also related to women and their psyche, and they represent women’s creativity. Silko affirms in one of her interviews that the garden represents the miniature of a world and it helps the people to see things in a different perspective and the possible ways to connect things in a spiritual fashion.

In the novel garden is a trope employed by Silko to look at the difference in the attitudes of the Euro-Americans and native people. Edward, representing the European imperialistic attitude is far more interested in destructive forms of plant harvesting and relocation. He visits exotic places and collects rare plant specimens (orchids) for wealthy collectors. On the other hand, Indigo during her journey visits numerous gardens and collects seeds and tubers, and she brings them back with an intention to introduce the new plants to the gardens in the dunes. This shows the difference in their perception of nature and in appropriating things.

As in her earlier works Ceremony and Storyteller, here also Silko employs the imagery of a web with the Earth as its centre. Indigo’s journey to her native land is similar to the journey of Tayo in Ceremony and the twin sisters’ wanderings in Almanac. In the present journey, Hattie seems to gain more knowledge and insight into her proposed thesis on the role of the
mother goddess in world religions. Unlike *Almanac of the Dead*, the encyclopaedic novel that delineates the history of America and its people, *Gardens in the Dunes* makes use of plants and flowers to symbolically represent the ties between a land and its people. It tells how the land can both nourish its people, and make them feel strangers to the land.

“Indigo scooped up some stew with a piece of tortilla

“Look,” She said to the twins. “Do you see this?”

“When kind of potato, isn’t it?” Vedna fished one out of her stew and popped it into her mouth. . .

Maytha stirred her stew with a piece of tortilla and examined the vegetable—it was a gladiolus spud! She laughed out loud.

“You can eat them!” she exclaimed. Those gladiolus weren’t only beautiful; they were tasty! (Silko, *Gardens* 475-476)

Here gladiolus symbolically represents the nourishing power of the earth. In the novel there is another instance where gladiolus is portrayed as protectors of the earth: “Down the shoulder of the dune to the hollow between the dunes, sliver white gladiolus with pale blues and pale lavenders glowed among the great dark jade datura leaves” (Silko, *Gardens* 476). While in *Almanac* the twin sisters sustained themselves with the help of the horse-gut pages of the almanac, in *Gardens in the Dunes*, Indigo and Sister Salt planted some of the seeds that they collected during their journey and ate the rest of it to sustain themselves.
The novel beautifully looks at the effects of colonization on native people. Against the patriarchal notions of Christianity, Silko presents gnostic scriptures. Hattie, the Euro-American counterpart of Indigo, deals with the “female spiritual principle” in gnostic cosmogony. Silko incorporates Christian texts into the historical Ghost Dance, by presenting the gnostic texts in their revised form. The texts provide narratives that help the sisters to survive in the gardens in the dunes. These instances are subversive steps for they utilize the tools of the oppressor against the oppressors and the original meaning of the text is twisted to present the Native population as the victors. Silko makes an attempt to revise patriarchal religious texts by rewriting the early history of the church. The “gardens” in the title itself is a subversion of the patriarchal Christian concept of the Garden of Eden. The characters, Indigo and Sister Salt are in search of their lost history and this history is depicted through their journeys and their knowledge of plants. Silko herself has stated in an interview, “Everywhere the colonials went, the plants came back from there” (Arnold 20).

Thus the stories of Indigo, Sister Salt and Hattie deal with a much broader history of the American imperialist policies and military conquests. The generic combinations in the novel are reflections of the histories that are silenced in conventional histories and colonial narratives. To portray the tragic story of a land and its people Silko makes use of the stories of the plants and their displacement, the flooding of native lands, the destructive
policies of the government, etc. The novel thus gains the significance of a
global fiction through its innovative generic reconstructions.

Devitt in *Writing Genres* (2004) observes that independent cultures
and histories play a major role in constructing genres. By observing the
genres and the styles adopted by Walker and Silko, one can arrive at
interesting conclusions on personal and political, individual and social
aspects of history and society. They make new experiments in the
construction of genres just to make sure that what they want to convey to
the reading public is conveyed in full force and vigour. They articulate
histories through stories. For Walker and Silko, stories are the agencies that
help them to look at the hidden contours of the past and the present. If they
want to tell it with full force, they will need various strategies, including that
of genre.

For African and Native Americans, their history is related to myths
and stories rather than to expeditions and conquests often appearing in
white histories. In the novels of Walker and Silko myths are integrated with
ideological discourses and historical narration. Through this process of
integration, the present is often considered as a “bundle of meaning”
(Strauss 42). When we analyze their observation regarding myth making
with special reference to Slotkinds’ argument that myth “can only have a
historical foundation,” it can be inferred that we can “demystify our history
only by historicizing our myths—that is by treating them as human
creations, produced in a specific historical time and place, in response to the contingencies of social and personal life” (Slotkin 80).

Walker and Silko re-articulate generic constructs and their conventions. By developing the various hidden faculties associated with genre they draw a connecting link between nature and culture and also between the past and the present. Because “genre is not simply ‘given’ by the culture: rather, it is a constant process of negotiation and change” (Buckingham 137). By twisting language and its multifaceted potentialities these authors subvert the Eurocentric generic system. The revolutionary genre reconstructions of Walker and Silko become a political act when they are placed in the canonical context of the dominant Euro American generic thinking. Peter Hitchcock is of the view that generic variations are prone to transformations to accommodate changing social values and ideologies. “What is required is a mode of analysis that takes genre seriously enough to fathom the conditions under which particular genres may appear and expire” (311). The novels that are discussed here comprise traditional stories, folk tales, photographs, Bible versions, diary pages, data from history, poems, etc. The novels of Walker and Silko prove that the art of storytelling, which is a historical as well as a political act, is flexible and that they have a synthesizing vision which embraces every being on the earth.

Genre gets engendered here, in the hands of these two women writers, who retell myths, stories and folksongs to unravel history from their
point of view. Walker and Silko interpret and recreate existing stories, as writers as well as critics at the same time, and rewrite history and historiography in the process. By destabilising conservative notions of gender ideals using generic reworking, Walker and Silko enact a double critique of western patriarchy. The intertextual parodies that are used in the texts are a result of the “critical reworking of the past” (Federici 89). These texts are historiographic metafictions in which “textuality is inserted into history and into the social and political conditions of the discursive act itself,” (Hutcheon 81) and the novels become a “metafictionally self conscious and self regulating signifying system of literature” (Hutcheon 99). By doing this, Walker and Silko present a women’s literary tradition where the texts re-invoke the past and yoke it with the present by destabilising the canon.