Preface

In this study of Alice Walker's fiction, two dominant aspects are analysed: her feminist outlook which she prefers to express through her term 'womanist' and the significance of art which she considers an inherent factor in every woman. An artist with a message, Walker adopts the different literary forms to suit her thematic needs. One of the reasons for her use of the term 'womanist,' she says, is her wish to be original in expression. Originality is a hallmark of Walker the literary artist, and literary forms and genres take new shapes under her pen. At the same time she is one who holds tradition and heritage very dear. She advocates this to all women. Zora Neale Hurston and Jean Toomer are foremost among her literary models. She addresses the black women in particular but her womanist message is applicable to all women in general and thereby it helps the ennoblement of human life. Though it starts with a sexist and racial connotation, ultimately her fiction presents a vision of love, harmony and peace among all peoples.

The first chapter, as the title INTRODUCTION suggests, is an introduction of Walker's works, her biographical details and her place in the literary field with the varied critical responses to her works. Belonging to a family of sharecroppers, she has gone through the sufferings of a black American family. When she was eight, she was
facially mutilated when one of her eyes was blinded by a shot from her brother's gun. And it was her daughter Rebecca who finally helped her come out of the mental and spiritual trauma caused by the injury. While these experiences find expression in her works in one form or other, more direct references to her life are found in her novel *Meridian*. Of her novels *The Color Purple* has brought her much fame. She got the Pulitzer Prize and the American Book Award in 1983 for it. As a novelist, poet, essayist, short-story writer and biographer, she expresses her fears, hopes and visions with force and directness in a manner that is her own. So she gets a mixed response of criticism.

Being woman centered, Walker's fiction is primarily concerned with the black woman. In the second chapter REALIZATION OF SELF AND IDENTITY IN WOMAN'S GROWTH, the subject of a woman's growth through her awareness of her self and identity which she realizes by various means like resistance, change, female bonding, sexual liberation, economic independence and activity is discussed.

To become whole, a woman has to resist social conventions which tend to confine her within the domestic sphere serving patriarchal interests. This is dealt with in the third chapter WOMAN'S PLACE AND ROLE IN THE SOCIAL STRUCTURE. Walker's fiction shows how institutions like home, marriage, motherhood and religion are all constituents of the patriarchal system that keeps woman under
subjugation thereby limiting her full growth. So she has to resist the oppressive factors not through violence, as some of her characters attempt at and fail, but through her creativity.

The fourth chapter WALKER THE ARTIST deals with Walker's handling of literary forms, traditions and language. Like making quilts, Walker constructs her works making use of different genres and forms. The genres of coming out and bildungsroman stand prominent in her fiction as they depict the growth and development of women which is Walker's chief concern. Both the preoccupation with self seen in the self-reflective novel and the social awareness of traditional fiction engage her as a novelist. Revision as a trope serves well her purpose of changing the stereotype images of black women besides linking black women writers and going back to heritage and ancestry. Her effective use of the epistolary form and Black English in The Color Purple contributes much to the novel's appeal. The presence of folklore, myth and religion in her fiction further assists in placing her in a traditional context.

Summing up the findings in the study of Alice Walker's fiction, the final chapter CONCLUSION reiterates Walker's strong convictions about her womanist ideology and the great significance of art in life. Art ensures life. It is curative, transformative, magical and reformatory. It is functional and not merely decorative. Most important of all is that art helps to preserve a people's soul as exemplified in Meridian. In Walker's
womanist perspective it is important that woman is connected with the community in a creative manner that enlivens and ennobles both the woman artist and the community.