Chapter 3

Gender Identities

Gender identity is a variable that depends upon the contingencies of culture and history. Foucault regards it as a representation as well as self representation, which is the “product and process of a number of social technologies” (History of Sexuality 127). Works of literature, especially by women, have seriously foregrounded the conceptualization of gender. The conceptual structure designated by feminists and social scientists as the “sex-gender system” is a topic of concern for theorists and critics. Gender is a “re-presentation,” and a “construction”. This concept plays a significant role in what Louis Althusser calls the “ideological state apparatus,” and paradoxically it also discards the idea of the “representation of gender as an ideological misrepresentation” (De Lauretis 3).

Unlike the activists of versions of the Western feminism who object to the representation of women as the other in a patriarchal society, Walker and Silko track down forgotten historical and mythical figures in African American and Native American tales and myths. They want to rescue women from obscurity and fill the gender gap in history and art. These writers look at the issues of racism, sexism, capitalism and other oppressions to which women are exposed.
With the publication of Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), American feminist criticism gained a new appearance against the conventional view of women as a contended housewife taking care of household chores and duties, whose identity is related to the acceptance of “sexual passivity,” “male dominance” and “child-bearing” (Leitch 262). Along with this there also arose many emancipatory movements and critical tendencies. American feminist literary criticism is the meeting place of various subgenres of feminism, including Jewish feminism, Islamic feminism, African American feminism, Chicano feminism, Native American feminism, etc.

Feminism as a political force revises the concepts of canon and genre and the legacy of literary history. Before the emergence of subgenres like African American feminism and Chicano feminism, most of the feminist theorists had failed to speak from the point of view of a consolidated identity. Teresa De Lauretis formulates her theory on the understanding that the construction of gender occurs through various “technologies,” “institutional discourses,” and “representations of gender” (18). She says that gender exists in “the margins of hegemonic discourses” along with such expressions in the dominant discourses (18).

Race, class, sexuality, and gender appear as conflicting topographies in the novels of Walker and Silko. Their memories which are closely related
to gender constructs help the characters achieve a sense of wholeness. Judith Butler observes that gender always conceals its sources. It becomes a collective agreement that fabricates and nurtures cultural narratives. She says, “The historical possibilities materialized through various corporeal styles are nothing other than those punitively regulated cultural fictions alternately embodied and deflected under duress” (114).

Regarding the social construction and institutionalization of gender, there are certain inclusions and exclusions, whereby white women are positioned as the universal female subject, and women of colour are left out, making them “invisible both as racial and as gendered subjects” (Glenn 6). Experiences of African American and Native American women are narrated through the conceptual framings of “multiple consciousness,” “intersectionality,” “interlocking systems of oppression,” “gendered silences,” “racialized gender,” etc (Glenn 7). These frameworks provide an all encompassing structure to analyze gender in relation to the society from which it emanates. Gender as a constitutive feature and as an organizing principle is closely connected to the social, cultural, racial, sexual and political relations of the individual.

Gender relations serve as an appropriate ground for approaching power relations. Feminist theories concerning this are still under the power of western hegemony and are still dominated by biased gender perspectives.
Because of its inability to accommodate the variables with respect to race, colour and class, there is a “painful fragmentation among feminists,” (Haraway 179) which has resulted in “feminisms” instead of feminism.

The notion that race is a critical category underlies African American feminism. African American women writers received recognition because of the research and criticism undertaken by a long tradition of writers including Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor, Paul Marshall, Gayl Jones, Ntozake Shange, Toni Cade Bambara, Gwendolyn Brooks, Jamaica Kincaid, Nikki Giovanni, Audre Lorde, and Maya Angelou. Among these writers Alice Walker was instrumental in bringing back Zora Neale Hurston from behind the curtain. African American feminist criticism emerged as a separate genre of feminist theory towards the 1980s after comprehending its differences from the androcentric Black Power Movement and Civil Rights Movement. It bifurcated from the white dominant Women’s Liberation Movement, which ignored the needs and aspirations of the Third World women and women of colour. Regarding the white feminist practices bell hooks aptly observes that they ignore “black women’s experiences and thus reinforces white supremacist thinking by viewing white women’s experiences as the universal standard for evaluating gender status and identity” (“Black Students” A 44). African American women who were brought to the main land as slaves to work in the plantations were
oppressed at three major levels: They were oppressed to (1) “get their labour,” (2) they were “denied the rights and privileges,” (3) and “subjected to the sexist and racist oppressions in the US” (Collins 4-5). Thus the Africans in America had been struggling to comprehend the multiple realities of racial and gender discrimination and oppression since their forced migration to America.

Gender was considered as a product of sex, and as a natural distinction which gave way to a social dichotomy. bell hooks observes that there was a time when the racist relations prompted the black female to value race as the only relevant label of identification. However it is a fact of life that institutionalized sexism exists in marriage and even within the family. Rape exists as an appendage of the system of slavery. The system of marriage institutionalizes male to propagate legitimized sexual exploitation of the black female. *Ain’t I a Woman?* (1981) is the public proclamation from a black woman’s flaming spirit. In this book bell hooks says that “Mass sexual exploitation of enslaved black women was a direct consequence of the anti-woman sexual politics of colonial patriarchal America. Since the black woman was not protected either by law or by public opinion, she was an easy target” (hooks, *Ain’t I* 42-43).

During the period of forced slavery, the African American female survived like a matriarch. But the social status and the assertive power of the
black matriarch inhibited the black men and so they considered white women as more desirable than black women. Patricia Hills Collins observes, “The image of the matriarch also supports racial oppression. Black family structures are seen as being deviant because they challenge the patriarchal assumptions underpinning the traditional family ideal. Moreover, the absence of Black patriarchy is used as evidence for Black cultural inferiority” (77).

The 1970s and 1980s outpour of works, creative as well as critical, strengthened the place of African Americans in the literary scenario. Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Alice Walker’s *In Search of our Mother’s Gardens* (1983), and *The Color Purple* (1982), bell hooks’ *Ain’t I a Woman?* (1981), *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us are Brave: Black Women’s Studies* (1982), the anthology edited by Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (1984); the historical narrative written by Paula Giddings and Henry Louis Gates’ anthology *Reading Black, Reading Feminist* (1990) are some of the key texts that placed African American feminist literature and criticism firmly on the literary and critical scenario in the West.
Alice Walker stands in the long tradition of women who advised black women to forge their identity on the basis of self reliance and physical and emotional independence. In her novels Walker builds a bond which culturally links African women with African American women. There exists a sisterly bonding between co-wives who live in the same house. In *The Color Purple* (1982), it is Shug, Alfred's lover, who teaches Celie to love her own body. As Shug gets ready to leave the family, the husband and wife identify a new love and care based on mutual understanding. Madhu Dubey says, “Walker's womanist ideology affirms a psychological wholeness that is commonly oriented and is explicitly opposed to the self sufficient individuality of bourgeois humanist ideology” (4). Walker carries the tradition of women writers and activists like Zora Neale Hurston, Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Rebecca Coax Jackson, Jarena Lee, and Zilpha Elaw. One might say that the idea of remembering foremothers in writing is related to the Native American myth of Thought Woman, who created the whole world by remembering and naming things. All of Walker's novels are testimonies of communal and personal completeness. Loverie King speaks about Walker’s use of recurring motifs of the spiritual journeys of self, which includes birth, rebirth and transformation, the universality of pain, agony and suffering, along with a holistic view of life. “At issue is the condition of the soul, . . . She or he who achieves wholeness, or who aspires to achieve
wholeness, bears the responsibility for showing others the way, for lifting as they limb. One imagines a chain, or a continuum, of humanity with each leading the next” (239).

Walker proclaims that one achieves this wholeness by accepting one’s responsibilities which are closely affiliated to culture, traditions, land, histories and myths. She looks at the issues of gender and race simultaneously and expresses the spirit of animism that cuts across the distinctions of gender and race. Lacan upholds gender as constructed through the acquisition of language. One will enter this symbolic system under the Father’s control. Language is a medium in which meaning is constructed and codified by cultural practices. Deconstructing language also involves deconstruction of gender. Gender relations are conditioned by power struggle and their distribution is based on inequality and male supremacy.

Women’s writing involves a dialogue between male and female literary traditions. The male-centered literary practices often represent woman as a simulacrum, erasure or silence. In this context it is worthwhile to look at the argument of Barbara Johnson, who says that there would be no literature if human beings were not divided into two biological sexes. It is literature which explicitly examines the problematic of sexuality. In The Critical Difference (1980) she says that, “Literature is not only a thwarted
investigator but also an incorrigible perpetrator of the problem of sexuality” (Johnson 13).

African American women writers explore the different ways in which race affects the constitution of gender, and examine how cultural constructs of gender reflect racial experiences. Walker’s novels indicate that the acceptance of literary foremothers is a matter of pride for her. Walker is of the view that black aesthetics should transform the lives and consciousness of the people. She notes that for a long time, until the late seventies, the African American feminist discourse has been marginalized even within the African literary scenario and Anglo American literature.

Walker expresses her commitment to the writers who have gone before her in the struggle to regain their voice, like Jean Toomer, Zora Neale Hurston, etc. This kind of anxiety of influence is something that the male African American writers often deny, but which can be seen to exist among women writers. Critics like Valerie Smith observe that “the failure to comprehend women’s experience has prevented male Afro-Americanists from recognizing the forms of women’s oppression and expression” (“Gender and Afro-Americanist” 67).

Walker defines the term “Womanist” as “black feminist” or “feminist of colour.” She is a woman who loves other women, sexually and/or non-sexually. . . . She appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s
emotional flexibility . . . and women’s strength . . . and is committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female” (In Search XI).

Through her novels Walker makes an attempt to save black women so that they can restore their soul and bodies which have been appropriated by white patriarchy long ago. She confirms herself as a committed writer, a writer for the people and of the people. Her commitment is to expose the insanities of the society and she writes for the spiritual survival and holistic upheaval.

*The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1983) tells the story of Ruth, who has the courage to fight against Western hegemony. This novel is “doubly transformational” as the character who continues the forward movement “is not a male heir,” but a grandchild “whose coming of age is marked by sit-ins, voter registration and the speeches of Martin Luther King Jr” (Willis 118). This novel, which is set in rural Georgia, aptly traces the tradition of women’s struggle and examines how the women toil hard to feed the young ones. In the opening chapter itself Walker throws light on the sad plight of women by introducing a family where the husband plans to sell his wife to pay his debts off. Even if Brownfield has an unhappy childhood he always dreams of having a happy family. “In his day dream there was always snow. . . he pulled up to his house, a stately mansion with cherry-red brick chimneys and matching brick porch and steps, in a long chauffeur-driven
car. . . his wife waited for him in the kitchen steps” (Walker, Third Life 23-24).
Brownfield’s unhappy family life which affects his character prompts him to
dream so. Here is the typical scene of black American life where the
husband lives in daydreams and the wife goes out to feed the kids. In the
second section of the book where Walker traces Brownfield’s journey, she
uncovers the sad story of Josie, whose life has been destroyed by her own
father.

Brownfield starts imposing torture upon his wife. Mem is determined
to receive all the abuses and curses in total passivity. But Brownfield is so
determined to “treat her like a nigger and a whore” (Walker, Third Life 79).
Once Mem was his teacher, now he subverts the position of a teacher to
Pygmalion in reverse. He wants Mem to speak like a nigger. Brownfield
tortures her to make her call him “Mister.” He says, “A woman as black and
ugly as you ought to call a man Mister” (Walker, Third Life 109). Here we
find a husband who is determined to get respect from his wife even by using
force. He calls her ‘Miss Ugly’ instead of Mem. The great change that he
forcefully imposes upon Mem reflects the female submission and its final
impact. A series of changes comes over the woman in the family as she
works hard for her children and her husband: “Her mildness became stupor,
then her stupor became horror, desolation and, at last, hatred” (Walker,
Third Life 85). Brownfield abhors good speech and hates books and learning.
Walker formulates a great philosophy of colour through Mem as she expresses her view on the black colour. “Color was something the ground did to flowers and that was an end to it” (Walker, Third Life 84).

Brownfield, who is under the clutches of Captain Davies, is part of a power struggle in which his wife Mem is an adversary. Though he is under the control of a white master, and prefers to be a slave in a white man’s farm, he still nurtures the dream that he once had as a boy. Mem however is different and signs the lease to acquire a new house where she doesn’t want to work like a machine. Like Shug who comes up with her gospel, we find Mem, reissuing the Ten Commandments. She says:

First off you going to call me Mem, Mrs. Copeland, or Mrs. Mem R. Copeland. . . . second, you is going to call your children Daphne, Ornette and baby Ruth. . . . Third, if you ever lays a hand on me again, I’m going to blow your goddam brains out—Fourth, you tetch a hair on one of my children’s heads and I’m going to crucify you—Fifth, you going to learn to eat your meals like a gentleman, . . . Sixth, I don’t care about your whoring round town, but don’t you never wake me up on Sunday, morning grabbing on me. . . . Seventh, if you ever use a cuss word in my new house I’m going to cut your goddam tongue. Eighth, you going to take the blame for every wrong
thing you do and stop blaming it on me and Captain Davis and Daphne and Ornette and Ruth and everybody else . . . Ninth, you going to respect my house by never coming in it drunk. And tenth, you ain’t never going to call me ugly or black or nigger or bitch again, . . . (Walker, Third Life 138-139)

Even if Mem gives her ten commandments, she cannot withstand his cruel oppression because of continuous childbearing. Later they shift from Mem’s dream house to the place suggested by Brownfield. There also Brownfield starts torturing her, and the little girls are the witnesses. “Daphne whimpered, Ornette cried, Ruth alone merely looked on with all the bewilderment and disgust of a small child” (Walker, Third Life 152). Walker here depicts how little Ruth starts talking back to her father: “You nothing but a sonnabit,” she said “quickly and covered herself with her blanket so she wouldn’t feel the first really hard blows Brownfield ever gave her” (Walker, Third Life 153).

Later in the novel Brownfield kills his wife. Then Grange becomes the sole support of his grand-daughter. They visit the church not because of faith but out of curiosity. The passersby consider them as “dreaded incarnation of blasphemy” (Walker, Third Life 188). For Ruth her association with her grandfather teaches her a lot. She learns about foreign cities like Paris, London and New York. They talk about big bombs, forced slavery,
deaths of red men, and the predatory tendencies of the whites who attack
others and annex other peoples’ land. Grange’s condescending attitude
helps Ruth to stand on her own feet. African American men often try to
destroy their and other peoples’ selves by not taking responsibility for their
actions. Walker’s urge is to create a healthy generation and a healthy vision
by encouraging healthy sexual relationships. The relationship between
Grange and Ruth exemplifies the fact that one can achieve wholeness by
respecting and accepting each other. Walker’s vision embraces an
androgynous world, where men and women co-exist, where a grandfather
prepares the grand-daughter for a better future.

Towards the end of the novel Grange acts like a mother to Ruth. We
can identify the emergence of a primal self love when he rocks himself in his
death bed. He regains his self love and compassion. Walker presents
Grange’s uncompromising attempts to make the world a better place for
Ruth to live in. This novel strengthens many feminist concepts, values and
perceptions which include the introduction of what Fredric Jameson calls
“formal resolution” and “unsolvable social contradictions” in the living
world (The Political Unconscious 79), and gives answers to many unanswered
questions concerning the African American past. The dehumanizing social
structure where Grange is forced to live in makes an animal out of him and
forces him to impose cruelty on his wife. Walker talks about the unsolvable
social conditions that lead to the degradation of women in detail in an interview with John O’Brien:

I am committed to exploring the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties, and the triumphs of black women. In *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, ostensibly about a man and his son, it is the women and how they are treated that colors everything . . . And I wanted to explore the relationship between men and women, and why women are always condemned for doing what men do as an expression of their masculinity. Why are women so easily tramps and traitors when men are heroes for engaging in the same activity? Why do women stand for this?

(197)

Both in Walker and Silko gender constructions are closely connected to nature and earth. In *Meridian* (1976) the characters like Fast Mary, Louvinie and even Meridian, and their revolutionary spirits and thoughts are connected to nature. The Sacred Tree itself, named as Sojourner, is planted by the slave woman Louvinie, who was murdered and buried under the tree. For Fast Mary this tree has been her only friend. The language manipulated by the patriarchal society cannot communicate the bond shared by women and nature. In *Meridian* the Saxon women consider themselves as part of this untold history. They retell these stories and formalize their
suffering through a ceremony where they circle around the Sojourner hand in hand. Through the novel Walker celebrates the Afro-American history of Sojourner, but Meridian connects it with Native American spirituality, because the “tree filled her with the same sense of minuteness, and hugeness, of past and present, of sorrow and ecstasy that she had known at the Sacred Serpent” (Walker, Meridian 93). There is a deep preoccupation with the concept of women’s liberation in her initiatives.

Walker who is deeply aware of the power of writing wants to preserve the nobility of the culture without hurting anybody. Like Meridian who uses language to empower people politically and socially, Celie and Nettie use the language to regain their identity. The female protagonists in Walker’s novels display a love for earth and identify themselves with natural objects. Towards the end of the novel we see that even Truman realizes his potentialities and the real purpose behind his life through the intimacy he shared with Meridian. He receives the power and sense to identify Meridian in the world in which he thrives.

In Possessing the Secret of Joy (1992), Walker looks at new alternatives for mother-daughter relationships. Here the protagonist Tashi who is Americanized as Evelyn, is fighting to regain her gender identity. Her sad story reflects “the connection between mutilation and enslavement that is at the root of the domination of women in the world” (Walker, Possessing 139).
Tashi, who is proud of being a woman, cannot digest the idea of female circumcision. She wants to enjoy her womanhood. Tashi’s mother, who cannot suffer the untimely death of her daughter Dura, silently suffers the very same pain. Tashi wants to share her pain. She who wants to stain her “own feet with tears and blood,” (Walker, Possessing 17) thinks about the strength and the pain suffered by her mother, and she remembers the doctor’s comments on the pains of the Negro women, which can “never be analyzed effectively because they can never bring themselves to blame their mothers” (Walker, Possessing 19).

The novel begins with a flashback. Just before her death Tashi thinks about the ecstasy and joy that Lara, the panther, enjoyed, when some inward voice asked Lara to sit somewhere “where the sun may kiss” her and lie “where the moon can make love to her” (Walker, Possessing 4). This is the same ecstasy that Tashi wants to feel when she thinks about her femininity, which patriarchy wanted to snatch away from her. She represents all the women of Africa. In primitive societies priests considered women’s blood as sacred and believed in its power. Women enjoyed greater freedom. As the writer says, “Early African woman, the mother of womankind, was notoriously free!” (Walker, Possessing 278). Tashi has the very same wish, to wear a red dress so that she can immortalize the colour of the pristine, primitive African woman’s sacred blood, to acquire her freedom and
reconnect herself with the past where there is no racial and gender discrimination.

The novel’s greatest strength lies in its epigraph: “When the axe came into the forest, the trees said the handle is one of us,” (Walker, Possessing ix)—a quote from a bumper sticker. This is yet another aspect of her narrative style that subverts the Eurocentric notions of masterpieces. The epigraph is an open declaration of a highly political conviction. It is also linked to the theme of female circumcision dealt with in the novel. Just as the axe undoes the forest, traditions and false customs of patriarchy mutilate the female sensibility. Walker questions the African writers who do not speak against the traditions that mutilate feminine sensibility. From a global perspective the idea of female circumcision corresponds to cultural and social practices that hinder the fruition of feminine receptivity. The practice of genital mutilation aims at curbing the sexual and social freedom of women: “it is a violation of each woman’s right to the integrity of her body.” These acts are violations of human rights that should be “repudiated on the grounds of a universal ethical standard” (George 354).

Adopting strategies like multiple narration, Walker links personal histories with political concepts. There is a shift from the personal to the political. For her the personal history of the characters is as important as the history of a nation. Walker describes her personal histories, “herstories,” and
places “those histories firmly within a wider context of race and class” (Selzer 68).

Tashi represents the history of those hapless women whose personal freedom to experience and enjoy the joy of orgasm has been taken away by circumcision. The novel represents the comparison between the fate of the circumcised and the uncircumcised, as in the section where the French woman Lisette’s orgasmic experience of childbirth is compared with Tashi’s afflictive and devastating experience. The novel tries to make a connection between oppressive genital mutilations with the cosmetic modification of parts of the body that one undergoes in the postmodern age. Here Walker’s aim is “To offset the potential for their feminist/womanist critique of female circumcision to be read along neo-colonialist lines” (Morrison 273).

Walker’s novels trumpet the significance of sisterhood and female bonding. The fact that circumcision is carried out by women and not by men is an interesting factor which is addressed from the point of view of resistance. The relationship between Tashi and M’Lissa can be compared to a prey-predator relation. M’Lissa herself is a casualty of a harsh and unskilled infibulation. She reveals herself towards the end as an adorer of woman’s sexual pleasure. She believes that “the God of Woman is autonomy” (Walker, Possessing 223). But Tashi’s infibulation is not a forced
one, it is voluntary. Her revolt against the ceremony is expressed through experiencing/undergoing the ceremony itself. Tashi says:

My own body was a mystery to me, as was the female body, beyond the function of the breasts, to almost everyone I knew. From prison Our Leader said we must keep ourselves clean and pure as we had been since time immemorial—by cutting out unclean parts of our bodies. Everyone knew that if a woman was not circumscribed her unclean parts would grow so long they’d grow soon touch her thighs; she’d become masculine and arouse herself. No man could enter her because her own erection would be in his way. (Walker, Possessing 121)

This casual thought suggests how in a patriarchal society women suffer a subjugated status. They are just pleasure providers. The concept of female circumcision is only a conduit to understand the African spirit of her protagonists. The system demands them to curtail their pleasure and prune their physical body and emotional thoughts. This idea of gender subjugation is propagated by the state apparatus and its agencies. In this novel Walker proves that freedom from one’s suppressed history is as significant as freedom to exercise ones’ free will and choice.

In The Color Purple (1982), Walker re-evaluates the female body as a locale for self awareness and self respect. Instead of negation and reservation
that women suffer in a patriarchal order, Walker insists that women should be considered as the authentic half of the social totality for the harmony of the whole and the survival of the human species. We find a strong bond of love and care between women as sisters, friends, mothers and daughters in her novels. In *The Color Purple*, Celie considers Shug Avery as her mentor, and the one who moulds her into a perfect woman, and helps her to come out of her shell. There is a big disparity between the ways Mr.—treats her and Shug Avery. Mr.—looks at her always with scornful eyes: “He look at me. It like he looking at the earth. It need somethin? his eyes say” (Walker, *Color Purple* 28). Celie, at times, behaves like a block of wood that cannot respond to the oppressive attitudes of men, even as she articulates her pain through her letters. The language Walker uses, its grammar and syntax, identifies the political location of the characters, and how they reclaim their own language by resisting the masters’ language.

A woman’s identity is directly attached to the way in which the society moves and grows, and she has to direct her spirits accordingly into creative areas. Shug, who is an established blues singer, advises and directs Celie to do so. There is a special flavour to the tie that exists between women, and this is true of the relationship that Celie has with Nettie and Shug. This attachment and commitment between the female characters, who are like mentors, give them courage and strength to move forward
irrespective of hindering forces. This is a community of women which resembles the “residual African model of the village compound, where all the women are in charge of all the children, and domestic as well as economic duties are often shared” (Wilentz, *Binding Cultures* 69). Walker’s characters extend this communion from women to men as well as to trees and the whole world. This is the relationship between Meridian and the magnolia tree. The togetherness that the women share while quilting in *The Color Purple* symbolizes the sisterhood they share. They even name a pattern of quilting as “sister’s choice.” It is comparable to the weaving done by the Spider Woman in the Native American myth. Celie expresses her anger at men by calling them Mr. —. When Mr. — daddy comes to visit them, she spits in his glass of water and schemes that on his next visit she will add Shug’s urine into the water. These are extreme actions, which subtly presents Celie’s suppressed hatred of men.

Celie feels the same attachment for Shug as she feels for Nettie. But Shug is decided that she will leave only when Albert stops beating her. Celie is strengthened by her support and care. She says, “My life stop when I left home, I think. But then I think again. It stop with Mr. — maybe, but start up again with Shug” (Walker, *Color Purple* 82). Later Shug realizes that they are birds of the same feather and says, “Us each other’s people now” (Walker, *Color Purple* 167). Walker introduces Nettie’s letters only in the second half of
the novel. It is Shug who helps her in retrieving her letters from Albert’s trunk. This is an instance of the communion of women. In one of the letters, Walker forces Celie to utter the strongest political argument in the whole novel. The patriarchal white God is invariably male. In another letter Celie says that the white God is neither male nor female. Pointing to the inhuman attitude of God Celie writes, “God ain’t a he or a she, but a It” (Walker, Color Purple 177).

Shug advises her to do pants stitching. This idea of pants-making reappears again in The Temple of My Familiar when Celie’s daughter Olivia relates it to the power of the black woman. James C. Hall considers this epistolary style adopted by Walker as a strategy to reflect the link between the literary space of women and the fulfillment of female identity. He says: “This grounding celebrates an escape from history while retaining faithfulness to the transformative power of art. It is also significant that Western and African expressive traditions combine in the epistolary mode, which is the literary/literal equivalent of call and response” (89). Walker here looks at the damaging effects of male domination upon Celie’s spirit and her eventual redemption through Shug. Celie for the first time in her life experiences equality and mutuality in her relationship with Shug and gradually develops a sense of liberty and power, something she has never experienced in her unbearable relationship with men.
Walker begins *The Color Purple* with a dedication to the animistic spirit, which is a clear cut expression of her womanist position which is neither androcentric nor gynocentric. The question of gender has already been inscribed in the “political unconscious” of cultural discourses, which as Michel Foucault says, are products of various social institutions, technologies, epistemologies, cultures, and traditions. Gender in this scheme of things has nothing to do with the sex, or any particular property of the body. As Foucault says, it is a “complex political technology . . . , the set of effects produced in bodies, behaviours, and social relations” (*History of Sexuality* 127)

*The Color Purple* is a text where the black female changes an inhospitable male environment amenable to their nurture and development. The specific historical events place the whites and the men in an elevated stance over the blacks. When Albert in his loneliness comes to Celie seeking friendship, what we see is a feminized Albert who wants to learn cooking and sewing. The fluidity of gender roles is evident in the situation where a male is ready to learn cooking and sewing from a female. Albert, to forget his cruel masculine past, participates in the feelings and experiences of the female. Celie learns how to stand on her firm feet, how to be self reliant. “Celie’s freedom from Albert’s domination is coupled with sociosexual economy” (Meese, *Crossing* 132). The love that Celie feels for Shug is
spiritual and is similar to the love that she feels for her Mother, her sister Nettie and her lost babies.

The art of inscription (through letters) that connects the two sisters, Nettie and Celie, gives them a transcendental experience. Celie is presented as a confused character in the beginning. She says, “Dear God, I am fourteen years old. I am I have always been a good girl. May be you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me” (Walker, Color Purple 11). Walker effectively uses language as a trope to fight against white masters. She makes Celie use language in such a fashion that it will go against the rules of the master’s grammar, and thus make her participate in the spiritual and emotional continuity of the people. Even if Celie dreams of a peaceful future, she adores the past and its memories as a treasure. Felipe Smith says,

At the heart of Walker’s definition of the writer’s social role is a cultivated awareness of the reciprocal saving potential of art, based on her sense of art as a means of keeping alive the connection between ancestral spirits and their living descendants. This multiple preservation of artist, subject and communal spirit describes . . . the very core of Walker’s artistic strategy. (438)

Walker, through Shug, celebrates the spirit along with memories. It is Shug who advises Celie to identify the animistic spirit that is in nature. She
helps to channelize Celie’s energies and emotions positively by quilting and sewing pants. Shug crosses the boundaries of the society that hinder the development of women. She promises her people a new way of perceiving the world. She helps them understand the real purpose behind the existence of each and every being, provides them support to identify the spirit and to relate the spirit to themselves. This helps to redeem a beautiful future for Celie. Her self-expression is through the letters that she writes and through the hundreds of pants that she sews for her family and friends.

Nurturing creativity is what Shug aims at, because “If women cannot fulfill their nature, the creative spirit within them, they become dangerous, catatonic, or paralyzed by guilt” (Christian, Black Women Novelists 252). She regards it as her duty to divert her spirit into creative areas, where the world can value her. Shug advises and directs her to do so. There is a special flavour to the tie that exists between the solidarity of the women, especially in the relation that Celie has with Nettie and Shug. The attachment and commitment between the female characters give them courage, strength and show them the way to move forward. They are more or less like sisters or mentors. Here is a re-invention of the primitive African model of domestic association “where all the women are in charge of all the children and domestic as well as economic duties are often shared” (Wilentz, Binding Cultures 69).
Celie exemplifies Walker’s definition of “womanism,” which is elaborated through her relationship with Shug, which has a personal as well as a sexual/spiritual and transcendental dimension. Shug explains to her the mysteries of her body and sex. Like a mother caring for her daughter’s health, Shug teaches Celie to respect her body, and to love herself. Her self-scorn is replaced by self-pride and she realizes the value of self-reliance and self-esteem. She takes firm steps to reclaim her identity and her lost self. Her fight is for the entire black women who have been silenced by the system. Walker’s novel itself is like a prayer. Both in *The Color Purple* and in *By the Light of My Father’s Smile* (1998), women appear as saviours of society, guiding, saving, accepting, and teaching others and learning from others.

*By the Light of My Father’s Smile* is a novel that celebrates the theme of sexuality. Robinson’s daughter Magdalena who is wild and natural, and whose arduous spirit wants to learn the feminine skills from wild Indian boys, is prohibited from going out with them by her father, who never wants her to be wild and uncontrolled like the natives. Walker delineates the details not only of gender roles, but also of the racial discrimination existing among whites and blacks and between native Indians and blacks. Magdalena later changes her name to June, which stands for the promise of “moisture, readiness” and “richness of summer” (Walker, *By the Light* 21). Walker titled her novel *By the Light of My Father’s Smile*, after a phrase from
the initiation song of the Indians. This is a song that June hums at times. But this song is not permitted in the church. Even if Senor Robinson is an anthropologist who can identify the true meaning and relevance of the tribes and their traditions and beliefs, he forbids her to sing that song, which proclaims the “carnal message of unity with creation and no credit to the Creator” (Walker, By the Light 22).

In the chapter “Twigs,” Walker introduces the story of Manuelito and Magdalena, who explore nature like children, who love each other. At a very young age they regard sex not as lust, but as a spiritual blessing. This Native Indian faith where the union between the male and female is regarded as holy is contrasted with Susannah’s political statement that orgasmic freedom has been a male right for a long time. Walker’s womanism and Mundo’s animism celebrate the wholeness of each and every being on earth, irrespective of sex and gender. Mundos’ consideration of the female as the mother of corn is comparable to Native American faith. There is a song in the novel which expresses the belief in the equality of sexes:

Anyone can see that woman is the mother,

of the oldest man on earth

is it not then a prayer

to bow before her?

Anyone can see that man is the father
of the oldest woman on earth
is it not then a prayer
to bow before him? (Walker, By the Light 161)

Manuelito tells Robinson, “We know woman and man are equals. Differently beautiful” (Walker, By the Light 162), a philosophy that every civilization in its pristine form accepts and respects. Walker wrote this novel as part of her advice to men to accept their daughters for what they are. Robinson’s patriarchal control over his daughters affects their self esteem. But Susannah thinks the other way round. She finds peace through the regular visitations of her father in her dreams. This novel is an open declaration of women’s sexuality. Walker wants to erase the moralistic puritan view, which is hypocritical and biased. Keith Byerman speaks about the novel’s treatment of the topic:

Female beauty and desire here are aligned with moralistic structures. Sexuality gains its value within the frame work of a moral order. And this pattern receives the sanction of the Father, who loves the woman so carefully limits desire. Moreover by identifying with the mother, the woman joins the father, which leaves her husband a kind of “hip” song who must be brought into line before his desire can be satisfied.

(“Desire and Alice Walker” 323)
Walker wants to undermine the Christian idea of looking at sex and its pleasure as a taboo. The father by witnessing his daughter’s sexual exploits, both with a man and with a woman, acknowledges her sexuality. He achieves the grace of an angel by which he blesses his daughter. As a womanist, Walker advocates the rights of women as well as the spiritual possibilities of black men. The relationship between father-daughter or grandfather-granddaughter and the “potentiality of black men” (Byrd 720) is a recurring theme in Walker’s novels, which underline the fact that she accepts the role played by men as equally significant as women in shaping a generation.

If demythologizing tradition is the greatest subversive act of African American writers, portraying gender in a radically different form is the greatest feat of Native American writers. For Native Americans, gender is related to their ethnicity. Until the arrival of women writers, Native American literature was preoccupied with the exhibition of uneasy masculinist tendencies. Native American literature on the American land is being reinvented by some of the women writers who understand the syncretism between the land, the people and the myths, such as Joy Harjo, Paula Gunn Allenn, Louise Erdrich, Wendy Rose, Linda Hogan, Beth Brant, Lucy Tapahonso, Betty Louise Bell, and many others. Valorizing a culture that is tied to the land and myths, these women writers initiated reworking
of stories, songs and lullabies that are orally transmitted, and are attached to the land. They believe in the sacredness of the land and the earth. Contrary to the individualism of Euro American cultures, what the Native American writers aim at developing is a sense of communality in relation to language, orality and the land. Alice Callahan is the first Native American to write a novel (Wynema, 1891), which she dedicates to the Indian tribes of North America. This novelist never relegates her women characters to the kitchen and domestic spaces. She asserts that the world should be guided by “values of the home” (Van Dyke 89), an idea which is taken seriously by other women writers including Silko.

Native American feminists, unlike the mainstream feminists, are tied to the native histories. Their conceptual coordinates circle around three key topics, (1) “tribal sovereignty” (2) “cultural survival” and (3), “diverse tribal understandings of gender roles and sexuality” (Wallace 400). In the 1980s there appeared a plethora of literary texts that addressed Native American feminist concerns and their close connection with the land, the people and its culture. *I am the Fire of Time: The Voices of Native American Women* (1977), edited by Jane b. Katz, Carolynn Niethammer’s *Daughter’s of the Earth: The Lives and Legends of American Indian Women* (1977), Paula Gun Allen’s *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions* (1986), Laura Coltelli’s *Winged Words: American Indian Writers Speak* (1990) are some
of the texts that pioneered the advent of feminism and feminist concerns in the Native American soil. Anthropologists and ethnographers have assigned a lower status to the Indian women as homemakers performing passive roles. But they have been part of a long tradition of storytellers who pass on stories from one generation to the next and preserve their cultural values.

Pauline Johnson’s *The White Wampum* (1895) and *The Canadian Born* (1903), Gertrude Simmons Bonnin’s *The American Indian Stories* (1921) and *The Old Indian Legends* (1901) and Christine Quintasket’s *Cogewea, The Half-blood, A Depiction of the Great Montana Cattle Range* (1927) inaugurated the entry of Native American women writers into the literary world. The later development and extension of genres started with the arrival of a new bunch of writers, who started researching the oral stories handed down from generation to generation, and who venerated the “concept of land” as the home for the entire cosmos. Silko’s *Ceremony, Storyteller, Almanac of the Dead* and *Gardens in the Dunes* discuss the “Native American Spirituality,” the continuum of oral story telling practices, and the Euro American appropriation of the Native American cultures. Paula Gunn Allen’s *The Woman Who Owned the Shadows* (1983) inaugurated a different conceptualization of Native American literature. This book deals with the struggles of contemporary Native American writers as well as the “ritual experiences of women” in Native America. Joy Harjo, the Cherokee poet,
musician and screen writer in her work *She Had Some Horses* (1983), deals with women’s connection with the land and her trust in the “power of language” to heal and change.

To pursue Leslie Marmon Silko’s gender concerns will take one on a journey to the Native American myths and oral practices of storytelling, because her gender concerns are attached more to the tribal and Indian life than to the emancipatory movements of Euro-Americans. Her works relate the “ethnomythographic” concerns of the modern period, and discuss the life of American Indians, and the significance of the community’s bond with the native land. Silko, who respects Pueblo matrilineage, pays emphasis on female accomplishments and such crafts as “cooking, healing, weaving, art, acculturation and socialization” (Snodgrass 1-3). The discussions on gender in the novels of Silko basically concentrate on the idea of gender complimentarity. Silko makes use of the holistic nature of the tribal world view in unveiling the plot of her novels.

Silko’s novels look at the reciprocity of gender concerns and the relevance of stories in the communal life of Native Americans. Though her novel *Ceremony* (1977) depicts Tayo’s mental break down as an aftermath of the war, his story gains impetus from the Native American land, its people and its myths, where female spirits and deities appear as saviours. The novel begins with a description of the creative process involved in the task.
Silko maps the embedded texts (of myths and folklores) in Native American culture, where the female enjoys a higher status as the creator and maker of the world, as in the description of the Spider Woman:

She is sitting in her room

tinking of a story now

I am telling you the story

she is thinking. (Silko, Ceremony 1)

The Spider Woman is an embodiment of creative power, myth, history and time. She is the maker of the universe and the mother of the whole world. She is, as Paula Gunn Allen argues, “land as a female,” manifested in the form of “mountains, lakes, creatures, and philosophical/sociological systems” (Allen 10). This cognitive connection between culture and nature strengthens the gynocratic basis of womanhood, which according to the Keresian theology, brings this world into existence through a story. The Thought Woman in this mythology is thought that rules creation. Whatever the Thought Woman thinks will appear in the world. Names, language, creation, and wisdom emanate from her. So she thinks about her sisters, and they appear. This is an instance of women strengthening their communal bond by making people and things. Here Thought Woman, a “dynamic and powerful entity” (Nicholson 234) is an “all-fertile being, able to produce human beings and all other creatures”
(Nicholson 233). Mother Earth also follows her “in holding, and taking us back to her breast” (Purley 30). Tayo traces his identity and growth through his union with the land which occurs through women. Silko begins her novel by describing the myth of creation like this:

Ts’its’tsi nako, Thought-Woman,
is sitting in her room
and whatever she thinks about
appears.
She thought of her sisters,
Nau’ts’ity’i and I’tcts’ity’i,
and together they created the Universe
this world
and the four worlds below.
Thought-Woman, the spider,
named things and
as she named them
they appeared. (Silko, Ceremony 1)

Thus the entire cosmos is under the Thought Woman’s linguistic surveillance. Christian creation myth gets subverted through this image of weaving, where the Thought Woman weaves the earth out of her thoughts. Again, it is a woman who created the world, a gynocentric world that is the
opposite of the Biblical myth which envisions the world as created by Patriarchal male God. In the Pueblo creation myth it is the Thought Woman who names and creates beings on the earth. Thus a woman is at the centre of this myth, though Silko prefers a holistic vision which is androgynous in content. In Tayo’s life he comes across two life forces, the feminine and the masculine, which together help him recover from the trauma. While undergoing the ceremony, Tayo is helped by Betonie and the medicine man, the old grandmother and auntie, Ts’eh, the mountain spirit and Night Swan to attain spiritual rekindling. Silko reverses and interrupts the mythologies and position women in new ways, through her storytelling art that identifies the spider’s web (which is continues as well as circular) “as a conceptual model for articulating and arriving at meanings” (Davies 162).

The novel begins with a description of the Indian land (which symbolically represents Tayo’s mind) as a barren one with no rain and water. Rain comes only after Tayo’s realization of the significance of tales and their relation with the land. “The transition was completed. In the west and in the south too, the clouds with round heavy bellies had gathered for the dawn. . . . The ear for the story and the eye for the pattern was theirs; the feeling was theirs: we came out of this land and we are hers” (Silko, Ceremony 255). In the Pueblo myth and tradition, corn and the deity Corn mother are worshipped and respected. The Sun Father, who represents
masculinity and light, is the complementary partner of the Corn Mother, who represents femininity and fertility.

Silko deconstructs the principles of the western canon by placing her characters and themes in a female framework, one based not on high culture (western canon’s gnosticism), but one which is integral for the existence of human beings. Here is a holistic philosophy like Walker’s, one which embraces both the human and animal species. Rather than searching for sublime themes, Silko looks at the earth and narrates stories and songs that emanate from the land and its people. In her representation of women, Silko moves against feminist themes and offers an androgynous vision. The spiritual and healing capabilities of women in *Ceremony* help Tayo to get cured from his illness. Both man and woman are involved in his healing which is a communal act, a move towards wholeness and “gender balance.” The novel becomes a “discourse of healing” for the “culturally ill” (Wilentz, *Healing Narratives* 53). Healing in this novel is “an avenue for women to participate in central cultural institutions of significance to both sexes” (McClain 2). In *Ceremony*, Silko rewrites and retells Native American stories, and here the novel becomes a chant, a “healing ceremony” (Wilentz, *Healing Narratives* 81) that analyzes the link between individuals and the world. The sick world is reflected in the illness of the individual.
The power of female sexuality is explored in *Storyteller* (1981). The Yellow Woman symbolizes freedom, fertility, creativity and strength. Native American myth treats the female spirit as the storyteller who creates the world out of her stories. It considers her as a healer who moves against the modesty of women, a quality which has been upheld by western culture. Native Americans’ love for the place is evident in the way they treat the earth and care for it, which is contrary to the whites’ attitude to nature. While Native Americans really cared for the earth, the white man “used” the earth. Women enter into metaphysical and mystical relationship with nature in Native American landscape. Such a phenomenon is not evident in western gender constructions. The novel, because of its heterogenous nature, gives the readers an experience of the physical, and the spiritual, of the natural and the supernatural. Silko suggests that such an experience should be one of passion and love. To experience that, “we must sleep with the river and find he is warmer than any man. We must listen to voices and stories that inform us” (*Yellow Woman* 229).

Silko rewrites and interprets Native American stories through her short stories and songs, and positions herself in an androgynous universe. In the poem “Cottonwood Part Two Buffalo Story,” Silko tells us about the sacrifice of the Yellow Woman, Kochininako, who is on the lookout of water for her people. In the course of her journey she meets the Buffalo man, who
falls in love with her. As the Buffalo man takes his wife, Kochininako’s husband Estou-eh-muut seeks the Spider Woman’s help. With her help he kills the entire Buffalo people along with his wife Kochininako. The female, in the human form or in the form of a spirit, is identified as a life-giving and life-supporting source, as Kochininako’s body serves as meals to her people.

Silko concludes her story-song:

So that was the beginning—
the hunters would travel
far away to plains in the East
where the Buffalo People lived
and they would bring home
all that good meat.
Nobody would be hungry then.
It was all because
one time long ago
our daughter, our sister Kochininako
went away with them. (Silko, Storyteller 76)

Like Walker, Silko has developed a style whereby the characters, settings, or themes of one work reappear in another. For instance, the giant snake which appears in Silko’s Ceremony reappears in Almanac; multiple versions of the same character and story are found in The Storyteller.
case of Walker, Celie in *The Color Purple*, reappears in *The Temple of My Familiar*; Shug Avery appears in both *The Color Purple*, and *The Temple of My Familiar*. This reincarnation of characters adds a new flavour to their works and leads to the problematization of gender in their novels.

“Storytelling,” another song in the book presents a different version of the Yellow woman’s story, where a woman who is kidnapped comes back to her home with her twin babies. The story resembles the tale of Yellow Woman in the Keres tales, where the woman returns to her people with twin baby boys. In another tale, the same Yellow Woman deserts her husband to elope with the Buffalo Man. Thus Silko disturbs the linearity of storytelling, makes it open ended, where one story leads to another. Unlike the Yellow Woman’s husband in the Keres tale, the husband in “Storytelling” does not have the patience to accept his lady. Silko champions the long tradition of storytelling, and at the same time points at the bitter realities of the world through *Storyteller*, which is considered as an experimental autobiography. To etch out a space and identity for Native American women writers, Silko revivifies hidden myths and traditions and highlights the role played by women figures as storytellers and also as carriers of wisdom.

Silko’s *Almanac of the Dead* (1991) describes the whites’ cruelty to Indians and how they destroy nature and the nation. “The Indians had seen generations of themselves ground into bloody pulp under the steel wheels of
ore cars in crumbling tunnels of gold mines. The Indians had seen for themselves the cruelty of the Europeans toward children and women” (Silko, Almanac 312). During their settlement in America, the white men never bothered about their past, but were ambitious about the future. They could not comprehend the Native American faith in the past and their ancestors, in spirits and stories. Unlike Silko’s other novels, Almanac is highly charged with political, social and cultural convictions and considers women as playing an active role in moulding a prosperous economy and nation.

Silko presents the debasement and instability of male-dominated postcolonial America. The Native American tradition cherishes a symbiotic relationship between the male and the female spirits, and demonstrates a rare syncretic vision that is lacking in the white man’s culture. This lack and the spirit of aggression between Indian and Euro-American forces leads to the chaos in the novel. Men are consumers whereas women are commodities. Silko reinstates the Keres creation story to highlight the fact that intellect and creativity are associated with the female. Unlike the Western concept of women, Pueblo mythology regards the feminine with respect and has always kept women in high esteem.

In the Keres creation story, the Spider Woman gives sacred bundles to her sisters, Iyatiku and Nau’ts’ityi, who in turn create the world out of their
bundles. Iyatiku becomes the mother of the Laguna people. In Laguna culture men respected women and they lived in harmony. But after sometime young men started living in their own ways and because of their impudence, Iyatiku left them. Native American women want to restore their position and prestige. When white men started occupying the tribal land, women’s status also started deteriorating. The white’s government policies and Christianization affected the political stature of the Natives. They subverted the gynocratic system of Native tribals and degraded the Cherokee women. The colonizers worked hard to take control of the land and women, and in their struggle to colonize the land, they colonized women also. Paula Gunn Allan says:

In the ensuing struggle women endured rape and murder, but they had no voice in the future direction of the Cherokee Nation. The Cherokee were by this time highly stratified, though they had been much less so before this period and many were Christianized. The male leadership bought and sold not only black men and women but also men and women of neighboring tribes, the women of the leadership classes retreated to Bible classes, sewing circles, and petticoats that rivaled those worn by their white sisters. (37)
Mental trauma that affected Tayo in *Ceremony* reappears in *Almanac* through men’s and their disregard for women. Silko says that the relative power of Laguna women is due to the acceptance of two spirits. Violence sprouted in the Native American land with the arrival of the first European in America. They forget their connection with the Earth and their ancestral traditions. Silko’s homosexual male characters have a cannibalistic lust for blood. The bond between Serlo and Beaufrey is based on their love for pure European bloodlines. Beaufrey’s early affinity with cannibalism is reflected in his erotic attraction to footage on abortions, sex change operations, and clitoridectomies, and his sadistic pleasure. He takes delight in torture, mutilation and cruelty inflicted on others. Beaufrey also has a monstrous obsession with racial purity.

Native and African American writers depict the underlying sense of identity based on spiritual and cultural continuity, and a connection with the natural world. This androgynous tradition also has important connections with contemporary gender theory. Blacks and Native Americans, who aim at the reinstatement of tribal traditions, cannot accept the idea of identity that glorifies fragmentation and discontinuity. The almanac is an exemplary subversive symbol. Silko uses it to question the authority of the Bible as the authentic Book of knowledge. As a bundle of fragments the almanac is a
postmodernist feminist symbol that allows Silko to decentre metanarratives and other totalizing discourses.

The almanac is introduced in Book Five of the First Part. Yoeme, the grandmother, narrates the story of the almanac, the arrival of the whites, and their exploitation. It is Yoeme who keeps the custody of the old almanac. When Yoeme describes various events, Lecha diligently writes it down in a paper using the colonizer’s language, English. Yoeme is happy about this appropriation: “Yoeme claimed this was the sign the keepers of the notebooks had always prayed for” (Silko, Almanac 130). In this same chapter Silko introduces the image of the snake. The idea of right and wrong introduced by the white Christian masters appears here. The people are free to go South and North. Then the white priests announce that smuggling is a mortal sin as it is a kind of stealing from the government. This is a paradoxical statement to come from a set of people who themselves are intruding into another man’s land. Silko poses certain queries here: “Where were the priest and his Catholic Church when the federal soldiers used Yaqui babies for target practice? . . . How could one steal if the government itself was the worst thief?” (Silko, Almanac 133).

Lecha, Zeta and Yoeme are three revolutionaries who in effect act as Silko’s agents for social change. Lecha, gives a humourous twist to Freudian theories in indirectly pointing to the white people’s sadism and says: “Freud
had sensed the approach of the Jewish holocaust in the dreams and jokes of his patients. Freud had been one of the first to appreciate the Western European appetite for the sadistic eroticism and masochism of modern war” (Silko, *Almanac* 174). Lecha’s is a feminist reading of the postulates of a psychoanalyst who has often been accused of being a male chauvinist.

As for the natural spirits in *Almanac*, there is no discrimination based on sex and gender. The spirits guide Angelita and El Feo, when they plan to retake the Indian land. These are the two revolutionaries who wanted to obtain weapons and supplies for retaking the land. While describing the spirits, Silko also gives a graphic account of the Corn Mother, the Old Spider Woman, and the big snake. Alegría feminizes Mexico when she says, “Poor Mother Mexico had been gang raped by the world” (Silko, *Almanac* 671). Lecha and her sister Zeta, custodians of the almanac, are really happy when they receive the news of the reappearance of the giant stone serpent near the road.

Silko upsets the assigned gender roles in subverting the traditional European idea of American history as a saga of male adventure, exploration and conquest. The patriarchal mindset of European scholars forced them to recognize only the male figures of authority in American history. Contrary to this, Silko’s *Almanac* incorporates a number of female figures like Zeta, Lecha, Leah Blue, Angelita, and Alegría as fighters determined to regain the
land. Silko presents the eco-warriors in the novel along with the women leaders who take the initiative in saving the land from destruction. The novel also echoes the sentiments of eco-feminists. It offers a critique of the ‘patriarchal man’ and expresses a strong commitment to a non-gendered egalitarianism rather than dominance to women.

In her latest novel *Gardens in the Dunes* (1999), Silko makes use of the world of fantasy to reflect on the world of reality. She relies on her memories and on the stories narrated to her by her parents and grandparents to recreate the world of reality. It deals with the story of Indigo and Sister Salt. While Indigo visits different lands, Sister Salt is presented as a fighter for her own community. She is a revolutionary figure who loves her body and is proud of the fact that her son Bright Eyes is the product of her sexual union with the Afro Indian cook and the brewer, Big Stick and Big Candy. This child is a representation “of a larger Pan-Indian alliance that stretches across national boundaries” (Katanski 211). Indigo and Sister Salt in a sense represent two levels of womanhood. Silko employs nature as a trope to reflect on their life and peregrinations. The journey of the characters, and the pain and agony they suffer are all designed in the form of a web. The gender angle in the novel comes to the fore at the points where Silko speaks about women and the torture that they undergo during the whites’ stay in their land. It is not only the plants, the seeds and the gardens that appear in the
novel that make it women-centered, but also the stories concerning cooking and food narrated. In the words of Mary Ellen Snodgrass, “The narrative develops an ecofeminist alliance of gardeners who value vegetable patches, vines, and orchards as survivors of white havoc to Indians and the land” (107).

The novel attaches a great deal of significance to the role of women as culture binders and revolutionaries. Hattie’s thesis entitled “The Female Principle in the Early Church” and her reinterpretation of the story of ‘Paradise Lost,’ which is later denounced as heretical help the readers in analysing the disparity between the attitudes of the white male and the female. Hattie speaks about the “principle of aboriginal serpentine matriarchal spirituality” (Fitz 193). Silko criticizes the dominant patriarcahal Christian ideologies that favour sexual and cultural repression and the intolerance of diversity. Brewster Fitz says:

Silko’s principal characters experience a desire to embrace all, but also a realization that is not yet possible. This desire can be seen not only as welcoming diversity but also as potentially producing confusion that early interpretations of the Galilean’s life and teachings produced diverse cults that the Church fathers excluded and wrote off as heresies. The problem is an old one in world of thought: If an all-embracing culture of love,
tolerance, diversity, and equality embraces the members of an exclusionary, intolerant, hierarchical culture, it risks destroying itself. If it excludes the members of the antithetical culture, it takes the first step toward becoming like the culture it excludes. (194)

After reading The Gnostic Gospels of Elaine Pagel, Silko develops the idea that there are many Jesuses, a view unacceptable to white Christianity. Silko nativizes such religious views and gives them an ecofeminist twist when she says that Jesus and Holy Mother bless the natives by giving them “plump squash blossoms” (Silko, Gardens 5). Silko rewrites the Babel story in the Bible as an indication of man’s ability to speak different languages that can be understood by all. This is explained in the New Testament when the resurrected Christ manifests himself before the disciples. In the novel we come across the following ceremony:

When Grandma Fleet and Mama knelt to pick up blossoms, the Holy Mother blessed them in their Sand Lizard Language.

When the Mormons approached the Messiah, Sister Salt stayed nearby to listen for herself; she was amazed. As the Messiah gave his blessing to Mormon, Sister Salt distinctly heard the words he spoke as Sand Lizard, not English, yet the Mormons
understood his words and murmured their thanks to him.

(Silko, *Gardens* 31-32).

Walker and Silko regard humanity as a blend of the male and the female. Walker portrays characters who suffer racial and gender discrimination from the whites, and oppression from the black males. They struggle to gain their rights both as respectable women and as Afro-Americans. Their language is the medium through which they fight against the dominant sexist and racist ideology. Walker’s narrative strategies redefine the black woman’s self and her consciousness. Hers is an African American feminist world view which reverberates with an androgynous vision and an animistic spirit. Both writers try to regain their suppressed identity through writing. They express their world vision through their characters: “Their angle of vision allows them to see what white people, especially males, seldom see. With one penetrating glance they cut through layers of institutional racism and sexism and uncover a core of social contradictions and intimate dilemmas which plague all of us, regardless of race or gender” (Tate xvi).

The novels examined here are filled with incredibilities as they transgress the borderlines between public and private discourses. The textual gaps in the novels call the attention of the readers. The gender blindness and the generic inability to articulate the truths regarding gender
have led these writers to ways of articulation that rework and modify the existing modes of narration. The writings of Walker and Silko can be considered as expressions of boundary crossing. They redefine identity, and re-unite and re-member their culture and history. Walker’s novels also dramatize the power of letters to change a woman’s place in society. These writers never attempt to reshape a masculine space into a feminine one. Instead, they add a new life and colour to the already existing feminine space by looking at the themes of female creativity, nurturing and healing. They come out of the traditional concept of space by rearticulating what Showalter defines as “the space of the Other, the gaps, silences and absences of discourse and representation, to which the feminine has traditionally been relegated” (36). These women writers depict the experiences of several women and men, rewrite several cultural narratives and discourses, without any discordance, and create a symphony of their own, in which each character voices his/her experience. In articulating the experiences that are forgotten or forbidden by dominant social institutions, Walker and Silko cross over the borders of such institutions and create “the tension of contradiction, multiplicity, and heteronomy” (De Lauretis 26).

The powerful voice of these writers is, at the same time, confident and authentic and reflects their commitment to female concerns. These novels present the vitalities and complexities of a woman’s universe. These works
are expressions of their assurance of and their regard for a better world. As artists, they “build our temples for tomorrow,” and “stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves,” (Hughes 694) and they reflect the commitment of womanhood, not exclusively African American or Native American but of the whole world. These writers, while using the language want to destabilize the power constructed by their male counterparts, by deconstructing it. This is what Toril Moi says while discussing the non-essentialist feminist discourse:

We have different interests-and interests must here be taken to mean political and power-related interests which intersect in the sign. The meaning of the sign is thrown open-the sign becomes ‘polysemic’ rather than ‘univocal’-and though it is true to say that the dominant power group at any given time will dominate the intertextual production of meaning, this is not to suggest that the opposition has been reduced to total silence. The power struggle intersects in the sign. (157)

Through their novels they move beyond the literary constructs of the European masters. They create a style of their own to tell the unheard stories of their sisters and fellow beings. Walker and Silko inscribe the displaced areas where women suffered internal colonization, which can be linked to the past and the present. They subvert the limitations of interpretations
based upon the female-male binary oppositions. Instead of speaking from
the position of a suppressed subject, they present to the readers possibilities
of changes and solutions for a better world. Rather than concentrating on
black/white, male/female, margin/centre divisions, they express the actual
power and strength that resides in a human being. Walker and Silko present
a syncretic world view that urges the readers to consider the world as their
common abode.