Preface

The recent history of humans on earth has been one of greed, exploitation, arrogance and destruction. The landscape has become hideous and desolate due to man's overexploitation of nature. With the increase of man's arrogant greed to a disturbing magnitude, the need to extend legitimacy and lend due critical consideration to the voice of nature becomes highly pertinent. Though race, class and gender formed major themes in post war literature, earth with its deteriorating life-supporting systems failed to find proper representation in literature until the mid eighties. Environmental disasters like oil spills, toxic waste contamination, global warming, extinction of species etc. went almost unnoticed by literary scholars. As a result of collaborative projects for promoting environmental literary studies, these concerns have now become an important presence in the literary realm.

Alice Walker is one of the most significant African American writers who has woven a diversity of concerns into the fabric of her writings. With an overwhelming concern for the environment, she gives voice to the mute and the muted around her. It is the distinctive voice of an activist writer who challenges the existing views regarding mankind's relationship with his surroundings. The thesis makes an ecocritical analysis of Alice Walker's works, taking into consideration how they serve as viable artifacts of her ecological vision. It attempts a thematic and structural analysis of her works with focus on her sensitivity to the sights and sounds around her, her representation of the human-nonhuman relationship, the redemptive zeal, the
reverberant plea for cosmic wholeness and a non-dualistic spirituality which undermines patriarchal religious codes.

Chapter 1, titled “The Earthling Psyche: Defining Ecocriticism” consists of two sections. The first section examines the wide variety of definitions given to the term “ecocriticism”, all of which endeavour to bring together literature and ecology under the same umbrella. It traces the various phases of man-nature relationship over the ages moulded by changing scientific thoughts and philosophy. It also discusses the various dimensions of an earth-centred approach to literary studies. The second section of the chapter traces the forces which have shaped Walker’s consciousness as an ecologist. Earlier writers like Zora Neale Hurston, Isabella Bird and Rachel Carson have influenced her profoundly. She has imbibed the geo-centric values as a legacy of her tri-racial origin. From the doubly marginalized position of a black woman, she is able to identify the oppressive forces around her and employs her pen to fight against them.

In chapter II, bearing the title “Writing As/For Survival”, the sustaining power of narration is dealt with. It elucidates how Walker adopts writing as a strategy for her own survival and for the survival of others, the most important concern that ecology relates to. Her preoccupation with the “survival whole” of her people and also with the land provokes her to depict the victimization and injustice in the black society. In accomplishing this, she draws her inspiration from the spirit of her foremothers who had turned to art as an alternative to despair. Ever since her debut as a writer, Walker has
never ceased portraying instances of colonization—both external and internal, exploitation of land and people, fragmentation and mutilation. True to her belief that the artist’s task is to change the world, she enters into a relentless fight with the victimizing agencies, whether they are white or black, man or woman, tradition or science. She also suggests strategies of resistance so that one can attain selfhood and wholeness. As the survival of the women writers is an equally strong concern, Walker tries to dispel the clouds of anonymity and oblivion hovering over them. That is why she discovers the works of Zora Neale Hurston, who was eclipsed by hostile critics and publishers. Thus she rewrites the literary history of America.

The third chapter “The Quilt of Oeuvre” examines how Walker conceptualizes the ecological paradigm advocated by leading ecologists, which recognizes the fundamental interdependence and interconnectedness of all phenomena. Walker schematizes her works in a quilt-like pattern which is a visible manifestation of this wide web of relationships. Quilting originated out of the necessity for warmth and an innate craving for beauty. A quilt is made by piecing old bits of cloth and sewing them together in attractive patterns. As a result of the aesthetic revival, piecing has evolved as a metaphor for a female aesthetic, sisterhood and a politics for survival. It is also symbolic of recapturing the past. Alice Walker adopts the quilt pattern as the matrix of her works, both in structure and subject. For her, piecing and quilting represent the matrilineal heritage of aesthetic creativity and an obsessive desire to recapture the past. It serves as a model for “womanist”
writing of reconciliation and connection. Every text becomes a pretext or cotext of another. The intertextual and intratextual link among her works, like that of a quilt, emphasizes the need to see the smallest, remotest part in relation to a very large whole. She makes the pieced quilt as an emblem of a universalist, inter-racial and intertextual tradition. In The Color Purple, The Temple of My Familiar and Possessing the Secret of Joy, multiple voices interact in a dialogic manner that promotes a systemic or contextual thinking which forms the essence of ecological thinking.

Chapter IV titled “Animal Cousins and Uncle Trees” highlights the dialectical relationship Walker hopes to maintain with the nonhuman world. Human impact on the earth has accelerated the extinction of species in a dangerous manner and hence humans are bound to assert a role of explicit guardianship over the vast panoply of life. Her efforts to encourage an egalitarian attitude to nature find expression in The Temple of My Familiar and her several essays. She is highly sensitive to the mournful cries of the chimpanzees and the peacocks. The “gospel according to Shug” in The Temple prescribes the tenets for peaceful coexistence. By means of several narrative pieces, Walker nostalgically recounts instances of harmonious rapport that had existed between the human and nonhuman. This was lost with the rise of the mechanistic age which witnessed aggravated exploitative assault on the environment. Viewed in the light of reflections by ecofeminists and deep ecologists, Walker’s concern for animal rights can be understood as logical extension of the more general feminist concern for nature or for less
privileged human groups. Walker reinforces the idea that living beings are supposed to coexist in complex relationships. She visualizes the adherence to a holistic view which enables people to look at all of creation as one substance and therefore deserving of the same respect. Walker is very much influenced by the native Americans in formulating such an egalitarian attitude to the non-human friends.

The fifth chapter “Reinstating the Goddess” is a discussion of the nondualistic spirituality suggested by ecologists as a feasible corrective to ecological imperilment. Walker speaks very much in favour of adopting an earth-centred spirituality which promotes the immanence of God, the sacredness of this world, the wholeness of body, and autonomy of sensuality and sexuality. Walker’s adoration of the early matriarchal societies and pagan goddesses and her critique of the western patriarchal religions is analyzed in detail. The observations made by feminist theologians like Mary Daly, Rosemary Ruether and Carol Christ are paraphrased in the light of which Walker’s hostility towards a male, monotheistic God is evaluated. As other deep ecologists do, Walker also favours the return of the Goddess which can be considered a figurative representation of the new culture.

In the pursuit of this study, a thematic and structural analysis of almost all her works has been made irrespective of generic categorizations in an attempt to reinforce the web of connections emphasized by Walker. Many books on ecology, mostly dealing with the theoretical and philosophical aspects have been read thoroughly in order to examine Walker’s works from
an ecocritical perspective. It has to be acknowledged that the technical aspects of ecology are not thoroughly dealt with, as it is not much relevant for this study. The recommendations in the sixth edition of The MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers have been followed in the preparation of the thesis.