1.0 Preliminaries

It is a well known fact that with the arrival of infamous ‘May Flower’ black-ship at James-town, Virginia in August 1619, with nineteen African people, had started the brutal human slave trade in America. After legalization by the government in 1641, it got full speed and swing. Till the Black Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, that is, for a period of two hundred and forty-four years, lacs of African people--male, female and children were forcefully brought and sold in America. The main reason behind the development in human slave trade was to solve the problem of labor on the plantation farms of America, especially, southern America. The fact was that the black slaves were not only economically exploited; they were tragically exploited on all levels—physical, mental and sexual as well. They were treated as just breeding animals, sub-humans and commodities. One more stark reality was that the Black women were triply exploited, being as African, black and female.

The history books and views of scholars like Harihar Kulkarni make clear that the African people were more civilized and cultured than the so-called Europeans, especially, white Americans. The historian Lerone Bennett states that the Africans were first to use tools, paint, pictures and sculpture, he further remarks: “civilization started in the greater valleys of Asia and Africa” [1966:05]. Another scholar Ngugi wa Thiango too is of the opinion that “the people (in pre-conquered Africa) tended their farm, and also their music, officiated in ceremonious dances, recited poetry and stories around the fire side” [1976:06]. The study of history books reveals that there was no color-bias. The black color of their skin was always considered beautiful. W.E.B. Du Bois opines:
How beautiful he was, with his olive-tinted flesh and dark gold ringlets, his eyes of the mingled blue and brown, his perfect little limbs, and the soft voluptuous roll which the blood of Africa had moulded into his features [Quoted in Kulkarni 1999:37].

To support this view, the following account by Alex Haley is significant:

Rightly now, it was on the eve of the annual harvest, Circa 1760, every female in the village over twelve rains old, was boiling and then cooling a freshly-bounded saydame leaves solution, in which they soak their feet to a deep, ...as all men felt that more blackness a woman had, the more beautiful she was.... [Ibid].

Another most important feature of African heavenly life was that they never distinguished between sexes. They heartily treated both the sexes as equal. This feature once again makes clear that they were certainly superior to Europeans. In this context, Iva.E.Carruthers describes the egalitarian and harmonious African traditional family and community system:

There was no endemic antagonism between the sexes but rather a holistic approach to community organizations out of which both men and women would find self identification, security and continuity [1979:12-13].

In Africa, not only equal status was given to women, but she was also considered superior to men because of her motherhood. La Frances Rogers-Rose, making use of African mythology, puts:

In African mythology the universe was conceived and delivered by a woman. No other person has that ability – the ability to give birth, to ensure the ever increasing number of ancestors, to link the past with the present [1980:16].
There are some more striking features like dance, the sacred marriage institution and finally, the celebration of female ancestor ship. Thus, considering all the features of African life together one might say that Africa, of course, pre-conquered Africa, was nothing but a Heaven on earth.

As already pointed out, with the arrival of that infamous ship at Jamestown, Virginia, merciless human slave trade had started in America. The way, the innocent African people were captured and treated in the ship, is inexpressible. Whatever description one reads in history books, is shocking. One such tormenting account by Frank Tannenbaum is sufficient to understand the tragic lot of captured Africans. He writes:

Little Negro villages in their interior of Africa were frequently attacked in the middle of the night, the people were killed or captured by Europeans themselves or more frequently, by Africans acting on their account for Europeans, and the victims left alive were shackled with a collar about the neck, men, women and children and driven for hundreds of miles to the coast. The human caravan guarded by armed men... would sometimes trek a thousand miles to the coast through forest and jungle before reaching the stations where the Negroes destined for slave trade could be disposed of [1946:21].

The noble laureate Toni Morrison also gives a similar account of the terrible journey across the middle passage in her epical novel *Beloved* (1987). In many of the books, it is reported that many unfortunate African people including women and children committed suicide and most of them died due to unbearable conditions in the ship. Whatever in number they arrived at the coast, they were destined to separate from
one-another. The white farmers purposefully did not buy all the members of the family. Henson Josiah provides a very pathetic account of her life:

My (Henson Josiah’s) brothers and sisters were bid off first, and one by one, while my mother, paralyzed with grief held me by the hand. Her turn came and she was bought by Issac Riley of Montgomery Country. Then I was offered... My mother, half distracted with the thought of parting for ever from all her children, pushed through the crowd while the bidding for me was going on, to the spot where Riley was standing. She fell at his feet, and clung to his knees, entreating him in tones that a mother could only command, to buy her baby as well as herself, and spare to her one, at least, one of her little ones... This man disengaged himself from her with violent blows and kicks [1962:53].

In this way, the human slave trade started and the world witnessed and experienced the blackest history of America, where the men of flesh and blood, the men of mind and heart, the men of love and emotion, were made into commodities, sub-humans, breeding animals and chattel.

1.1 African American Literature: Origin and Development

The term ‘literature’ from Aristotle, had been defined and explained by a number of experts and scholars. But no definition is still considered to be complete and appropriate. The widely quoted idea is that literature is the product of society. Whatever happens in society that gets reflected in the literature. Thus, the literature written by the writers (especially, African American writers) on the happenings with them or in their community can be termed as African American literature. Bhasker A. Shukla attempts to define: “African American literature is literature written by, about, and sometimes specifically for African Americans” [2007:09].
The study of African American literature reveals that it has some features, which are thoroughly distinct and different from mainstream American literature. The most striking point about these two literatures is that both had started from the same point of time, the beginning of American literature from its independence i.e. from 4th July, 1776. It was only three years before the American independence; the first African American poet Phillis Wheatley published her book of verse *Poems on Various Subjects* (1773). Further study of African American literature also makes it quite clear that since its beginning to the present day, it primarily focuses on the issues of slavery. Among the themes and issues explored in it are: the role of African Americans within the large American society, African American culture, racism, slavery and exploitation on all levels. Another most important feature of this literature is the brilliant use of traditional oral poetry such as spirituals, African American gospel music, blues and rap. The use of Black English is also its distinct feature.

Though, it has its own distinct and different features, it is a part of mainstream American literature. According to Joanne Gabbin, African American literature exists both inside and outside American literature. She aptly remarks: “Somehow African American literature has been relegated to a different level, outside American literature, yet it is an integral part” [Quoted in Shukla 2007:18]. But there is much controversy over this issue. There are some writers like Robert Hayden, who reject the idea of any Black literature. This first African American poet laureate consultant in poetry to the library of congress once said: “There is no such thing as Black literature. There’s good literature and bad. And that’s all” [Ibid: 19]. But W E B DuBois complaints that African American writers do not portray Black people in a positive light. He insists: “We
want everything that is said about us to tell of the best and highest and noblest in us. We insist that our Art and Propaganda be one’’ [Ibid]. There are some scholars, who are of the opinion that African American literature is quite about their race. In short, they try to label it as ethnic writing. But, there are critics like Paul Greenberg, who rejects this idea and says: ‘‘.... it defies the meaning of works like Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, in which Ellison’s main character is invisible because people see him as nothing more than a Black man’’ [Ibid: 18].

1.1.1 Eighteenth Century Literature

As pointed out earlier that in 1773, the first prominent African American poet Phillis Wheatley (1753-84) published her book of verse, *Poems on Various Subjects*. Her poetry was so beautiful and artistic that was praised by many of the leading figures of that time. But people of America were not ready to accept that such a good poetry could have been written by a slave woman. For the purpose, she had to defend herself in the court.

Another prominent poet of that period was Jupiter Hammon (1711-1806?). He was a noted orator. Like Wheatley, he also remained slave until his death. The poet published his poem *An Evening Thought: Salvation by Christ with Penitential Cries* as a broadside in 1761. He also wrote an ode on Phillis Wheatley in which, he discussed their shared humanity and common bonds. But, he is still remembered as an orator, in one of his speeches, he points out the gravity of slavery system: ‘‘If we should ever get to Heaven, we shall find nobody to reproach us for being black or for being slaves’’ [Quoted in Shukla 2007: 11].

Along with these two poets, there was one more poet Lucy Terry, whose name is also mention worthy because of her *Bars Fight* (1746) – a
verse account of an Indian raid. In fact, she is the first African American poet.

1.1.2 Nineteenth Century Literature

In the first half, the three notable writers—Victor Sejour, William Wells Brown and Harriet Wilson greatly contributed to African American literature. Of them, Victor Sejour (1817-74) was born free in New Orleans and migrated to France at the age of nineteen. There he published his short-story *La Mulatre* (The Mulatto) in 1837. The story, though, represents the first known fiction by an African American, it was written in French and published in France, and had apparently no influence on later African American literature. So, his contribution was very limited than the other two writers of his time.

William Wells Brown (1814-84) was an abolitionist, lecturer, novelist, playwright and historian. Though, he was born slave, he ran to the North, where he worked for abolitionist causes. In 1853, he published the novel *Clotel: Or, The President’s Daughter*, which was considered to be the first novel written by an African American. The novel is based on a rumor about the president Thomas Jefferson, having a daughter with his slave named Sally Hemings. The novel, being published in England, does not get the credit and honor of being the first African American novel. On the other hand, the honor of the first African American novel goes to Harriet Wilson’s *Our Nig* (1859), which very beautifully gives the details of the difficult lives of Blacks in North America.

In the second half of the 19th century, there emerged a new genre as Slave Narrative, which later on was called as sub-genre of African American literature. The record tells that to present the reality of slavery, near about six thousand former slaves from North America and the
Caribbean wrote accounts of their lives. Of them, more than one hundred were published as separate books or pamphlets. The most important thing was that these slave narratives were categorized into three distinct forms: tales of religious redemption, tales to inspire the abolitionist struggle and tales of progress.

Frederick Douglass (1818-95) was the most note-worthy writer. He was also a famous orator and editor. Like Brown, he too escaped to North and worked for abolitionist causes. In 1845, he published his autobiography *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave*. Like Phillis Wheatley, he also had to face the problem of white attack that how a black man could have written such an eloquent work. Thus, Douglass later revised and expanded his autobiography, and republished with a new title *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855).

1.1.3 Post-Slavery African American Literature

In 1970s, the African American people became legally free as American citizens, due to three amendments (13\textsuperscript{th} to 15\textsuperscript{th} amendments) to the constitution of America. The writers, then, speedily continued to write non-fiction works about the condition of black people in the country. W.E.B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington and Marcus Garvey were the prominent writers among them.

W.E.B. Du Bois (1868-1963) was a famous writer and political thinker. He was also one of the original founders of NAACP. In 1903, he published his most influential collection of essays *The Souls of Black Folk*. His essays had a personal tone; they proved to be thought-provoking and heart-rending. The book contains his famous quote: “….the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line” [2007:06].
Booker T Washington (1856-1915) was also noted non-fictional writer and educationist. He was the founder of the Tuskegee Institute, a Black college in Alabama. There are four highly intellectual and influencing books to his credit – *The Future of the American Negro* (1899), *Up From Slavery* (1901), *Tuskegee and Its People* (1905) and *My Larger Education* (1911). His views were contrary to that of Du Bois. He always believed that Blacks should first lift themselves up and prove themselves the equal of whites before asking to end racism.

Marcus Garvey (1887-1940) was a publisher, journalist and crusader of Black Nationalism. His call ‘Back-to-Africa’ highly encouraged people to return to their original homeland.

1.1.4 **Harlem Renaissance: Influencing Movement**

The great intellectual and literary movement--Harlem Renaissance started in 1917. It highly inspired and enchanted both the political activists and literary artists. It was also called as ‘New Negro Mood’ by Alian Locke. Bhasker Shukla writes:

> While the Harlem Renaissance, based in the African American community in Harlem in New York City, existed as a larger flowering of social thought and culture--with numerous Black artists, musicians, and others producing classic works in fields from jazz to theatre--the renaissance is perhaps best known for the literature that came out of it [2007: 14].

This movement was a reaction against the courtly muses of white America and near-white mulatto characters. Langston Hughes asserts:

> We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it does not matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. The tom-tom
cries and tom-tom laugh. If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn’t matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand up on top of the mountain, free within ourselves [1926a:694].

The main feature of this movement was migration, which produced a new sense of independence in the Black community. It also empowered the growing American Civil Rights Movement (1940 to 1960). James Baldwin, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Gwendolyn Brooks, Lorraine Hansberry, Amiri Baraka, Nella Larsen, Jessie Fauset were some of the prominent writers, who contributed to the literature.

James Baldwin wrote in all twenty books including essays and novels. His work attracted most diverse and antithetical response. Asha Sharma categorizes the available criticism on Baldwin in two parts:

In the first category are a set of critics who concern themselves with the question of art versus propaganda in Baldwin’s novels, focusing their attention on this duality in his fiction. The second group includes critics who totally ignore the racial characteristics of Baldwin’s novels and concentrate on elements which provide a universal appeal to his fiction like any other modern mainstream American novel [2005:02].

Baldwin was the great admirer and fan of Richard Wright whom he called the greatest Black writer in the world for him.

Richard Wright (1908-1960) was best known for his novel Native Son (1940), other semi-autobiographical books Black Boy (1945), The Outsider (1953) and White Man, Listen (1957) also to his credit. In his widely read novel Native Son, he presents the story of a Black slave named Bigger Thomas. The protagonist Thomas accidently murders white woman. He gets punished for the crime. But the most important
thing of the book is that the black slave is shown as native or American son. This idea of Wright is highly appreciated by all.

Ralph Ellison (1914) was also equally a great writer. His slave narrative *Invisible Man* (1952) gave him much fame and name. It won the National Book Award in 1953. It deals with the story of a nameless protagonist, who longs to be successful in white America. The reader also realizes the sorrow of Ellison as an invisible and as only black slave to the white people. Though, only few books have been written by him, his contribution to literature is undoubtedly great and inspiring.

The novelist and the poet Gwendolyn Brooks was also a noted writer of Harlem Renaissance. Her epic *Annie Allen* (1948) was awarded with the Pulitzer Prize in 1949. The epic is the story of a passive and vulnerable Annie Allen. She gets deserted by her soldier husband and is left pathetically mourning her fate in the kitchen. There is one more novel penned by Brooks entitled *Maud Martha* (1953). In her autobiography *Report From Part One* (1972), Brooks writes that *Maud Martha* is an autobiographical novel. She further puts:

> Much that has happened to Maud Martha has not happened to me -- and she is nicer and better wordinated creature than I am. But it is true that much in the story was taken out of my life [1972:119].

Jean Toomer in his only book *Cane* described the experiences of black people in the rural South and the urban North. The South was a highly racist part, thus, the black people started to migrate to the North. In the period, the writers like Arna Bontemps, Rudolph Fisher, Eric Warlord and others wrote much about the common agencies and hard-earned joys of their people. The people of Harlem requested Toomer for writing another such book but he strongly refused to do so.
The dramatists like Lorraine Hansberry and Amiri Baraka also contributed to literature by writing much influencing plays. Hansberry’s *A Raisin In The Sun* (1958) won the New York Drama Critics Circle Award in 1959. Baraka showed comparably much interest in music criticism and poetry that gave him much popularity.

### 1.1.5 Black Women Writers

With the publication of a verse-book *Poems on Various Subjects* (1773) by the renowned black woman poet Phillis Wheatley, the contribution of black women writers to African American literature seems very great and inspiring. Lorraine Bethel remarks in the context:

> I believe that there is a separate and identifiable tradition of black women writers, simultaneously existing within and independent of the American, Afro-American and American female traditions [1982: 178].

The general assumption which is, of course, not fully true, among the scholars and the critics, just from 1970 onwards, this literary rich tradition of black women writers took a new and powerful shape. Mary Helen Washington has rightly traced the three–inter–related cycles within the tradition: “The evolutionary process is both historical and psychological and consists of three interrelated cycles: suspension, assimilation and emergence” [1982:212] Harihar Kulkarni has correctly picked up the idea and applied to black women writers:

The cycle of ‘suspension’ can be traced back to the nineteenth century novels written by Harriet Wilson, Frances Harper and Pauline Hopkins, and the cycle of ‘assimilation’ could easily be attributed to the novels written in the thirties and forties by writers like Jessie Fauset, Nella Larsen and others. Because of their innate capacity to reconstruct black womanhood and their power to
project new trajectories of self, Paule Marshall, Toni Morrison and other novelists… could conveniently be labeled as the artists belonging to the third cycle: ‘emergence’ [1999:115].

Thus, the black women novelists of the 19th century like Harriet Wilson, Frances Harper and Pauline Hopkins came in the first cycle of ‘suspension’. Mary Helen Washington aptly provides reasons of their belonging to the cycle.

….the pressures against them are so great they cannot move anywhere. Suspended in time and place, they are women whose life choices are … severely limited … by the external circumstances of their lives [1982:212].

In this context, the view of Alice Walker is also note-worthy. She writes: “….the black women of the post – Reconstruction period “suspended” as artists “hindered and thwarted by contrary instincts” [1979: 139]. While studying the novels of these novelists, one finds all the salient features in them, which a ‘suspension novel’ has-, depiction of mulatto characters, impact of past male-writers, more importance to race than sex; lack of self–identity; and celebration of female ancestors.

Frances E.W. Harper’s *Iola Leroy or Shadows Uplifted* (1892) deals with the story of young mulatto girl. Due to lack of knowledge of Negro blood in her veins, she considers herself superior to other black girls. She, ironically enough, advocates the slave system for the plantation life. Being fair–skinned, she behaves like a white lady. But when she realizes her originality as Black, she then tries to resurrect herself. While facing the polarity of racism, she considers her past life as sin and does penance in isolation. Finally, she decides to live a decent life of a black woman, but it becomes utterly impossible for her.
Harriet Wilson and Pauline Hopkins are the other two black women novelists belonging to the cycle of ‘suspension’. Wilson’s *Our Nig* has been called the first African American novel. It also deals with racism and sexism. Pauline Hopkins’ *Contending Forces* (1990) too is a mention-worthy book. Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen, as pointed out earlier, belonged to Harlem Renaissance. Though, in the period, the black artists were busy in singing the song of racial solidarity and creative independence, when they were not ready to imitate the white literature and cultured models, Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen were pre-occupied with the construction of mulatto utopia under the sign passing. Barbara Christian rightly says:

…creation of near-white, bourgeois, middle class, mulatto characters (by Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen) posed a serious threat to the New Negro Philosophy. If blacks were culturally no different from whites … how could anyone posit a unique Negro genius, a specifically different culture? [1985:47].

Jessie Fauset (1884-1961) was a prominent black woman novelist. She was the daughter of a Minister. She was educated at Cornell University, where she majored in French and was elected a member of Phi Beta Kappa. She had no good knowledge about rural South Black people. Abby Arthur Johnson writes about her: “Fauset wrote about people positioned between two races because she often found herself in that situation” [1978:150].

Fauset published four novels: *There is Confusion* (1924), *Plum Bun* (1929), *Chinaberry Tree* (1931) and *Comedy, American Style* (1933). Her novels deal with the themes of marriage, money, men, social standing, love-making, etc. All her heroines are beautiful, educated and middle-class women. They hate the black-skinned girls; even they hate
their own black relatives. Angela Murray in *Plum Bun* abandons her dark-skinned sister Virginia Murray and goes to the market to buy a plum bun. The same attitude one finds in *There is Confusion*, when the heroine Laurentine for the sake of white customers hates and refuses colored customers.

Nella Larsen (1893-1963) was another most renowned black woman novelist. She published two novels *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929). Like Fauset, Larsen also creates beautiful, educated, middle-class women. Larsen in her novel *Quicksand* presents heroine Helga Crane, who is pretty, solitary girl with no family connections. She gets educated by a white uncle after the death of her parents. In a Negro College, she seems to be distinct from all because of her middle-class style. Because of her prettiness, she can marry with any white man and can enjoy life. But she rightly thinks that she would, in that case, disgrace her Black blood. Thus, she marries with a travelling Minister. He takes her to Alabama. Yet, Helga cannot realize herself till she sinks in the house of her husband into the quick-sand of poverty and child-bearing.

Ann Petry (1908) continued the tradition of the heroines, who went to pass for white. Her heroine Lutie Johnson in *The Street* (1946) is the best example, who tries to live by the female version of the American Dream as pure, protected, and well-provided for. There are two more novels written by her: *Country Place* (1947) and *The Narrows* (1953). In addition, two biographical books-- *Harriet Tubman: Conductor on the Underground Railroad* (1955), *Tibuta of Salem Village* (1963) and a collection of short-stories *Miss Muriel and Other Stories* (1971) are to her credit. Riger Whitlow calls her best follower of Wright. The notable thing is that there is a great impact of Great Depression (1929-33) on her
novels, particularly her novel *The Street*. It is the book that gives Petry a chance to become the first black woman to record book-sales of over a million copies.

Dorothy West (1912) was another remarkable novelist. One finds more similarities between her and Petry. Like Petry, West comes from middle-class bourgeois family. She also participates in the political, social and literary movements. She has published only one novel *The Living is Easy* (1948). The book is written in the Faustian way. The protagonist Cleo Jericho Judson is twenty-three years junior to her husband. She always calls him Mr Niger, who is famous as ‘Black Banana King’. Cleo always wants more money than her husband Bert can give her, and he also wants in return more love and affection. Like Pauline Breedlove of *The Bluest Eye* (1970) by Toni Morrison, Cleo is very color-conscious. She too hates her newly born daughter and tries to alter her daughter’s physical features.

Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960) was a novelist, folklorist and anthropologist. Her major works were published during the 1930s. In addition to her short-stories, she published four novels: *Jonatis Gourd Vine* (1934), *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1942) and *Seraph on the Suwannee* (1948). In the mean time, she also penned books on folklore: *Mules and Men* (1935), and *Tell My Horse* (1938) and an autobiography *Dust Tracks on the Road* (1942). Unlike her predecessor women novelists, she does not employ the ‘passing’ theme, nor does she show crude bitterness toward the white men.

Paule Marshall is the first black woman novelist, who engages herself in the task of reconstructing Black womanhood. Until her arrival on the literary scene, most of the writers approached the major themes
like history, colonialism, slavery, racism from a male perspective. Paule Marshall is the first Black writer, who treats these ideas from a Black feminist point of view. She gives new meaning to Black womanhood by transforming abused creatures into self-conscious rebels, who meet the challenges of the world and seek to define their identity within the context of their own culture. Her novel *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959) centers round Selina, a girl child of first generation, who passes from a traumatic childhood to womanhood. With psyche damaged by the racist and sexist ideology, she initially judges her self-worth by the white standards of feminine beauty. Not only Selina, but other heroines Reena, Silla, Marle Kinbona are self-seekers and perennial rebels.

Gloria Naylor is another prominent Black woman novelist. She tries to present the voice of the black women through her writing. She projects black women who are totally trapped by the iniquitous system. In her *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982), she throws light on the economic and social position of the Brewster Place. It is mainly a collection of seven stories, each story focuses on a different woman who experiences and endures conflicts within herself and as a result of her interaction with others. The focus is on the black women who live in the locality in the form of a community. Naylor, in this novel, shows how these seven women try to understand who they are? What factors are responsible for their lamentable plight and how to overcome their suffering?

1.2 Place of Toni Morrison and Alice Walker in African American Literature

The 1993 Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison and the Pulitzer Prize winner Alice Walker are the two great contemporary Black women novelists of America. In 70’s, both registered their entry in African
American literature. As already stated that both the novelists have innate capacity to reconstruct black womanhood and power to project new trajectories of self. While studying their work, one realizes that both deal with problems of black women from all angles—gender, race and class. Sandeep Pathak boldly explains “Though their literary visions are shaped by different perspectives, Morrison and Walker speak a similar truth out of their “Collective Consciousness” and create women who are “spiritual sisters” [2007:64]

1.2.1 Brief Biographical Sketches: Morrison and Walker

Chaloe alias Toni Morrison was born on 18th February 1931 in Lorain Ohio. She was the second child of George Wofford and Ramah Willis Wofford. Before her birth, her parents had migrated to Ohio. Ohio was a northern community, located near Lake Erie. It was considered to be peaceful and free racist. In her novels, the readers get a clear idea of the impact of the town life and community. Her father was a hard-working man, the same hard-working and devotional trait of character, one finds in Morrison.

Morrison started her education in such a time, when no black child could think of education. She continued her education, facing all the familial and social problems. While doing B.A. in English, she joined a repertory company, the Howard University players; with them she made several tours of South. Those tours greatly helped her in writing novels and particularly for depicting the black life. In the same period, she changed her first name, because nobody could correctly pronounce it. Thus, she changed it to Toni, a shortened version of her middle name. In fact, Morrison wanted to become a dancer. There was great impact of Maria Tallchief on her, a famous ballerina of the time. She was also a great reader of French and Russian writers. She read the books of all her
favorite writers in such a way that the characters jumped from the novels and talked with her. “Memorable are her recollections of the richness of black lore, black music, black myths... As a teenager, Morrison read the European literary masters: English, Russian and French” [Ibid:12-13].

For M.A., she attended Cornwell University in Ithaca, New York. She successfully completed the thesis on the topic ‘The Theme of Suicide in the Works of William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf’ and acquired the degree. After completing her education, she accepted the job at Texas Southern University in Houston, where she taught Introductory English. In 1957, she returned to Howard University as a member of faculty and there she met Harold Morrison, a Jamaican architect, whom she married in 1958. She gave birth to her first child Harold Ford in 1961. Her married life was not happy, exact reasons had neither been given in her interviews nor in her writings. But, the reasons seem to be clear that because of her contact with other people regarding the Civil Rights Movement, and the very instinct she had for writing. She then joined a small group of writers as a temporary escape from daily boring married life. In fact, she needed company of people, who could appreciate literature as much as she did. Her marriage deteriorated, while she was pregnant with their second child, and she left her husband. Later, she divorced him and returned to her parents’ house in Lorain with her two sons. After the divorce, Morrison got a job as an associate editor in Random House in 1964. When she went to work, her sons were taken care of by the housekeeper. At evenings, after returning from the duty, she cooked dinner and played with the boys until they went to sleep, and after that she used to write till late night.

Morrison worked in Random House for nearly twenty years. This period was really hard and difficult. She had to play three roles at a time
– a senior editor of a reputed publishing firm, an affectionate and loving mother of two sons, and a writer of four novels. After 1984, she devoted her whole life to writing.

Alice Malsenior Walker was born on 9th February 1944. She was the eighth child to Minnie Talluh Walker and Winnie Lee Walker. When she was eight years old, a freak accident involving BBs gunshot left her blinded in the right eye. The accident changed her life altogether. She became secluded and reserved. This blinded eye is often reminisced in her works. Although she was operated to correct the impairment but she could never recover fully. Seema Murugan has rightly linked the freak accident of Walker with the precarious fate of black women. She writes:

This accident itself becomes an arch-image of Walker’s imagination; it seems to have made her deeply aware of a black woman’s precarious fate in a world of male supremacy and of the symbolism of light and shadow [2008: 24].

She was always unhappy with her eye. Whatever damage was done to the eye, became the beauty of her life, when her three years old daughter Rebecca opened Walker’s eyes by looking at her eyes: “Mommy, there’s a world in your eye ... Mommy, where did you get that world in your eye?” [1983a:370]. Walker also dedicated her book In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens (1983) by saying, “who (daughter Rebecca) saw in me what I considered a scar and redefined it as a world” [Ibid: ix].

She, after completing her primary education, went to Spelman College, Georgia for further studies. Her mother was really a gifted woman, who gave her three special gifts - a suitcase for travelling all over the world, a typewriter for creativity and a sewing machine for self-sufficiency. These gifts proved very fruitful for Walker while completing her higher education at Georgia. In 1963, she met Martin Luther King
and actively participated in Civil Rights Movement. In 1964, she suddenly realized that she was pregnant, she tried to commit suicide. In her novel *Meridian* (1976), the protagonist also gets pregnant but she marries the lover. This pregnancy taught a lesson to Walker. She turned to writing as a natural outlet for her distress and stopped writing only to eat and sleep. During this period, she realized that because of woman’s body, woman becomes alone and lonely. This sorrow is very well expressed in her poems. She herself accepts: “When I am happy (or neither happy nor sad), I write essays, short stories, and novels. Poems— even happy ones—emerge from an accumulation of sadness…” [Ibid: 249-250].

In 1967, she married Melvyn Levanthal, a civil rights lawyer. It was her inter-racial marriage, which raised many objections and troubles in her life. In 1972, Walker started teaching at Wellesley College; there she began classes of ‘Gender Studies’. For the course-material, she selected the novels of Zora Neale Hurston. The novels of Hurston were already out of print. Walker took much labor in collecting the material and brought Hurston in the lime-light. In fact, Hurston was already rejected by the readers for picturing African American people as whole and complete, but whatever name and fame that Hurston got as a great novelist, the credit goes to Alice Walker.

In 1982, she was awarded with the Pulitzer Prize for her novel *The Color Purple* (1982), which chronicles the life of a black girl growing up in the Deep South in the state of Georgia. Recently, she published a book called *Sent By Earth: A Message from the Grandmother’s Spirit* (2002), which was a reaction against the bombing by terrorist group on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.
1.2.2 Morrison and Walker: Versatile Writers

Toni Morrison and Alice Walker are both versatile writers. Both have handled almost all genres of literature – fiction, essay, biography etc, but they are most famous as novelists and short-story writers. Toni Morrison in her nine novels including *Beloved* (1987) and Alice Walker in five novels including *The Color Purple* (1982) realistically depict the wretched life of Black slaves, particularly Black women in white America. While reading their novels, one feels and hears the heart-rending and heart-touching cries of all ill-fated black outcasts. Both the writers have written plenty of critical essays, Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992), and Walker’s *Live By the Word* (1988) are just the examples. Morrison has not written poetry and Walker has not handled drama, but their writing is wet with dramatic and poetic style.

1.2.3 Engaging Story Tellers: Morrison and Walker

Everybody in the world loves to listen or to read stories. The readers all over world, in the same way, love to read the stories of both the women writers. The similarity between the two writers is that they employ various techniques of narration such as flash-back, stream of consciousness, including traditional techniques of narration. It is always said that the novelist or any writer should be so effective in his/her narrative style that the reader should not put the book down till he or she finishes it. In this context, both Morrison and Walker are quite successful.

While talking about style of narration, Sandeep Pathak aptly remarks, “Morrison always begins her narrative with an arresting event” [2007:30]. For example, on the very page of her novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970), the narrator tells: “Quiet as it’s kept, there were no marigolds in
the fall of 1941. We (the narrator Claudia and her sister Frieda) thought, at the time, that it was because Pecola was having her father’s baby that the marigolds did not grow” [TBE: 04]. A similar beginning one finds in The Color Purple by Walker, “You (Celie, whose father becomes the father of her children) better not never tell nobody but God. It’d kill your mammy” [TCP: 03]. The reader is first shocked and then is curious to know that how a daughter is having father’s babies. These arresting events make the reader to go further and further in the story. Toni Morrison in Sula (1973) writes about the idea of celebrating National Suicide Day by Shadrack in the very introductory chapter. In the same way, Alice Walker in her novel Meridian (1976) narrates about the woman who died twenty-five years ago and her dead body has been preserved by her husband “Marilene O’Shay, One of the Twelve Human Wonders of the World: Dead for Twenty-Five years, Preserved in Life-Like Condition [M:04]. These things in the opening chapters naturally create curiosity in the readers. Seema Murugan too appreciates Walker’s power of storytelling: “The most impressive thing about Walker’s fiction is her power as a storyteller… She depends upon her capacity to render theme in terms of action” [2008:03].

### 1.2.4 Impact of Great Writers on Morrison and Walker

The study of Morrison’s work, including non-fictional work reveals that the impact of Ralph Ellison, Alex Haley, Henry Dumas, Toni Cade Bambara and Jean-Paul Sartre is equally great as her education and her work of edition at Random House. Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man (1952) makes a great impact on the personality of Toni Morrison. She learns from Ellison’s world, in which, African people can live the life of visibility underground and invisibility aboveground. Whatever type of African-American world is created by Ellison in his novels by aptly using
myths, folk-lore, culture, tradition and history that world highly impressed Morrison to a great deal and one can see the same brilliant use of myths and history in her novels too.

Alex Haley’s *Roots* (1951) also makes an impact on her. The book deals with the dialectical relationship between discovering one’s ancestral roots and discovering one’s self. While reading Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*, one can have the same theme handled by her. The ideas, concepts and terms of Toni Cade Bambara have also played a great role in molding the personality of Toni Morrison as a novelist. The term ‘African Spirit’ gives an idea of the creation of the protagonist Jadine, who, like Velma Henry, refuses the advice given by her lover named Son in *Tar Baby* (1981). In fact, Jadine is originally Black but mistakenly considers herself as a White lady.

Toni Morrison is also highly indebted to Henry Dumas, from whose work she brilliantly selects some names, terms and concepts. The names ‘Sweet Home’ and ‘Boy-Boy’ are used by her in *Beloved* and *Sula* respectively. The influence of Jean-Paul Sartre’s philosophy on Morrison is explicit and clear. He is always of the opinion that man is nothing but what he makes of himself that in his freedom he carries the weight of the world on his shoulders. The readers find the same type of thinking when Morrison answers one of the questions of Gloria Naylor in an interview. Morrison says: “The point is that freedom is choosing your responsibility. It is not having no responsibilities, it is choosing the ones you want” [Naylor & Morrison 1985: 573].

Alice Walker herself gives a list of writers, whose works have greatly influenced her writing. While talking about Leo Tolstoy, she frankly tells that the short-stories and novels have taught her the importance of diving through politics and social forecasts to dig into the
essential spirit of individual persons. She further talks about other Russian writers in her essay “From an Interview” in the following way:

.... and Dostoevsky, who found his truths where everyone else seemed afraid to look, and Turgenev, Gorky, and Gogol, who made me think that Russia must have something floating about in the air that writers breathe from the time they are born [1983a:257].

Alice Walker is also very much influenced by poets like Basho, Shiki, Li Po, Emily Dickinson, E.E. Cummings and Robert Graves. Reading her poetry, the readers easily understand that she is very much impressed by the haiku poets and sensual poets like Ovid and Catullus. Commenting on Jean Toomer’s greatness as a writer, she herself writes:

I have embarrassed my classes occasionally by standing in front of them in tears as Toomer’s poem about “some genius from the South” flew through my body like a swarm of golden butterflies on their way toward a destructive sun [Ibid: 258].

The same type of influence of other poets like Gwendolyn Brooks, Arna Bontemps, and Camare Laye is seen on her mind and personality as a poet. The influence of Flannery O’Connor and Faulkner is also seen in her writing. She writes, “Flannery O’Connor has also influenced my work. To me, she is the best of the white Southern writers, including Faulkner” [Ibid: 259].

The influence of Zora Neale Hurston on Alice Walker, or the love of Walker for Hurston is famous and well-familiar to the readers. In fact, when Walker decides to prescribe Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* for the syllabus of ‘Gender Studies’ classes, the books of Hurston were out of print and had already been rejected by the readers of America. Walker knows the greatness of Zora. She expresses her grief,
“My feeling is that Zora Neale Hurston is probably one of the most misunderstood, least appreciated writers of this century. Which is a pity. She is great. A writer of courage, and incredible humor, with poetry in every line” [Ibid: 260]. When one reads the poetry, short-stories and novels of Walker, one definitely finds the presence of Hurston, the style of Hurston in her work.

1.2.5 Quest for Identity: Dominating Theme

Not only in the novels of Morrison and Walker, but almost in all fictional works of African American literature, there is a dominating theme--the quest for identity. Almost all the protagonists start their journey in search of either individual or collective identity of the community.

In Toni Morrison’s novel *The Bluest Eye*, the protagonist Pecola Breedlove after realizing the reasons behind humiliation, exploitation at every stage of life, wants to be loved and to be beautiful. It becomes her tragic quest that results in failure at the end of the novel. In *Sula*, the protagonist Sula also starts her journey in search of her identity as a liberated woman. It becomes her utterly selfish quest. She, after the death of her mother, disappears from Bottom for ten years. She, due to her selfishness, puts her grandmother in charity home. She, just to satisfy her physical cravings, sleeps with Jude, the husband of her very intimate friend Nel. In her quest, she becomes the symbol of evil. Macon (Milkman) Dead III, the protagonist of *Song of Solomon* (1977), goes on his journey in the search of his ancestral roots. His search also becomes fruitless in the end of the novel.

Alice Walker’s protagonists also go on in search of their identities. Celie of *The Color Purple*, in the beginning is a submissive, silent and stereotype character, but when Shug comes in her life, she also starts her
journey in the search of her own identity. Luckily enough, she succeeds at the end of the novel. The protagonist Grange Copeland of *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, in his third life, perceives positive outlook and tries to help his grand-daughter named Ruth. Meridian of *Meridian*, is also the best example, who, like Sula, breaking all ties of relations with family members, wanders in search of her identity. But unlike Sula, she stands for good, not evil. Not only that, she tries to become mother of her whole community.

1.2.6 Use of Black English by Both the Writers

The African-American literature largely deals with the sorrow and pains of Black slaves. The sorrow or the desire of heart can only be well expressed in one’s mother-tongue. The use of Black English, thus, becomes a distinct feature of this literature. Like other varieties of English, it has its own set of grammatical and phonological rules as well as a special lexicon and rhetorical style to give it a unique character. Black English simply means the language or dialect spoken by Black people. Whatever American English the Black had listened to and understood, while making conversation or dialogue with their masters that later on, became the Black English. Brita Lindberg-Seyersted studies the first letter of Celie of *The Color Purple*, which provides several other features of Black English. She writes:

…. for instance by omission of the third – person singular present tense-s (“she say”), omission of the -ed suffix to mark the past tense (“he grab”), zero copula (“he good to her”), use of uninflected be implying a habit (“every time I be the one to cook”), double negation (“I don’t never”), omission of final-s from possessive nouns (“her sister doctor”), pronominal apposition (“My mama she fuss at me”), and hypercorrection (“I feels”). As for features of pronunciation we note for
example, loss of a final d sound (“a kine word”) and reduction of a consonant cluster (“chilren”) [1992:87].

Like other writers, Toni Morrison also makes good use of Black English in her writing. Almost all her characters are definitely illiterate and even have no proper knowledge of the world. The black people always converse with their own people in Black English. Toni Morrison while writing the story, especially while describing their conversation between or among themselves, while describing their quarrels, love-making etc. uses Black English. The quarrel between Mr. Cholly and Mrs. Pauline Breedlove is presented in Black English in Morrison’s The Bluest Eye, in order to give liveness to the event. Thus, the critics call her work as poetic and ornate. But, Morrison refuses to call her work ‘poetic’. She herself makes it clear in her interview with Thomas LeClair:

I don’t like to have someone call my books ‘poetic’ because it has the connotation of luxuriating richness. I wanted to restore language that black people spoke to its original power. That calls for a language that is rich but not ornate [1981:27].

When Alice Walker started the classes of “gender studies” and selected Zora Neale Hurston’s novel Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937) for the study, Walker thought that Hurston’s use of Black English would create problems for the students. But, she later on, realized that it had no problems. She, then, also started to make good use of Black English in her novels and short-stories. Seema Murugan is of the opinion that Walker’s realistic dialogues, descriptions and characterization receive a stamp of authenticity from use of Black English. She further says:

Black English is the mirror of black life in America--in it are embodied and signed the black
men’s humiliation, agony, as well as their cruelty to women— it is the cry of the black soul. And the same language articulates their tolerance, self-sacrificing spirit, and their unique sense of humour. An example from Meridian will further buttress our point of Black English as one of Walker’s medium to attain realism [2008:80].

Alice Walker in her novel The Color Purple makes use of Black English graphically. She depicts the situations or events in such a way that the readers get involved emotionally along with the characters. One such event is when Celie’s stepfather Pa sells her to Mr.-:

He say, Let me see her again.

Pa call me. Celie, he say. Like it wasn’t nothing. Mr.- want another look at you. I go stand in the door. The sun shine in my eyes. He’s still up on his horse. He look me up and down.

Pa rattle his newspaper. Move-up, he won’t bite, he say. I go closer to the steps, but not too close cause I’m a little scared of his horse.

Turn round, Pa say.

I turn round. One of my little brothers come up. I think it was Lucious. He fat and playful, all the time munching on something.

He say, What you doing that for?

Pa say, Your sister thinking bout Marriage.

Didn’t mean nothing to him. He pull my dresstail and ast can he have some blackberry jam out of the safe.

I say, Yeah.

She good with children, Pa say, rattling his paper open more. Never heard her say a hard word to nary one of them. Just give ’em everything they ast for, is the only problem.

Mr---- say, That cow still coming?

He say, Her cow. [TCP:12-13].
1.2.7 Autobiographical Element in Their Writings

Literature is never purely objective. It knowingly or unknowingly records the real life experiences of the concerned writer, though; he or she decides to write purely objective literature. Thus, Toni Morrison and Alice Walker are no exception to this. While studying their writings, one finds their life-experiences, influences of great persons on them, and some factors that developed and enriched their lives and career as writers.

As regards Morrison, one can say that the characters, the landscapes, the plight of her women characters tell the story, though partly, of her life. In many of her novels, the colorful and complex life of Lorain, Ohio is depicted, in which, she herself was born and brought up. Lorain, Ohio was a small Midwestern steel-mill town located twenty-five miles West of Cleveland. It was situated far from the madding crowd of New York’s inner city. In her novel, The Bluest Eye, there is Pauline Breedlove, who works as a house-servant in a white family. This focuses on the early professional life of Morrison. The quest of Milkman Dead of Song of Solomon stands for Morrison’s own struggle in real life. Thus, the personal landscape and all other factors develop her sense-self as a black woman. The other two important factors- her editing work at Random House and the impact of great writers sharpen her consciousness as a black woman writer. While editing Chinweizu’s book The West and the Rest of Us, she perceives the nature of African oppression that capitalism precedes racism. One sees the real understanding of capitalism in her later books like Tar Baby (1981) and Beloved (1987). Her next edited book The Black Book (1974) is a compendium of news clippings and advertisements chronicling the life of African people in the United States from slavery. It provides the kernel to her epical novel
Beloved. There is also the impact of writers like Ralph Ellison, Alex Haley and others on her writings.

Seema Murugan in her book *The Fiction of Alice Walker: A Study of Black Images* (2008) very aptly records the autobiographical element and impact of other factors in her fictional world. Murugan states that in her name itself, Alice Walker acknowledges slavery as a part of her own distant past. Walker knew that her father’s great-great grandmother Mrs. Marry Poole came as a slave on foot from Virginia, carrying a baby on each hip. This was a trek that walker commemorates by retaining her maiden name. In her fiction, one always discovers the same pathetic picture of a black family chained and shadowed by the system of slavery. The impact of Zora Neale Hurston on her writings is explicit and clear.

### 1.2.8 Plight of Black Women

While reading the novels of Black women writers including Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, the readers realize that the novels deal with the plight of black women, not of black men. It is undoubtedly true that black women were more humiliated, exploited than the black men in the fatal period of slavery. In this context, K Sumana holds the African-American male writers responsible. According to her, these male writers portrayed black women as sex-objects or merely an extension of the male ego with no autonomous individual self. In short, black male writers have been no different from their white counterparts in the treatment of black women. So, K Sumana provides reasons why the male characters have been depicted as negative images by the black women writers. She writes, “It is this hegemony of the masculine perspective, along with its male-centered aesthetic, that is now being challenged in and through the writings of Black American women.” [1998: 13].
Toni Morrison, in almost all her novels, depicts the plight of black women. In *The Bluest Eye*, the protagonist Pecola Breedlove, her mother Pauline Breedlove, the MacTeer sisters—Frieda and Claudia and other women are shown as the victims of race, gender and class. But the book, at the same time, reveals the fact that the black women have been greatly humiliated, damaged more by the black men than the white men. That is why; Morrison presents black male characters as non-humans. Mr Cholly Breedlove is nothing but a bull, who has no knowledge about relations. He rapes his own daughter and destroys her life. Sammy, the brother of Pecola, is useless and helpless and always runs away from the house. In *Sula*, the black women characters including Sula have been delineated as struggling and fighting women, who direct their journey in search of their individuality. In the same novel, there are Shadrack, Ajax, who have no identity of their own. They are just negative characters. Toni Morrison, in her third novel, presents male-protagonist named Milkman Dead. But he too is the great exploiter of black innocent women. His two sisters have complaints against him and he is responsible for the suicide of Hagar. Thus, in one novel after another, Morrison depicts the responsible factors behind the plight of black women in the midst of white as well as black men.

Like Morrison, Alice Walker too depicts the plight of black women in her novels and short-stories. Her each novel or short-story tells the tragic story of black women. Her novels reveal that the black women have been more victimized by black men rather than white male. In her novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, there are four black women—Margaret, Mem, Mrs Mamis Banks and Josie—all have been either ruined or killed by their men. In *The Color Purple*, Celie has been raped and ruined by her own stepfather and husband. But in the end, she finds out
her own identity as free and independent woman. In the novels of Walker, also the readers find negative male characters. Louis Pratt aptly examines the work of Walker in his critical essay “Alice Walker’s Men: Profiles in the Quest for Love and Personal Values” published in Harold Bloom’s *Alice Walker* (2007) and writes:

Thus, one of the major short-comings in Walker’s fiction is that her Black male characters emerge either as tranquil men whose existence must be validated and filtered through the consciousness of her women, or they are presented as weak, self-centered, turbulent men whose humanity is placed in jeopardy by their inability to develop loving relationships with their wives and children [Quoted in Bloom 2007a:06]

1.2.9 Morrison Feminist While Walker Womanist

Toni Morrison has always been called as a great Black feminist writer. She has good knowledge of black women’s life and problems. She also knows that exploitation of black women is caused by racism, capitalism, sexism and even by black male patriarchal hegemony. In her novels, she explores aspects of oppression afflicting African people, especially, black women. K. Sumana prefers to call her cultural feminist rather than political feminist. She remarks:

Though most of the stories of her (Toni Morrison) novels are revealed through the eyes of black women, she does not adopt the kind of political feminism associated with women’s movement of the 1970s. Rather, she writes in the tradition of black women writers like Hurston and Paule Marshall as a cultural feminist, celebrating the strengths of black women against the heavy odds of racism, sexism and classism by developing the necessary political, social and aesthetic consciousness [1998:31].
In her novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970), she puts forth the fragmented identities of black women. The protagonist Pecola is a teenager, illiterate, black, ugly girl. She has been humiliated, insulted, exploited at every stage of her life. Nobody loves her. Even her mother dislikes her. Pecola realizes that because of her black eyes, color and ugliness, she is hated. So, she longs for blue eyes, blonde hair and white skin. She, then, becomes the victim of American standards of beauty. Not only Pecola, there are many more black women, who are so badly socialized in the white America that they unknowingly forget their real identities and culture. Mrs Pauline Breedlove, another woman from the same novel, also has a fragmented identity. She also develops self-hatred and self-negation. She feels happy and powerful, while working in the house of her white master. She takes more pride in nurturing the white girl rather than her own daughter. In other words, Morrison gives message to all the highly socialized black women, not to forget their own precious black culture and individual identities. In *Sula* (1973), Morrison depicts Sula, as an extension of Pecola, highly individualistic and rebellious. Sula realizes that marriage does not give stability to the black women. She witnesses how her own mother and grand-mother suffered much at the hands of their husbands. She, thus, becomes a rebel and declares war against the male world. Eva has been called a black matriarch. In fact, she is compelled to become the head of the family, because, her husband abandons her and her children. She struggles much and by selling her one leg, she runs the house. But the struggle of Sula, throughout the novel, is memorable, because she insists that she exists primarily as herself and for herself, she does not want to exist as a mother or a wife of any man.

In *Beloved* (1987), the protagonist Sethe, has been presented in two major roles--an enslaved black woman, and free black woman. In her
first role, she submitted herself to the cruel institution of black slavery. She works as a bull, from the rise to the setting of the day. She has completely forgotten her culture, her individuality and values of life. But when she is denied her ‘mothering’, her milk is stolen, she decides to rebel against the system. She succeeds in eloping, but when slave-catchers come to take her children away from her, she kills one of her children. She commits infanticide in order to release the child from the future bonded life. Sethe’s problems are different from other women-characters of Morrison’s novels. Morrison has successfully covered all the problems of enslaved men and women. Thus, Morrison proves herself as a great advocate of black women and puts all the problems before the readers, and sometimes tries to provide the solutions in the form of character’s protest or revolt.

Alice Walker is also basically a feminist, but prefers to call herself as a Womanist. In her widely-read book *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* (1983), she provides four meanings of the term. She puts:

**Womanist 1.** From *womanish*. (Opp. of “girlish”, i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious). A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, “You acting womanish,” i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered “good” for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression. “You trying to be grown”. Responsible. In charge. Serious.

2. **Also:** A woman loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility (values tears a natural counter-balance of laughter), and women’s strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or non-sexually.
Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, *male and female*. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health….


4. Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender [1983a: xi-xii].

These four meanings of the term ‘Womanist’ definitely help the readers to understand her fictional world, the men and women in it. Her novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970) is mainly the life-story of Grange Copeland, but it is also the story of four tragic women-- Margaret Copeland, Mem Copeland, Josie and Mamis Lou Banks. All the four women work hard and struggle throughout their lives. Both Copeland women are mercilessly murdered by their husbands and Josie becomes vulnerable and dependent on others, by losing her own estate for Grange Copeland. The significant thing behind their struggle is that they do not wage war only for themselves but for their families which shows their Womanist consciousness. Meridian of *Meridian* (1976) is also the black individualist woman, who, like Sula of *Sula* by Morrison, directs her life towards self-identity. Though, she gets married and has a son, she leaves everything and becomes symbolically the mother of whole black community. Meridian’s whole life is full of fights and struggle. Her becoming mother, her education in adverse situation, her falling in love with Truman and in Civil Rights Movement, her final success in politics and all other things never allow her to damage the Black consciousness in her heart for the whole community.

*The Color Purple* (1982) is the story of Celie. She is black, poor, powerless and submissive girl. Both Shug and Sophia help her to start journey in the search of her identity. Her journey becomes quite difficult,
but she learns how to reach the desired destination and it creates Black Womanist consciousness in her.

### 1.2.10 Folk-Lore and Legends in Their Works

Toni Morrison and Alice Walker make good use of folk-lore, culture, myths, and legends in their fictional world just to carry out the values the Black community considers significant. One thing should be made clear that till the 19th century, the black slaves were not allowed to take education. Their fore-fathers, due to lack of education, preserved the black culture, myths and legends orally through the stories and songs. The best example, one finds in Brown’s novel *The Clotel: Or The President's Daughter* (1853) in which he sings:

The big bee flies high,  
The little bee makes the honey;  
The black folk makes the cotton  
And the white folk gets the money [1853:108].

In *The Bluest Eye*, the reader finds the reference to African ritual: “…. If we planted the seeds, and said the right words over them, they would blossom, and everything would be all right” [TBE: 04]. Another element of African myth is well delineated in Pecola’s story that she becomes Cinderella with longing for blue eyes, blonde hair and fair-skin. A well-known factor in African culture is to give nicknames. One finds Pauline Breedlove, who longs for nickname in the same novel. Ralph Ellison also aptly asserts the basis of these things in literature. He says:

For us (African American Writers) the question should be, what are the specific forms of that humanity, and what in our background is worth preserving or abandoning? The clue to this can be found in folk-lore, which offers the first drawings of any group’s character. It preserves mainly those situations which have repeated themselves again
and again in the history of any given group [1953:172].

Alice Walker too in her novel *The Color Purple* uses the archetypal myth of Philomela. In the original myth, she is not only raped but also silenced. But Walker gives Philomela/Celie a voice that successfully opposes the suppression of patriarchal society. Walker also uses birds and blood imaginary to connect Celie with her mythic prototype Philomela. Another noteworthy thing about this novel is that almost all the characters have no surnames—Celie, Nettie, Harpo, Albert Samuel etc. In *Meridian*, there is the sojourner tree, which has a well-known legend behind it. The slave woman who planted that tree also belongs to a myth. The woman Louvinie was a tall, thin, strong and magic woman. It was a rumor that the tree could talk, make music, was sacred to birds and possessed the power of magic.

In this way, both the writers in almost all their novels make brilliant use of myths, legends, black-culture, blues, etc.

### 1.2.11 Walker as a Poet and Short-story Writer

Toni Morrison has not dared to write a single poem or a short-story, but it does not mean that there is no poetry and story in her fictional work. Her novel, *Beloved* has been glorified as an epical novel. It means that it contains poetry in prosaic form. Whatever love she has for poetry is also seen in her other novels. In her novel *The Bluest Eye*, there are some characters, who sing the songs in order to express their emotions, desires and sorrows. Mrs MacTeer, the mother of Frieda and Claudia, is a great singer. Her own daughter and one of narrators Claudia talks about her singing:

> If my mother was in a singing mood, it wasn’t so bad. She would sing about hard times, bad times, and somebody-done-gone-and-left-me times. But
her voice was so sweet and her singing-eyes so melty I found myself longing for those hard times, yearning to be grown without “a thin di-i-ime to my name” [TBE: 17-18].

The whore Poland also always sings and yearns for the desired lover. The same desire for coming of a lover is well expressed by Ivy, on behalf of Pauline in the following way:

Precious Lord take my hand  
Lead me on, let me stand  
I am tired, I am weak, I am worn.  
Through the storms, through the night  
Lead me on to the light  
Take my hand, precious Lord, lead me on  
[Ibid: 89].

In *Song of Solomon*, there is also poetry. The title itself makes clear that the story is the Song of Solomon. In it, the anonymous woman-singer and the protagonist Milkman Dead sing the Song of Solomon. When Milkman Dead is on the journey for finding out the roots of their ancestors, he remembers the song and sings:

O Solomon don’t leave me here  
Cotton balls to choke me  
O Solomon don’t leave me here  
Buckra’s arms to yoke me  
[SOS: 303]

The same song is sung by the anonymous woman-singer, when Mr. Robert Smith commits suicide at the outset of the novel. When Hagar too commits suicide, Pilate expresses her feelings in the following way:

I’ll find who’s botherin my sweet sugar lumpkin.  
I’ll find who’s botherin my baby girl.  
[Ibid: 318]

Her novels also have good and gripping stories. Her novel *The Bluest Eye* was actually a short-story, but Morrison made it a novel.
Alice Walker has published six collections of poetry including – *Once: Poems* (1968), *Revolutionary Petunias and other Poems* (1973), *Good Night, Willie Lee, I’ll See You in the Morning: Poems* (1979) and *Horses make a Landscape Look More Beautiful: Poems* (1984). Though, hundreds of poems have been penned by her, she is still famous and recognized as a black woman novelist rather than a poet. She herself provides the reason:

I sometimes feel the urge to write poems way in advance of ever sitting down to write. There is a definite restlessness, a kind of feverish excitement that is tinged with dread. The dread is because after writing each batch of poems I am always convinced that I will never write poems again [1983a:250].

This hurry (in writing poetry) makes her dread. But in her essay “From an Interview,” she further makes it clear that “writing poems is my way of celebrating with the world that I have not committed suicide the evening before” [Ibid:249]. Her first volume of poetry *Once: Poems* mainly consists of suicide poems. When she was on tour before marriage, she suddenly realized her pregnancy, she found herself in a critical situation. She closed herself in a room for three whole days, also tried to commit suicide. But her friend took her to the doctor and solved the problem. After getting released from the tension of pregnancy, she started to write poems and in a period of a week, she almost wrote all of the poems published in *Once: Poems*. She herself confesses how a woman becomes alone because of her body. She admits: “Then I wrote the suicide poems, because I felt I understood the part played in suicide by circumstances and fatigue. I also began to understand how alone woman is, because of her body” [Ibid: 248].
Alice Walker was greatly impressed by Zen epigrams and Japanese haiku. She also preferred thin and short poems because they seemed to her like painting the eye in the tiger. She was influenced by the poetry of Li Po, the Chinese Poet, Emily Dickinson, E.E. Cummings and Robert Graves. She herself talks about the great impact of Graves’ poetry on her thus: “I liked Graves because he took it as given that passionate love between man and woman does not necessarily last forever. He enjoyed the moment, and didn’t bother about the future. My poem “The Man in the Yellow Terry” is very much influenced by Graves” [Ibid: 257]. The poems written by Walker are highly emotional and personal.

Alice Walker has also written a number of short-stories. There are two collections of short-stories to her credit—*In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women* (1973) and “You Can’t Keep a Good Woman Down: Stories” (1981). In her first collection of short-stories, there are thirteen stories, all deal with the problems of black women. Walker herself writes in her essay “From an Interview”:

> In my new book, *In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women*, thirteen women – mad, raging, loving, resentful, hateful, strong, ugly, weak, pitiful, and magnificent - try to live with the loyalty to black men that characterizes all of their lives. For me, black women are the most fascinating creations in the world [Ibid: 251].

Her widely read story, “The Child Who Favored Daughter” deals with the relationship between man and woman, particularly about the relationship between the father and the daughter. In this story, the father cuts off the breasts of his daughter because she falls in love with a white boy. In this context, Walker writes:

> … and I wanted to learn, myself, how it happens that the hatred a child can have for a parent becomes inflexible. And I wanted to explore the
relationship between men and women, and why women are condemned for doing what men do as an expression of their masculinity [Ibid: 256].

Almost all the stories of this collection present the picture of black women and also depict their helpless lives in the hands of men, particularly, black men. Anne Mickelson rightly puts, “these stories present a kind of gallery of black women and their moves towards self-discovery, to tentative, uncompleted exploration; to disillusionment to rage, peace, death and life” [1979:154].

Her second collection of short-fiction *You Can’t Keep a Good Woman Down: Stories* has been considered and labeled as weak than her first collection of short-stories. In this collection, there are fourteen stories in all. The epigraph of the collection has nothing to do with the stories, only few characters qualify as “spiritually alive” according to most informed standards. Alice Hall Petry has cleverly criticized both the collections of Short-Fiction of Walker in her critical essay “Alice Walker: The Achievement of the Short Fiction” published in the book *Alice Walker* edited by Harold Bloom. She further writes:

As a general over-view, it seeks to evaluate Walker’s achievement as a short story writer while probing a fundamental question raised by so many reviewers of the two volumes: why is *You Can’t Keep a Good Woman Down* so consistently less satisfying than the earlier *In Love and Trouble*? How has Alice Walker managed to undermine so completely that latest-and-best formula so dear to book reviewers? The answer, as we shall see, is partly a matter of conception and partly one of technique ... her capacity to produce stories that are sometimes extraordinary good, at other times startlingly weak—places her at a career watershed [Quoted in Bloom 2007a:33-34].
1.2.12 Their Universality

Fictional work of both the writers has all the essential features which universal works generally have. Mortimer Jerome Adler talks about the features of such great books:

….Great books, on the contrary, transcend the provincial limits of their own. They remain as world literature. The ones we are sure great all the ones men everywhere turn to again and again through the centuries [Quoted in Mali 1999:68].

Toni Morrison and Alice Walker in almost all novels, present the provincial picture of Lorain, Ohio, Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi etc. Both the writers deal with the stories of black men and women, living in the circle of their community, following rules and regulations of it. But this provincial picture gets transcended when one thinks about the same type of sorrow of Dalits in Maharashtra and bonded labors in Andhra Pradesh. It is not co-incident that Indian writer K.R.Rao writes the novel entitled Yajnam, in which the protagonist Seetaravudu, like Sethe of Beloved, kills her son in order to save him from bonded labor life. Like America, South Africa and West Indies, the novels of Morrison and Walker have been read in India with the same enthusiasm and love. The characters of any universal work are life like. Like Shakespearean characters, the characters of Morrison and Walker are true of life. Pecola, Celie, Sethe, Meridian and others are highly realistic. One can find a number of Pecolas in every society, who every day and night, long to be loved and called beautiful. The reader even finds a number of Sulas and Meridians in the world, who want to live an individualistic life. Seema Murugan calls Walker a universal writer: “The Color Purple has become so popular that Walker is almost universally recognised as a spokeswoman for black people, especially for black women” [2008:109].
Great books provide new meanings at every new reading. The readers also find the same newness in the novels of Morrison and Walker. Lastly, the novels of both the writers, like all universal works, have a universal appeal in their depiction of suffering, oppression and pain. But Morrison, while talking to LeClair rejects the idea:

If I (Morrison) tried to write a universal novel, it would be water. Behind this question is the suggestion that to write for black people is somehow to diminish the writing. From my perspective, there are only black people. When I say “people” that’s what I mean. Lots of books written by black people about black people have had this “universality” as a burden… [1985:28].

1.2.13 Critical Talents: Morrison and Walker

Toni Morrison and Alice Walker though are mostly recognized as black women writers, their critical writing is also equally appealing and influencing.

Toni Morrison has written a number of critical essays. Her critical book *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and Literary Imagination* (1992) is considered as one of the scholarly books. This book is based on a lecture series she delivered at Harvard University. The main theme of all her lectures is to reveal the presence of the Africanness or blackness in the works of white writers. Morrison herself makes clear the point by saying, “…. while probing the problem of living in a rationalized society with its democratic egalitarianism, on one hand, and its ideological dependence on racialism, on the other” [1992:64]. In all her lectures, she points out the importance of black presence in building of the nation and its development as a democratic nation. K Sumana rightly examines the point made by Morrison:
Her discerning discussion on Africanism in major works of white American fiction enlivens debates on the function of literary criticism and alternative constructions of the Africanist character in African, African-American and related interdisciplinary studies. It is bound to alter our reading of the so-called classics in white American literature [1998:40].


Alice Walker too has great critical talent. Her book In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens (1983) has been called a performative autobiography. Laurie McMillan in her essay “Telling a Critical Story: Alice Walker’s In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens, published in Harold Bloom’s Alice Walker, aptly remarks:

While not all personal criticism needs to take on Walker’s approach of storytelling, Walker does provide a strong example of autobiographical writing that uses performance to move its readers to political activism. Readers are called to engage in and actively interpret Walker’s text in order that they more fully engage in and actively interpret their own worlds [McMillan quoted in Bloom 2007a:182].

The book has a subtitle ‘Womanist Prose’. It has been divided into four parts. There are thirty-six essays in all. In fact, these include addresses
and lectures delivered by her at different places on different occasions. It can also be called as an autobiography. Laurie McMillan has selected three personal essays – ‘Beyond the Peacock’ (1975), ‘Looking for Zora’ (1975), and ‘In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens’ (1974) as representative essays. These selected essays are anecdotal. According to Jane Tompkins, the autobiographical anecdote is generally a brief story based on an actual event that is used to criticize the literature. In this way, not only these selected three essays, but all the essays acquaint the readers with the men and women of her talk. It proves her ability as a great critic, without putting difficult theories for literary criticism.

1.3 Conclusion

In the first half of this chapter, an attempt has been made to make a historical survey of African American literature. This survey deliberately begins with the beginning of slavery system in white America. Before stating the wretched enslaved life of African American people, the study brings out the striking features of pre-captured Africa, which was nothing but a heaven on earth.

In 1773, the first African American poet Phillis Wheatley published her book of verse. The study purposefully divides the literature into centuries-- such as 18th century, 19th century, slave narratives of post-slavery era, Harlem Renaissance and black women novelists of the 20th century in order to understand it easily. In this section, noted and major writers are mentioned.

In the second half of this chapter, the study tries to assess the place of the two writers namely Toni Morrison and Alice Walker. Both are undoubtedly versatile writers. They have handled almost all genres of literature. Both have edited books and written biographies. On the surface level, both are great black women novelists of African American
literature. Both have been awarded with the prestigious Pulitzer Award for their epical novels – Morrison’s *Beloved* and Walker’s *The Color Purple*. The Nobel Prize in 1993 was awarded to Morrison makes it crystal clear that she has already secured topmost place in African American literature, and next to her comes Alice Walker.