CONCLUSION

There is hope for those who believe in the power of the living word. They who have undergone mighty struggles have survived by reposing faith in living by the word. Bama and Alice Walker: two writers separated by culture, by geography, by history, have held firmly to the power of salvation in the word that is animated with their convictions and with their imagination. Though they have undergone different experiences of marginalization in their respective cultural locations, they are united in their power to inspire life into their words that become the many novels of Alice Walker and the not so numerous but considerably powerful novel narratives of Bama.

The present discussion adopts a trajectory that begins in the ideological terrain of Comparative Literature. It traces the interest in Comparative Literature as a discipline in the Indian academy as well as registering some of the significant milestones in its disciplinary evolution in the continental and American academic spheres. The purpose of this exercise was to identify for the present study a space within the discipline of Comparative Literature where two writers like Bama and Alice Walker can be read together. It was felt that unless sufficient grounds for comparison are reclaimed there would remain many questions regarding the tenability of bringing together an African-American writer like Alice Walker and an Indian Tamil Dalit writer like Bama.

Both the writers inhabit domains that are informed by historical, social, political and humanistic considerations which are as distinct from each other as much as they are alike. The factors that appear to bring them together also, on closer examination, convince that the similarities are tenable only to a point beyond which they respond to different cultural dynamics. The study has explored and also examined the ways in which the two writers can be seen to be fellow travelers gravitating to their historical destiny as writers with a purpose. The study also manages to resist the temptation to see them as consistently alike in their negotiation with their respective cultural situation.
Alice Walker’s response to the dynamics of race relations can be similar to, but never congruent to, Bama’s response to the dynamics of caste equations in the context of the Dalit community in the state of Tamilnadu in India. The space that the study manages to clear for its purpose within Comparative Literature is used to register the fact that between Alice Walker and Bama there are aspects that are similar but the same cannot be read as congruence.

The present study has started with an Introduction where the discipline of Comparative Literature has been traced from the symbolic anxiety of Rene Wellek that the vast potential of the discipline for bringing together writers and tendencies to generate stimulating intellectual engagements have not received the deserved favour with academicians. This historical arc has been traced through the periodical reports of the American Comparative Literature Association to its apogee in Gayatri Spivak’s declaration of the “Death” of the discipline in which she has made a case for “planetarity.” This study is premised on the possibility of “crossing borders” which creates a clement weather for the realization of the spirit of “planetarity.” Two writers, so much unlike each other in certain respects and so much alike in certain other respects are better understood when one crosses the ideological borders that emphasize difference towards an intellectual space of accommodation.

The study follows a tripartite pattern: Overview, Problems and Negotiation. Chapter I and Chapter II present an overview, respectively, of the novels by Bama and by Alice Walker. In these chapters the thematic considerations in the three novels and one short story collection of Bama and the seven novels of Alice Walker are taken up. This is an ideological preparation, in that, the terrain that needs to be further examined in the subsequent chapters are marked. One can see how these two writers, located in different national, cultural, historical and political spheres achieve a grasp of their immediate reality and how they transmute their life-experience into art experience. It also becomes clear that they adopt two different approaches to the novel. While Alice Walker is more
consistent with the wide and cosmic canvas of the novel, Bama’s approach to the genre itself must count as novel, in that, she uses tiny flights of narrative to stitch together her story.

Chapter III and Chapter IV deal with the problems presented, respectively, by Bama and by Alice Walker. The problems fall into certain identifiable patterns. They are, at the macrocosmic level, the problems of the Dalit community in its traditional relationship with the Upper Caste communities in Tamilnadu, in India, as well as those of the African American community in its traditional relationship with the White community in America. There are concentric circles of problem within this: there is the problem of the intra-communal relationship between the Dalit male and the Dalit woman as well as the relationship between the African American male and the African American woman. Seen from the perspective of the women, and both the writers prefer to approach the problems from the feminist or womanist perspective, one can see that the problems that the writers articulate are more complex and tangled.

What is remarkable about the two writers is that they have, through their personal suffering and commitment to the living word, configured the problems in language. In this way, they have brought into view the many forms of suffering visited upon the marginalized by the hegemonic forces that control power. The articulation of the problems faced by the Dalit and the African American communities, itself, must be seen as the immeasurable contributions of Bama and Alice Walker. They have cut the channels of articulation from personal suffering, at which point, there is a preponderance of the emotional participation towards a meeting with the communal suffering, at which point, the personal becomes a wider stream accommodating larger concerns to become social constructs calling attention. Both writers move from social constructs to national and racial planes of enunciation, at which level, the streams of articulation become rivers of robust energy that engage everyone who recognizes in these articulations the humanistic and philosophical dimensions that are of relevance to mankind at all times.
Chapter V and Chapter VI deal with the ways of negotiation adopted by Bama and by Alice Walker. The present study would insist that negotiation is important though not more important than articulating the problems. The eye of the writer to see the problem that is invisible owing to the persistent force of erasure and obliteration and the ear of the writer to pick the unspoken words that would become the resistance of individuals suffering under the weight of enforced muteness is always of greater value and importance than negotiation. Hence, the chapters on negotiation follow the chapters where the writers bring the problems into manifest form. Negotiation by Bama and Alice Walker follow a pattern, in the sense that, both the writers forge telling images that work like powerful connotational force-fields and they serve to hold the narratives, consistently, with scintillating suggestiveness.

The chapters on negotiation are structured keeping two purposes in mind. There are textual extracts deployed along with the personal testimony of the writers. These are further augmented with the critical judgement that has always followed the two writers and which has always found it difficult to disagree with the committed positions of the two writers. The chapters, then, consider three voices: what they [the characters] said; what they [the writers] said; what they [the critics] said. The negotiations of problems by Bama and Alice Walker manifest as the responses of individuals in the narrative scheme of the novels. They are interpreted, at different junctures, as strong, aggressive, resistant and revolutionary by the adversaries. It is an indication of the freshness of approach of Bama and Alice Walker that critics of all persuasions have been keen to seek clarification from the authors themselves with respect to the intent and purpose of the moves made by the characters in their narratives. The fact that Alice Walker has been courted by the media and the professional a many times and the fact that Bama is heard more frequently in recent times attest that the conviction, force, and dexterity with which they have performed acts of negotiation of the African American or the Dalit problem is worth engaging with.
With respect to their attitude to language, one can say that the two writers have much in common. They are not only representatives of communities that are marginalized they also exist on the margins of linguistic acceptability. The irony of their linguistic situation is that they must choose the language of the mainstream or the centre to be acceptable. However, with access to education denied and with respectability for their dialects also denied, they are caught between the unease of a double denial: neither accepted within the sphere of the mainstream nor allowed to nurture their own dialects. At the level of personal experience, they suffer many degrees of segregation from the mainstream of American or Tamil/Indian society. Both the writers choose languages that are not the language of the mainstream culture. They choose the language of their own marginalized communities. They work their resistance in the form of deliberately speaking the vernacular or bhasha or the distinguishing dialect of their respective communities.

So, Alice Walker’s English is distinct from the English of William Faulkner and Ernest Hemingway even as Bama’s Tamil is distinct from the Tamil of Kalki Krishnamoorthy or Jayakanthan. Their choice of the dialect testifies to their rebellious spirit. The sustained manner in which they carry the negotiation of the cultural problems testifies to the conviction they possess in their own abilities to forge language that would work into the conscience of the communities at the centre of the racial or social equations. They magically transform the illiterate, the submissive and the mute, say, Celie in The Color Purple, into a character whose letters to an unseen God or to Nettie become the most pregnant articulations about the understanding of suffering, the configuration of the same into an understanding of their existential situation, the formulation of that understanding into questions that manifest the yet unseen and unspoken problems and, eventually, into the possibility for the negotiation of those problems.
Here, one could invoke the image employed by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffith and Helen Tiffin to locate Post-Colonial Literature: “Empire Writes Back.” Metaphorically, Alice Walker and Bama can be seen to inhabit cultural spheres which are removed from the centre and yet exist in relation to it as the subject of hegemonic dynamics. By this consideration, they represent the empire and, through language, which is not the language of the centre, but a deliberate and considered choice of the dialect of the marginalized, they demonstrate positions that suggest resistance, subversion. As the metaphor in the title of Ashcroft’s book suggests, the case of Walker and Bama is verily the case of the “empire” writing back to the “Centre.”

Both Bama and Alice Walker have provided to their novels very suggestive titles which, in most cases, work like shining symbols whose direct as well as diffused light pervades their narratives, especially, when these writers plumb the darkness in their respective communities and their socio-cultural locations. They have been, themselves, victims of this darkness but they have with the force of their conviction and circumstances forged ways to liberate themselves. The darkness which Bama and Alice Walker want to dispel is that of illiteracy, submissiveness in the face of male brutality within the family and white male/upper caste prejudices without, denial of civil rights that impacts the sense of personal worth, heinous social practices perpetrated in the name of tradition to which every member of the community is forced to subscribe to, the enforced muteness which denies the individuals, especially women, the freedom to reflect on their sufferings thus fixing them in an existence where they cannot frame the questions that will clarify, for them, the shape of their problems, the dangerous situation in which the individuals are forced to defer their critical evaluations perpetually.

Bama’s titles are all Tamil words: “Karukku,” “Vanman,” “Sangati,” “Oru Thathavum Erumaiyum.” Karukku is the palmyra leaf. It has sharp serrated edges which can cut like a sword. This is the word Bama chooses for her first novel which is autobiographical. In a sense, it is the personal account of Bama about herself as a person
as well as the representative of her Dalit community. As a person she has undergone the typical fury of marginalization which she could narrate with the mandate provided by the genre of autobiography. What is unusual for an autobiography is to morph the same voice into the voice of the community. Bama does just that. She transmutes the personal into the voice of the community. She, unlike, most women of her community is educated, has a voice and, importantly, the courage to make that voice the medium for throwing light on the community’s plight. So, the Karukku, or the palmyra with which the life of the Dalit is intertwined, becomes the double-edged sword: the symbol of the community’s physical and mental suffering at the hands of the upper castes as well as the sword of revolt when it becomes the sharp and keen candour of Bama to expose these inequities in language.

“Sangati” is a Tamil word which has two related but different meanings: it means both “news” and “gossip.” There are apparent meanings for both the words and actual meanings too. The apparent and actual meanings are similar but not congruent. For instance, both “news” and “gossip” are similar in that they presuppose a teller, a carrier of the tale, the mediator. News is, apparently, the truth, the officially accepted version and the veracity of which is not disputed. Gossip is, apparently, falsehood, the unofficial version and that which raises a lot of doubts. However, when one moves from a theoretical understanding of News and Gossip to their practical shapes, one realizes the politics of mediation which can, for the purpose of manipulating consent doctors “news” for the sake of influencing decision. “Gossip” as the marginalized “other” of news, is by the silent majority, accorded the status of truth, of credibility. Both “news” and “gossip” are interesting only when there are happenings that cannot be predicted or anticipated. Bama takes advantage of the play of the real and the apparent meanings of the word “Sangati” to suggest the brewing of the unexpected: the silent revolution in the form of the women coming into a mass awakening regarding the power of salvation in education. That is news to the majority, upper caste communities, which Bama delivers to the reader like a piece of gossip with all the confidence and trusting nature of the tellers of gossip.
“Vanman” is translated as “Vendetta.” It means the hidden malice that manifests as revenge. It also carries the suggestion of “poison” as in Blake’s “The Poison Tree.” The significance of the image is in the juxtaposition of “friendliness” with “malice.” Friendliness works like the proverbial wool over the eye of the victim so that he/she is unable to see the poison waiting to invade their body and mind. Bama, through the deployment of this image, adroitly brings out the devious purposes of the upper caste, Naicker community which, though a numerical minority, needs the support of one of the two majority Dalit communities: the Pallar or the Paraya to retain their stranglehold on social and political power. The support of one of the Dalit communities can be ensured only when the Naickers manage to let the poison of mutual distrust operate in the two communities, so that, a brother is turned against his brother, and the act of malice of the Naickers is invisible to their gullible eyes. The title “Vanmam” becomes a symbolic title because Bama is able to invest the common meaning of the word “malice” with the suggestion of “poison” and also sustain proximity in the same manner in which the Naickers, in the guise of friends let the poison of their malice take effect between the Pallar community and the Paraya community in the form of mutual distrust.

*Oru Thathavum Erumaiyum* is a one line story: “An Old Man and a Buffalo”. It is the typical story of the illiterate Dalit. He is in charge of the landlord’s buffaloes. His loyalty to the landlord is determined by how well he can tend to those four-legged animals. He is with the buffaloes all the time. One of the buffaloes goes astray, into the middle of the village pond, in the twilight hour and, fearing the landlord’s wrath, the old man wades into the water, struggles to swim and dies. The landlord does not attend the funeral of his trusted buffalo-herd. He sends Rs 100/- as ex gratia for the widow. The girl in the family boasts to her friends that they are rich now. The Buffalo and the Old Man, merge one into the other: dark skin, mute, symbols of suffering, aimless and led by the nose. This picture becomes, for Bama, the telling portrait of her community and, hence, the title of her short-story collection.
Alice Walker’s novels have titles that are loaded with suggestions. Most often they operate like symbols that hold the complete narrative with the power of their suggestions. *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* has “The Third Life” as operative words. It suggests the distance it takes, in temporal terms, for the aspiration or intent of the Southern black to become a reality. The third generation, represented through Ruth, provides the shape of hope and a modicum of certainty that the struggles of Grange Copeland would come to an end through a symbolic realization in the form of Ruth who is his “third life”: he who ate bark in extreme poverty now has catalogues arriving at his address suggesting the ripening of an aspiration into a reality.

The title of *Meridian* is eponymous. She is Meridian Hill. The second name is, literally and figuratively, her Christian name. She is the hill from which her people receive succour, the spirit to survive and the way to approach the trials of life. To this end, she evokes comparison with Jesus, who appeared on the mount for the sermon that was to provide hope to the community. The Civil Rights movement in which Meridian is active is only a historical association. Actually, she symbolizes the fundamental human rights to which every citizen of a civilized society is entitled. It is her humanity and espousal of true Christian values like sacrifice, suffering on behalf of others, tending to the wounds of the injured, and providing the ways for salvation that give to her personality a spitting likeness to Martin Luther King Jr. as well as to Jesus.

As regards *The Color Purple*, Walker implies that “it pisses off God” if no one regards the colour, “Purple” which stands for Divine or Regal splendour. She reworks the “Pygmalion” image which she uses for the first time in *The Third Life* yet again but by altering the sexual equation from heterosexuality to homosexuality. Celie who is unschooled in letters and in the ways of the world has been everyone’s whipping girl or slave. After Shug Avery and Nettie come into her life, she is dramatically transformed into a person, who till that point existed as another piece of furniture that was used. She is recognized, she discovers the beauty of her sexuality and she develops the language to
communicate her new-found glory. The transformation of Celie, from the cocoon to the butterfly, was possible through the understanding of the need to forge bonds not only with an unseen god but with the women around her who can liberate her. Thus, Celie, who discovers the divine in her body is, herself, the epitome of glory: the color purple.

*The Temple of my Familiar* is a case of turning the common understanding of the word into a symbol with bold and unconventional suggestions. It is common knowledge that every African has a personal god, his Familiar, who guides him or her in every turn of life like a protecting spirit or a guardian angel. So long as the women subscribed to the Familiar god as existing outside the person, they were practicing a code of dependence on an outside force which was invented by the male patriarchy. But the word, Familiar, receives significant seminal vibrations when the women, in the wake of their realization, locate the Familiar within the shrine of their body. At one stroke, they emphasize their shift from looking for salvation without to within their body and by discovering homo-erotic possibilities also banish the dependence on the male which is a multi-pronged act of defiance by the African-American woman. This act of defiance is, sustained in the next novel where, Walker launches into a powerful and vehement denunciation of genital mutilation. By submitting to the unhygienic, heinous, painful and traumatizing ritual women became a party to their own subjugation. By trying to share the pain as Tashi does, or by awakening the conscience of society and of women towards this terrible ritual, Walker suggests that the “secret” needs to be exploded as a calculated male conspiracy and that there is a need to put in its place a new secret that the woman’s body possesses the resources for independence.

*By the light of my Father’s Smile,* and *Now is the time to Open your Heart* are the more straightforward of Walker’s titles. In these narratives, Walker becomes more ecumenical and goes beyond the pale of the African-American community. In fact, she moves centrifugally in these two narratives while she had a centripetal orientation in all the novels up to *By the Light.* In all the other novels, she moves from the larger,
philosophical, concerns towards the African American community which is at the centre. In the last two novels, one finds her taking off from the African American family or individual towards other continents, other wider concerns like the discovery of spirituality in the circumambient universe. In the process, she also moves from the earthy immediacy of her community’s dialect, and even the epistolary communication of Celie with God to a more internationalist voice that belongs to the wider global community.

Both the writers have, at different times, admitted to the fact that writing has provided them liberation and lifted the weight of suffering from their hearts. One could think of a combination of images; one drawn from Walker and the other from Bama, to characterize the attempts by these writers to work through the spectre of marginalization and imminent erasure towards survival. Those images would be: Meridian- drawn from Alice Walker and Karukku-drawn from Bama. “Meridian” refers to the sun at noon, in the middle of the day, when the light is brightest and there are no shadows. One remembers the quotation from Camus with which Walker opens her first book of poems, *Once*:

Poverty was not a calamity for me. It was always balanced by the richness of light. . . . Circumstances helped me. To correct a natural difference, I was placed halfway between misery and the sun. Misery kept me believing that all was well under the sun, and the sun taught me that history wasn’t everything. (Marcus 12)

“Karukku” is the sharp edge of the palmyra tree. The harsh experiences of life cut into the being like the karukku of the palmyra tree. The sharp edge of casteism, untouchability and communal slurs remind the Dalit of the karukku. It also becomes the symbol of their resistance and response. Bama uses three more images from nature to bolster the ideas of erasure and survival. She refers to the feeble *murunga* tree and the broken wings of a bird to describe her condition that is faced with erasure. She then uses the image of the fish to suggest survival. Read together, they make the same sense of
learning from suffering suggested by Camus’s reference to poverty and the sunlight, which is further reinforced by Walker in superimposing the personality of Meridian on the image. Referring to her plight, Bama admits: “I had lost all my strength, and was as feeble as a murunga tree that blows over in the wind” (K 103). Later she says: “I am like a bird whose wings were broken” (104). After discovering her true powers, Bama writes: “I can breathe once again. . . .like a fish that has at last returned to the water, after having been flung outside and suffered distress” (K104).

The purpose of the study has been to discover the possibility of comparing two writers who invest their writings with an intensity that comes from seeing and suffering much marginalization. Both are buoyed by their conviction that beyond the particular struggle of the African-American or the Dalit there is the need to address the inhumanity in hegemonic forces that perpetrate racist and casteist practices which must be resisted and revolted against with all the force that can be breathed into the well considered word. This study does not seek to provide any documentary evidence to the effect that both the African-American and the Dalit have common genesis and that they have drifted in different directions during the African Diaspora. It, however, is keen to establish the two streams of cultural response as kindred in spirit and equally powerful in the creative animation of their respective cultural problems. Bama is not Walker’s equal in terms of the creative output. But she is more than Walker’s equal in the way in which she carves out her radical responses which are decent, restrained, poignant and humorous at the same time and completely devoid of venom or vulgarity. This noble sophistication is remarkable in both the writers who are hurt but would not return the hurt, who carry the scars of their many social injuries but would never scar the perpetrators. Both possess the largeness of a compassionate heart to see the forces that compel human beings to act and in the process cross the lines of civilized behaviour.

The scope of this study is vast. Based on the survey of literature, it is submitted that, this is the first work of its kind. There are areas which can be taken up for research
in the future. At the time of completing this project, the comparison between Alice Walker and Bama, in terms of critical output, reveals that Walker is the better known and well researched writer. Interest in Dalit writing is picking up with newer anthologies of essays, poems, short stories, besides, novels being published. Writers like Bama are increasingly being talked about; are interviewed more frequently and, with the translation of *Vanmam*, are receiving a wider critical attention for her three novels. As a pioneer of the Dalit voice she also carries the responsibilities of setting the tone and the direction for creative writers. Bama, in the first decade of the new millennium is exactly in the same position of Alice Walker in the 1970s.

One of the serious handicaps for such a work is the paucity of secondary sources for Bama which is marginal in comparison with Alice Walker’s. There are no libraries where Bama’s or the writings of the other Dalit writers are preserved for the purpose of research. The lacuna that is created on account of insufficient research documents is that one is unable to carry the discussion in different directions. The discussion will have to be carried forward through an extensive use of the interviews and conversations with the author. Then there is the problem that while Alice Walker can be called a novelist, Bama cannot be called a novelist in the same sense because her novels are, invariably, tiny episodic narratives where many characters interact and speak at the same time. A crucial difference between Alice Walker and Bama as novelists is the fact that there are no individual characters who dominate the narratives of Bama as they do in the novels of Alice Walker. Even in an autobiographical novel like *Karukku*, Bama’s is the voice of the individual as a representative of the disenfranchised community. One does not see a character like Mem or Ruth or Shug or Celie in Bama.

The point about the near absence of the conventional character in the novel can be theorized keeping the focus of the present study. Alice Walker and Bama represent their respective African-American and Dalit communities. However, they are not the conventional novelists who invest a heavy premium on the “author”-ity on the cover
These writers are, indeed, committed artists. However, they are not committed to individual “author”-ity. They are committed to the larger cause of the living words awakening the conscience of their downtrodden and marginalized communities. They lend their awakened voices to the cause of awakening the conscience of the race. So, their individual voices became the polyphonous responses of the, hitherto, mute members of the community. So, the personal, by conscious commitment of these authors, becomes the social, the communal and the universal. It becomes tenable, then, to see that Bama in her narratives and Alice Walker, gradually, in her early novels and quite obviously in the later novels, demonstrate this transmutation of the personal into the larger social concern.

The scope of this study is to initiate a process of reading together writers like Bama and Walker to, first, arrive at the tenability and, later, to extend the comparison into discovering patterns of alignment, of concern of writers who keep the life of the artist and the life of art as close to each other as possible and do not choose different postures in each sphere. It is a fetching exercise to see how authentic, full of earthiness and immediacy the language becomes once the writer narrates lived experience in the dialect of the community or race in which he or she is culturally located. It is when Comparative Literature allows the space for writers to cross borders and meet on the basis of the concern for humanity teetering on the verge of dehumanization; it is when within this space one sees the tenability of reading together two, apparently, dissimilar cultural responses like Bama and Alice Walker; it is in the recognition of their intense humanity that one realizes the spirit of “planetarity” as enunciated by Gayatri Spivak.

Much work has been done in identifying alignments within the sphere of African American culture. However, very little work has happened in Dalit literature. The minds of individuals, the markets for books by and on the marginalized are, gradually, opening. The critical judgement coming in the wake of Post-Colonial thinking, Feminism/Womanism, Postmodernism, is more attuned to pluralism now than it was ever before. In the true spirit of globalization, one must be able to build cultural bridges that
bring together writers like Bama and Alice Walker into new forums of discussion for the generation of new discourse that provides insights necessary to work through the miasma of parochialism, distrust, cynicism, “exhaustion” as John Barth would say and move towards humanity, replenishment, talking together and “planetarity” as the guiding lights of the humanities.