INTRODUCTION

I see a greater and greater commitment among black women writers to understand self, multiplied in terms of the community, the community multiplied in terms of the nation, and the nation multiplied in terms of the world. You have to understand what your place as an individual is and the place of the person who is close to you. You have to understand the space between you before you can understand more complex or larger groups.

- Alexis De Veaux

The development of Afro-American Women's fiction is a mirror-image of the intensity of the relationship between sexism and racism in America. A recurring struggle in the tradition of these writers from the nineteenth century to the present consists in their attempt to use the range of one's voice and to express the totality of self.

During the last two decades remarkable and still unchartered transformations have taken place in Afro-American literature. Once dismissed as 'provincial' by white critics of another era, and plagued by poor sales and little publicity, the fiction of the finest Afro-American authors in the 1980s frequently appears on best-sellers' list, receives
critical acclaim and extreme class-room use, and is regarded by many as being the most exciting - as well as controversial - writing published today. Perhaps the most significant of all, many of the pre-eminent leaders of this pioneering new fiction are black women who, as a group, were long the 'invisible' authors in a literary tradition almost as old as the nation itself.

Afro-American women writers emerge from a particular historical context; a context when examined from the perspective of the dominant American culture can accurately be described as oppressive. Through their writings the contemporary Afro-American women authors create a self-affirming protagonist; protagonists who are able through their own self-definition to discover their inherent divinity. This spiritual awakening enables these characters to emerge from the context of oppression and at least begin to assert, if not achieve their innate potential. If there is a predominant idea among contemporary Afro-American women writers, it may be Al Young's conviction that "individual human heart is more revolutionary than any political party or platform" (qtd. in Johnson 1989, 32).

Alice Walker (1944- ) is regarded as a writer of powerfully expressive fiction. Her work consistently reflects her concern with racial, and political issues, particularly
with the black woman's struggle for spiritual and political survival. Her political awareness, her Southern heritage, and her sense of the culture and history of her people form the ultimate base of her material. Much of her writing reveals her concern for black women and their families. She is very specific about her tasks: "I am preoccupied with the spiritual, the survival whole of my people. But beyond that, I am committed to exploring the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties, and the triumphs of black women (Walker 1973c, 192).

AFRO-AMERICAN WOMEN NOVELISTS AND THEIR TRADITION

In order to really understand the remarkable achievement of a Toni Morrison, an Alice Walker, or a Paule Marshall or the budding creativity of the other young women novelists, one must appreciate the tradition from which they have come and the conflict of images with which their foremothers have had to contend. The image of black women writing in isolation, across time and space, is conducted towards radical revision. Hortense J. Spillers rightly observes in his 'Afterward':

The room of one's own explodes its four walls to embrace the classroom, the library, and the various mechanisms of institutional and media life,...and collection of critical essays. These new arrangements, when perceived against the background of the Black Nationalist Movement and the most recent phase of the Women's Movement in the United
States, give us striking insight into the situations of tradition. Traditions are not born. They are made.

(Pryse and Spillers 1985, 250)

Early Afro-American Women novelists indicate, through their stated intentions, their primary reasons for writing their works. Harriet E. Wilson, the earliest known female Afro-American novelist published her novel, Our Nig (1959) which deals with the plight of Frado, the Mulatto heroine. Risking the possibility of hostile reactions, Harriet E. Wilson dared to confront the taboo on inter-racial marriage, of which she was an offspring. Russell observes: "It has been noted that before Our Nig, 'miscegenation' was never treated with any degree of normality in American literature" (Russell 1990, 14). Harriet E. Wilson used the conventions of the sentimental novel as well as the slave narrative to produce this unique form.

Frances Harper, for example, in her preface to Iola Leroy (1895), made clear her purpose when she wrote that "her story's mission would not be in vain if it awaken in the hearts of our countrymen a stronger sense of justice and a more Christian-like humanity" (qtd. in Christian 1985, 234). She was pleading for the justice due Afro-Americans, who, in the 1890s, were being lynched, burned out, raped, and
deprived of their rights as citizens in the wake of the failure of Reconstruction. Iola Leroy, Harper's major character, does not attempt to understand either herself as an individual or black women as a group. Rather, Iola Leroy, is a version of the "lady" Americans were expected to respect and honour, even though she is black. By creating respectable ideal heroine, according to the norms of the time, Harper was addressing not herself, black women, or black people, but her (white) country men. "As a traditional novel depicting the role of blacks during the Civil War and the struggles for personal and group social mobility during the Reconstruction era, Iola Leroy provides a panoramic view of the courage and commitment of mulattoes to freedom, justice, race, and family, especially motherhood" (Bell 1987, 58). The tradition of using a mulatto heroine was continued by Pauline Hopkins in her Contending Forces (1900).

Despite Afro-American literature's enormous debt to these women writers, however, it is rarely acknowledged. Black critic Mary Burgher aptly terms them the "step children of Black American literature" (qtd. in Shockley 1988, xviii). They are step children, indeed, for these foremothers have been relegated to backstage or offstage, and have been ignored altogether in literary anthologies.
Both Harper and Fauset were aware of the primarily negative images of black people that predominated in the minds of white Americans. So they constructed their heroines to refute those images, as their way of contributing to the struggle of black people for full citizenship in America. Of necessity their language was outer-directed rather than inwardly searching, for their characters were addressed to "the other Americans" who blocked group development. By focusing on the novels and manners of well-educated members of black high society, they introduced the novel of manners and genteel realism into the tradition of the Afro-American novel. These writers' creations, then, were conditioned by the need to establish "positive" images of black people; hence, the exploration of self, in all its complexity, could hardly be attempted.

The problems of identity for black middle-class women are also at the centre of the private and public worlds of Nella Larsen. She was the first black novelist to deal with the psychology of the fair skinned middle class, to dare and confront the interior, the soul divided and searching. Her two novels, Quicksand (1928) and Passing (1929) reject the romantic extremes of nationalism and assimilation in favour of cultural dualism. She was in revolt against the assimilationist assumption that blacks had to deny their colour and
culture and had to become white in mental outlook if not in physical appearance, in order to become white in mental outlook.

To a large extent, and necessarily so until the 1940s, most black women fiction writers directed their conscious intention towards a refutation of the negative images imposed upon all black women, images decidedly "masculine" according to the norms of the times. Nonetheless from Iola Leroy (1895) to Dorothy West's *The Living is Easy* (1948), there is an incredible tension between the "femininity" of the heroines and their actual behaviour. On the other hand, the writers try to prove that black women are women, that they are beautiful (fair), pure, upper class, and would be nonaggressive, dependent beings, if only racism did not exist. At the same time they appear to believe that if Afro-American women were to achieve the norm, they would lose important aspects of themselves. The novels, especially those about passing, embody this tension. But even in novels that do not focus on this theme, the writers emphasize their self-directedness of their heroines, as well as their light-skinned beauty and Christian morality. Thus Iola Leroy believes that women should work; Paule Hopkin's heroine in *Contending Forces* (1900) wants to advance the race; Fauset's characters, though class-bound, have ambition to an unfeminine degree; Larsen's heroine Helga Crane in *Quicksand* (1928), though restricted by
conventional morality, senses the power of her sensuality and the lie the image of the lady represents.

The tension between the femininity of these heroines and their "contrary instincts" has its roots, in part, in the fact that Afro-American women, contrary to the norm, could not survive unless they generated some measure of self-definition. If they tried to live by the female version of The American Dream, as pure, refined, protected, and well-provided for, they were often destroyed, as is Lutie Johnson, Ann Petry's heroine in The Street (1946). And even if they secured a measure of the Dream, some like Cleo in West's The Living is Easy became destructive, frustrated, alienated from self.

One notable exception to this trend in early Afro-American women writers' works is Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937). For in this work Hurston portrays the development of Janie Stark as a black woman who achieves self-fulfillment and understanding. It is interesting to note, however, that Hurston was obviously aware that the literature of that time focused on the black woman's drive towards economic stability and "feminine" ideals. She constructs the novel so that Janie moves through three stages that embody different views of black women: in her relationship with her first husband, Logan Killicks, Janie is treated
like a mule; she is rescued from that state by marrying Jody Starks, who wants her to become a lady, "The Queen of the Porch." But Hurston critiques the achievement of economic stability through feminine submission in marriage as the desirable goal for the black woman. She portrays the disastrous consequences of this goal on Janie - that she becomes, in this situation, a piece of desirable property, cut off from her community and languishing in the repression of her natural desire to be herself. Though Janie's relationship with Tea Cake is not ideal, Hurston does present us with a vision of possibility in terms of some parity in a relationship between a woman and a man, based not on material gain or ownership of property but on their desire to know one another.

It is significant that Hurston characterizes this relationship as play, pleasure, sensuality, which is for her the essential nature of nature itself, as symbolized by the image of the pear tree that pervades the novel. It is also critical to an appreciation of Hurston's radical effect on the tradition of Afro-American women's fiction that her language is so different from the language of the "conventional" novel of the times. Rooted in black English, Hurston uses metaphors derived from nature's play to emphasize the connection between the natural world and the possibilities of a harmonious social order. And in keeping with her choice of
language, she structures her novel as a circle, in which the returning Janie explores her own development by telling her story to Pheoby, whose name means "the moon", and who is her best friend and the symbolic representative of the community.

In its radical envisioning of the self as central, and in its use of language as a means of exploring the self as female and black, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a forerunner of the fiction of the seventies and the eighties. In general, most novels published before the 1950s embodied the tension between the writer's apparent acceptance of an ideal of woman derived from white upper-class society and the reality with which their protagonists had to contend.

But the attempt to present "positive" images of the black woman, to restrict her characterization to a prescribed ideal, did not result in any improvement in her image or in her condition. Rather, the refutation of negative images created a series of contradictions between the image that black women could not attain, through which they sometimes internalized, and the reality of their existence. That tension increased throughout the first half of the century, until in the 1940s the destruction it created becomes apparent in the fiction written by black women. The heroines of this period are defeated both by social reality and by the lack of self-knowledge. Barbara Christian points out the
importance of "self-knowledge" by stating "Self-knowledge is critical if black women were to develop the inner resources they would need in order to cope with larger social forces" (Christian 1985, 237).

Beginning with Gwendolyn Brook's *Maud Martha* (1953), one can observe a definite shift in the fiction of Afro-American women, a shift in point of view and intention that still characterizes the novels written today. Instead of refuting the general society's definition of black women, the Afro-American women writers of this period began putting more emphasis on reflecting the process of self-definition and understanding women have always had to be engaged in. The shift is, of course, not a sudden or a totally complete one; there are many phases in the process.

The first phase focused on portraying what the early literature tended to omit, namely, the complex existence of the ordinary, dark skinned woman, who is neither an upper-class matron committed to an ideal of woman that few could attain, as in the novels of Harlem Renaissance, nor a downtrodden victim, totally at the mercy of a hostile society, as in Ann Petry's *The Street*.

Gwendolyn Brooks claims that her intention in writing *Maud Martha* (1953) was to paint a portrait of an ordinary black woman, first as daughter, then as mother, and to show
what she makes of her "little life". Because of her 'awareness' Maud Martha constructs her own standards and manages to transform that "little life" into so much more despite the limits set on her by her family, husband, her race, her class, whites, American society. She emerges neither crushed nor triumphant. She manages, though barely, to be her own creator. She is able to see the contradiction between her real value as a black woman and how she is valued by those around her.

Perhaps because Maud Martha was such a departure from the usual characterizations of Afro-American women in previous fiction, the novel went out of print almost immediately. Mary Helen Washington has suggested that "it was given the kind of ladylike treatment that assured its dismissal" (qtd. in Russell 1990, 65). Nonetheless, it was to influence Paule Marshall, whose Brown Girl, Brownstones (1959) is a definite touchstone in contemporary Afro-American women's fiction. In characterizing Brooks's protagonist, Marshall noted Maud Martha's process of self exploration: "In her daily life, Maud Martha functions as an artist; in this way, this novel carries on the African tradition that the ordinary rituals of daily life are what must be made into art" (qtd. in Christian 1985, 238). The elements Marshall noted in Maud Martha - a focus on the complexity of women characters, who are central rather than marginal to the world, and the
significance of daily rituals through which these women situate themselves in the context of their specific community and culture - are dominant characteristics of her own novels.

The emphasis in Browngirl, Brownstone is on the black woman as mother and daughter. Marshall's novel was certainly affected by society's attitude that black women were matriarchs, domineering mothers who distorted their children who in turn disrupted society - a vortex of attitudes that culminated in the Moynihan Report. Her other novel, Praise-song for the Widow (1983) continues the theme of the black women's search for identity in a world bereft of ancestral connection.

Few early Afro-American women's novels focused on the black woman's role as mother, because of the negative stereotype of the black woman as mammy that pervaded American society. But instead of de-emphasizing the black woman's role as mother, Marshall probes its complexity. She portrays Silla Boyce as an embittered woman caught between her own personality and desires, and the life imposed on her as a mother who must destroy her unorthodox husband in order to have a stable family. This analysis of the black mother prefigures other analyzes of this theme in the 1970s, especially Toni Morrison's Sula and Alice Walker's Meridian. Silla is not an internal being like Maud Martha. She fights,
supported by her women friends who use their own language to penetrate illusion and verbally construct their own definitions in order to wage their battle. As a result, Selina, Silla's daughter, begins to learn the basis for the journey to self-knowledge, fully appreciating the dilemma which her mother and father could not solve. Marshall stresses the importance of an appreciation of ethnic and racial community for black women in their commitment to self development.

The emphasis on community and culture as a prerequisite for self-understanding reflected a growing sense among Afro-Americans in the late fifties and sixties of their unique cultural identity. The ideology of the sixties had stressed the necessity for Afro-Americans to rediscover their blackness, their unity in their blackness. As positive as that position was to the groups attempt to empower itself, one side effect was the tendency to idealize the relationship between black men and women, to blame sexism in the black community solely on racism or to justify a position that black men were superior to women.

During the sixties few novels by Afro-American women were published. Poetry and drama dominated the literature because of the immediacy of these forms and because of the connection that literature should be as accessible as possi-
ble to black communities. The result of that change in perception about audience was that Afro-American writers consciously began to view their communities as the group to which they were writing. In the novels written in the early seventies, it is not only that an individual heroine accepts, the sexist and racist definitions of herself, but that the entire black community, men and women, accept this construct - resulting in the destruction of many black women.

This fiction in the early seventies represents a second phase, one in which the black community itself becomes a major threat to the survival and empowerment of women. Women must struggle against the definitions of gender. The language of this fiction therefore becomes a language of protest, as Afro-American women writers vividly depict the victimization of their protagonists. Toni Morrison, Gayl Jones, Alice Walker, and Toni Cade Bambara all expose sexism and sexist violence in their own communities. But it is not so much that they depict an altered consciousness in their protagonists; rather, it is that their attitudes towards their material, and the audience to which they address their protest, has changed since the novels of the 1940s with their emphasis on oppression from outside the black community. In the novels of the early seventies, there is always someone who learns not only that white society must change, but also that the black community's attitudes towards women must be
revealed and revised. Interestingly, in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* it is Claudia McJeer, while in Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* it is the grand father, Grange, who must kill his son, the fruit of his initial self-hatred, in order to save his grand daughter Ruth. Both Claudia and Ruth possess the possibility of constructing their own self-definitions and affecting the direction of their communities, because they have witnessed the destruction of women in the wake of prevailing attitudes.

By the mid-1970s, the fiction makes a visionary leap. In novels like Morrison's *Sula* and Alice Walker's *Meridian*, the woman is not thrust outside her community. To one degree or another, she chooses to stand outside of it, to define herself as in revolt against it. As a radical, Sula exists primarily as and for herself - not to be a mother or to be the lover of men. Meridian takes a revolutionary stance by joining a social movement, the Civil Rights Movement. She gradually creates a community of support. It is important that both of these women claim their heritage. Sula and Meridian are who they are because of their maternal ancestry and their knowledge of that ancestry; and it is from their mothers that they acquire their language.

The heroines of the mid-1970s are socio-political actors in the world. Their stance is rebellious; their
consciousness has been altered, precisely because of the supposed crimes they are perceived as having committed against Motherhood, and beyond the constraints society imposes on female sexuality. Yet they are wounded heroines, partly because their communities are deeply entrenched in their view of woman as essentially a mother or as the lover of a man.

By the mid-seventies, Afro-American women fiction writers, like Paule Marshall, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Toni Cade Bambara, and Gayl Jones had not only defined their cultural context as a distinctly Afro-American one, but they had also probed many facets of the interrelationship of sexism and racism in their society. Not only had they demonstrated the fact that sexism existed in black communities, but they had also challenged the prevailing definition of woman in American society, especially in relation to motherhood and sexuality. And they had insisted not only on the centrality of black women to Afro-American history, but also on their pivotal significance to present-day social and political developments in America.

The novels of the late seventies and the eighties continue to explore these themes - that sexism must be struggled against in black communities and that sexism is integrally connected to racism. The fiction of this period -

Toni Morrison's novels have moved furthest away from the rebellious-woman stance of the mid-seventies and the focus is on men as much as women. She tries to figure out the possibilities of healing and community for her women characters. Pilate in *Song of Solomon* derives her accumulated wisdom from her father and primarily benefits Milkman, her nephew, rather than any other woman in the novel. Jadine in *Tar Baby* is portrayed as the woman who has taken a position so far removed from her community that she becomes a part of the West. In her search for self, she becomes selfish; in her desire for power, she loses essential parts of herself. Thus Morrison has moved full circle from Pecola, who is destroyed
by her community, to Jadine, who destroys any relationship to community in herself.

On the other end of the spectrum, Walker's Celie (The Color Purple) comes close to liberating herself through the community of her black sisters, Nettie, Sophie, and Shug, and is able to affect the men of her world positively. The motif of liberation through one's sisters is repeated in Shange's Sassafrass, in which the healing circle is that of black women: three sisters and their mother. In contrast to the novels of the early seventies because of the presence of a strong woman's community, the major protagonists do survive, some with the possibility of wholeness. While Morrison sees no practical way out of the morass of sexism, racism, and class privilege in the Western world, Alice Walker sees the possibility of empowerment for black women if they create a community of sisters which can alter the present-day unnatural definitions of woman and man.

Between these two ends of the spectrum, other novelists propose paths to empowerment. In Marshall's novel, Praisesong for the Widow (1983), Avey Johnson realizes that she has to discard her American value of obsessive materialism and must return to her source and remember the ancient wisdom of African culture if she is to define herself as a black woman. Her journey through myth and ritual, precipitated by the
dream of her old great-aunt, takes her back in time and space as she prepares to move forward in consciousness. So too with Audre Lorde's *Zami* (1982) in that she probes the cosmology of her black maternal ancestors in order to place herself.

In fact, in many of these novels, Africa and African women become important motifs for trying out different standards of new womanhood. In *Tar Baby*, Toni Morrison uses the image of the African woman in the yellow dress as a symbol for the authenticity that the jaded Jadine lacks. It is this woman's inner strength, beauty, and pride, manifested in the defiant stance of her body, that haunts Jadine's dreams and throws her into such a state of confusion that she flees her Parisian husband-to-be and retreats to the Isle de Chevaliers in the Caribbean. In contrast, Alice Walker reminds us in *The Color Purple*, one-third of which is set in Africa, that "black women have been the mule of the world there, and the mule of the world here," (Walker 1982b, 273) and that sexism flourishes in Africa. Audre Lorde begins *Zami* by describing her foremothers in Grenada. Like Lorde, Marshall recalls in *Praisesong for the Widow* the uniquely African quality of the women she encounters in her Caribbean sojourn on Carriacou. Ntozake Shange, too, uses African motifs in *Sassafrass*, focusing on their centrality in U.S. southern culture and especially on the development of sensuality in her three sister protagonists. She quite
consciously links African rhythms, dance, and style to a uniquely Afro-American woman culture and connects it to the style and rhythms of other Third World American women.

What is particularly interesting about the novelists' use of African elements in relation to the concept of woman is their sense of concreteness rather than abstraction. Many of the characters in these novels have moved from one place to another and have encountered other worlds distinctly different from their own. Mobility of black women is a new quality in these books of the eighties, for black women, in much of the previous literature, were restricted in space by their condition. It means that there is increased interaction between black women from the United States, the Caribbean, and Africa, as well as other women of colour.

Not only is the mobility through space a quality of present day fiction, so also is mobility from one class to another. In contrast to the novelists of the twenties which focused on upper-middle-class black women, novels of the forties which tended to emphasize proletarian women, or novels of the seventies which featured lower-middle-class women, many of the novels of this period present the development of black women who have moved from one class to another as major theme of the work. Thus Jadine in *Tar Baby*, Celie in *The Color People* and Avey Johnson in *Praisesong* have all
known poverty and have moved to a point where they have more material security. Still there are many variations in these authors' analysis of such a movement.

Toni Morrison's analysis of Jadine's focus on security and comfort emphasizes the danger that obsession with material things might have for the ambitious black woman. She forgets her "ancient properties" as Therese, the Caribbean sage points out, and succumbs to the decadent Western view of woman. Paule Marshall also focuses on the dangers of materialism, on how the fear of poverty and failure has affected Avey's and Jay Johnson's marriage - and their sense of themselves as black - to such an extent that they do not recognise their own faces. While Morrison warns us that our ancient properties can be easily eroded by the materialism of the West, Marshall emphasizes the seemingly irrational ways in which the collective memory of black people has a hold even on the Avey Johnsons of America. Alice Walker approaches the element of class mobility in another way. Celie does not lose her sense of community or her spiritual centre as she moves from dire poverty and deprivation to a more humane way of living, perhaps because she comes to that improvement in her life through inner growth and through the support of her sisters.
Apart from this, these writers also discussed the many styles of life of their characters and the issues confronting them as blacks, as women, as individual selves. This expression of a range of experience is nowhere more apparent than in these authors' treatment of their characters' sexuality. One radical change in the fiction of the 1980s is the overt exploration of lesbian relationships among black women and how these relationships are viewed by black communities. This exploration, probably, is not to be confused with the emphasis on friendship among black women which is a major theme in earlier literature. The beginning of this exploration has already shown that lesbianism is a complex subject, for sexual relationships between women are treated differently in *The Color Purple*, *The Women of Brewster Place*, *Sassafrasss*, and *Zami*.

In *The Color Purple*, the love/sex relationship between Celie and Shug is at the centre of the novel, and is presented as a natural, strengthening process through which both women as well as the people around them, grow. The lesbian relationship between Celie and Shug is expressed through the metaphors of nature and in the form of black English. In contrast, Gloria Naylor, in *The Women of Brewster Place*, places more emphasis on the reactions of the small community to which the lovers belong, as well as their
own internalization of social views about lesbianism. There is more concentration in this novel on the oppression that black lesbians experience. Appropriately, Naylor uses the metaphors of endurance rooted in Afro-American folk speech.

In Shange's *Sassafrass*, the sexual relationship between Cypress and her lover is a part of a community of lesbian women who, while affirming themselves, are also hostile to one another as the outer world might be. *Sassafrass*'s lesbian community is an imperfect one, and Cypress's sexual love for another woman is but part of a continuum of sexual love that includes her involvement with men. In *Zami*, however, the definition of a lesbian relationship is extended, since Lorde beautifully demonstrates how the heritage of her Grenadian mother is integrally connected to her development as a woman-identified woman. In using the word *Zami* as a title, a word which means "Women who live, love and work together", – Lorde searches for the connections between myth, poetry, and history that might shift the focus of the definition of humankind, particularly black humankind, from one that is predominantly male. These novelists have not clearly indicated whether such a bonding between black women would transcend the racial and class divisions among women in America that would make possible a powerful women's community that might effect significant change.
Afro-American female writers share with black males the heritage of the blues, whose spiritual dynamics ensure equilibrium in turbulent world. Perhaps because, as Stephen Henderson points out, there is a connection between the blues and the capacity to experience hope. The Afro-American female novelist sometimes even employs the mood and structure of the blues in her novels. As Henderson explains, "The blues ... are a music and poetry of confrontation - with the self, with the family and loved ones, with the oppressive forces of society, with nature, and on the heaviest level, with fate and the universe itself. And in the confrontation ... a woman discovers her strengths, and if she is a Ma Rainey, she shares it with the community and in the process becomes immortal" (Henderson 1980, 32).

More often than not, in Afro-American fiction, we have many Ma Raineys - Women without men: examples include Janie Crawford (Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God); Vyry (Margaret Walker's Jubilee); Merle (Marshall's The Chosen Place, The Timeless People); Avey Johnson (Marshall's Praisesong for the Widow); Sula and Nei (Morrison's Sula); Pilate and Circle (Morrison's Song of Solomon); Meridian (Alice Walker's Meridian); Ruth (Alice Walker's The Third Life of Grange Copeland); Celie and Nettie (Alice Walker's
The Color Purple). On one level the depiction of such women can be regarded as an anti-patriarchal statement on the author's part. On another these exemplary figures, like Ma Rainey, demonstrate concern for the family—not for the Western nuclear family (as viewed by feminists) but for the black extended family (as viewed by womanists) with its large numbers and geographical spread.

The language and forms of black women's fiction have also undergone a change. They are derived from women's experiences as well as from Afro-American culture. The most revolutionary transformation of the novel's form is Alice Walker's The Color Purple. It is written entirely in letters, a form which (along with diaries) was the only one that allowed women to record their everyday lives and feelings, their "herstory". Walker also explores the richness and clarity of black folk English in such a way that the reader understands that the inner core of a person cannot be truly known except through her own language. Like Walker, Ntozake Shange consciously uses a potpourri of forms primarily associated with women: recipes, potions, letters, as well as poetry and dance rhythms to construct her novel. In Song of Solomon and Tar Baby Morrison continues to explore Afro-American folk tales and folklore, the oral tradition of black people, which as Marshall reminds us in Praisesong for the Widow is often passed on from one
generation to the next by women. Marshall also uses dream, ritual, and hallucination, using the metaphors of women's experience in composing the ritualistic process of *Praisesong*. This exploration of new forms based on the black woman's culture and her story has, in a way, revitalized the American novel and has opened up new avenues of expression, indelibly altering the audience's sense of novelistic process.

Thematically and stylistically, the tone of the fiction of the eighties communicates the sense that women of Colour can no longer be perceived as marginal to the empowerment of all American women and that an understanding of their reality and imagination is essential to the process of change that the entire society must undergo in order to transform itself. This new fiction explores in a multiplicity of ways Alice Walker's statement in an interview:

> Writing to me is not about audience exactly. It's about living. It's about expanding myself as much as I can and seeing myself in as many roles and situations as possible. Let me put it this way. If I could live as a tree, as a river, as the moon, as the sun, as a star, as the earth, as a rock, I would. Writing permits me to be more than I am. Writing permits me to experience life as any number of strange creations.

(Walker 1983b, 185)
ALICE WALKER: A CRITICAL BIOGRAPHY

Born on 9 February 1944 to Willie Lee Walker, a sharecropper, and Minnie Lo Grant Walker, Alice Malsenior Walker grew up in rural Eatonton, Georgia, the youngest of eight children. Her father's great- great-grandmother, Mrs. Mary Poole, came as a slave on foot from Virginia, carrying a baby on each hip, a trip that Alice Walker commemorates by keeping her maiden name. "It is in memory of this walk that I choose too keep and embrace my 'maiden' name, Walker" (MG: 142). Like most Southern rural Afro-American families in the first half of the century, Walker's family was caught up in the sharecropping system, which strongly resembled its antecedent, slavery. Parents and children worked in the fields or dairy of a white landlord on exchange for a portion of the crop (usually subsistence level), cramped and battered housing, a few hundred dollars a year. For the adults in the community where Walker grew up, education was a route of escape from the poverty that they could provide for the next generation.

When Walker was eight years old, a pellet one of her brothers shot from a BB gun accidentally struck her in the right eye, blinding it and leaving a large white scar. Humiliated by other people's reactions to the disfigurement, Walker withdrew into negative fantasies. Her school
performance deteriorated, but on her own she read and wrote poems. At fourteen she spent the summer baby-sitting for a brother who lived in Boston. Understanding her feelings of shame, he and his wife paid for a simple surgery that removed the scar, leaving only a small bluish crater. Her school work immediately improved, and she graduated valedictorian of her high school class. With a rehabilitation scholarship for which her blind eye qualified her and seventy-five dollars collected by her neighbours, she entered Spelman College in Atlanta at the age of seventeen.

Spelman, the country's oldest college for black women, devoted its educational programme to refining the students according to traditional standards of Southern Womanhood. During the years 1961-1963, when Walker attended Spelman, Civil rights organizers worked hard in Atlanta, drawing Walker and other students into a kind of political activism that contrasted sharply with the college's conservative mission. Frustrated by Spelman's limitations, Walker transferred to Sarah Lawrence, an elite, mostly white women's college in Bronxville, New York. The summer before her senior year, she visited Kenya and Uganda on an educational grant. She returned to college pregnant and suicidal. Her mother looked upon abortion as a sin. When Walker reached out to her two sisters, one never replied and the other called her a slut. Feeling at the mercy of everything, including her own
body, she slept for three nights with a razor blade under her pillow. At the last moment a friend saved her life by giving her the phone number of an abortionist. This confrontation with suicide and abortion, together with the isolation she experienced after her childhood eye injury, profoundly influenced Walker. Emerging from her despair, Walker wrote poems steadily for a week, slipping each finished poem under the door of the poet Muriel Rukeyser, then writer in residence at Sarah Lawrence. With Rukeyser's help, the poems were later published as Walker's first book, *Once*, in 1968.

With *Once*, Walker made her successful debut as a poet. The volume went almost into a second printing. She explains the effects its appearance had on her:

By the time *Once* was published ... the book itself did not seem to me important; only the writing of the poems, which clarified for me how very much I loved being alive.... Since that time, it seems to me that all of my poems - and I wrote groups of poems rather than singles - are written when I have successfully pulled myself out of a completely numbing despair, and stand again in the sunlight. Writing poems is my way of celebrating with the world that I have not committed suicide the evening before.

(MG: 249)

After graduating in 1965, Walker briefly worked for the New York city Welfare Department. She had resolved to become a writer. Her first publication, an essay on the civil rights movement, won *The American Scholar*'s essay contest in 1966.
That summer she attended the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference in Vermont, and in 1967 she received both a Merrill Writing Fellowship and a McDowell Colony Fellowship. She married Melvyn Leventhal, a civil rights attorney and conscientious objector to the Vietnam war, in March 1967, and they moved to Mississippi. Walker worked on voter registration drives, taught black history to Head Start teachers, and served as writer-in-residence at Jackson State College (1968-1969) and Tougaloo College (1969-70). A National Endowment for the Arts Grant in 1969 supported her work on her first novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970) into which she incorporated some aspects of her own family's history as sharecroppers. She finished writing the novel days before her daughter Rebecca Grant Rosenthal was born.

After the publication of her novel, Walker left the South with a Radcliffe Institute fellowship to teach courses on black women writers - among the earliest such courses - at the University of Massachusetts at Boston (1971-1972), and Wellesley College (1972-1973). Her second collection of poems, *Revolutionary Petunias* (1973), received a National Book Award nomination and won the Lillian Smith Award of the Southern Regional Council. The following year her first collection of short stories, *In Love and Trouble* (1973), received the Rosenthal Foundation Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Both volumes draw on Walker's
years with the civil rights movement, taking a critical view of sexism within both conventional black communities and revolutionary groups, as well as of revolutionaries' contempt for people whose acts of resistance or strivings for fulfillment are theoretically incorrect. In 1974 her tribute to the poet Langston Hughes, a biography for children, was published.

Walker moved to Brooklyn, New York, in 1974, and became a contributing editor of Ms. the following year. In her second novel, Meridian (1976), she continued to weave the themes of revolution, sexism, and the traditions of black communities, using autobiographical material, particularly in portraying a Southern black women's college and the civil rights movement's change into the militant Black Power movement. Told in patchworked episodes that double back in time, Meridian is the story of a woman who leaves her home in the rural South to join the civil rights movement and enter college. Meridian's guilt over rejecting the traditional values of motherhood and her ambivalence about revolutionary violence once the movement turns militant give her an almost mystical physical illness and a saintly dedication to advancing her people. Her methods are anachronistic; virtually alone, she carries out spontaneous non-violent organizing efforts in a small community. Her eccentricity serves as a critique of the elitism, sexism, and militancy of
the Black Power movement long after it has lost its strength, and she offers hope that nonviolent change is still possible.

She and Leventhal were divorced in 1977. A second McDowell Colony Fellowship and Guggenheim Grant supported her literary work from 1977 to 1978. Finding New York an unsuitably urban to work on her next novel, which was to be set in the rural Georgia of her childhood, Walker moved to northern California in 1979. Before completing this novel, she published her edition of Zora Neale Hurston's writings (1979); her third book of poems, Good Night, Willie Lee, I'll See You in the Morning (1979), and her second collection of stories, You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down (1981). Both works repeat the theme of healing oneself of past guilt so as to face the future with courage. Like Revolutionary Petunias, Good Night, Willie Lee, I Will See You in the Morning is about the vital connection between love and lasting change, though now the emphasis is on the changing of love relationships between women and men as the foundation for a radical and irreversible transformation in society. You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down clearly signals black female celebration rather than predicament, and marks a transition in Walker's broadening vision for the potential lives of her black heroines.
The Color Purple (1982) was nominated for a National Book Critics Circle Award when it was published, and the following year, received both the Pulitzer Prize and the American Book Award. Walker was named distinguished writer in Afro-American studies at the University of California in the spring of 1982 and taught at Brandies University as the Fannie Hurst Professor of Literature in the fall.

Her important first collection of 'womanist' essays, In Search of Mothers' Gardens was published in 1983. Throughout the 1980's Walker travelled extensively, lecturing and reading her works at universities and conferences and joining delegations of writers to other countries. She also appeared and spoke at public gatherings, such as Nelson and Winnie Mandela's visit to San Francisco in 1990. Her fourth book of poems, Horses Make a Landscape More Beautiful (1984), and her second volume of essays, Living by the Word (1988), reflect the extension of her political commitments to the environment, animal rights, and anti-nuclear protests; the stretching of her self-definitions as an African American to make interracial and international connections; and the sights, sounds and smells of her rural home near Navano, California. Her fourth novel, The Temple of My Familiar (1989), reaches far corners of the earth and weaves together the voices of characters of different cultures, economic classes, and historical eras. Walker's fifth book of poems,
Her Blue Body Everything We Know: Earthling Poems 1965-1990 Complete, was published in 1991.

While not a sequel to The Color Purple or The Temple of My Familiar, her latest novel, Possessing the Secret of Joy (1992) follows the life of a barely glimpsed character from these works. Combining fact and fiction, communing with the spirits of the living and the dead, Alice Walker in this novel strikes with graceful power at the heart of one of the most controversial issues of our time, the female genital mutilation.

SURVEY OF LITERATURE

For Walker's writing and the critical response up to early 1987, two bibliographies - Louis H. Pratt and Darnell D. Pratt's Alice Malseñor Walker: An Annotated Bibliography (1988) and Erma Davis Banks and Keith Byreman's Alice Walker: An Annotated Bibliography, 1968-1986 (1989) - are equally useful research tools. The secondary history that they tell is a slice of the Afro-American women's renaissance. It begins with a few positive reviews of Walker's first book, Once, a collection of poems she wrote during her last year in college. The reviewers note her sharp, minimalist style. More than a dozen popular and scholarly periodicals took note of Walker's first novel, The Third Life of Grange Copeland. The clear message of the novel is that African Americans must
take responsibility for their own liberation. The reviewers disagreed on whether the novel was true to life or bore little resemblance to reality, and on whether political ideology impaired the book, but in 1971 critic Sam Cornish called it "one of the most important black novels we have" (qtd.in Howard 1982, 530). The first extensive interview with Walker appeared in Publishers' Weekly soon after the novel was published.

By 1972 Walker was one of the very few African American women identified with women's liberation, and she took part in a forum on the women's movement published in The American Scholar. In 1973 her second volume of poetry, Revolutionary Petunias, was published. Reviewed less broadly than her novel, Revolutionary Petunias received more unqualified praise than Once, although one critic considered her poetry not as good as her fiction, a judgement that has generally held. The simplicity and directness of Walker's poems do not inspire lengthy critical analysis, but many critics have used them to illuminate discussions of her themes. The poems in the second collection denounce black militancy and look to the past for a tradition of endurance and triumph.

of Black Women, was published. The reviews show that both Walker's career and the literary renaissance of which she was a part were well under way. In Black World, Mary Helen Washington associated Walker to Zora Neale Hurston, who became known as the precursor of current African American women writers. In Ms. (1974), Barbara Smith praised Walker's truth-telling about the inner lives of women for whom violence is an everyday occasion. Efforts to burst the myth surrounding black women's experience, Smith wrote, are "so pitifully rare in black, feminist or American writing that each shred of truth about these experiences constitutes a breakthrough" (Smith 1974, 43).


When Walker's second novel, Meridian, was published in 1978, Walker reviews were polarized. Some hailed the novel's power, while others criticized aspects of her technique: the uncentered episodic structure, the symbolism, the
characterization, the ambiguous end. Two reviews noted a historical continuity between *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, which closes with Grange's granddaughter, Ruth, escaping the cycle of poverty as the civil rights movement begins, and *Meridian*.

After *Meridian*’s publication several periodicals published interviews with Walker exploring the relationship between her writing and her life, and the reference series, *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, ran the first of many digests of the critical response to her work. In 1977 *Black American Literature Forum* published two scholarly essays on Walker, one by Trudier Harris exploring Walker's use of folklore, and one by Mary Helen Washington suggesting a thematic scheme for studying African American writers along three historic dimensions: creative suspension, assimilation, and, since the late 1960's, emergence. Jeanne Nable contributed *Beautiful, Also, Are the Souls of My Black Sisters* (1978) to the project of creating a history of African American women. In the chapter on "Black Women Writers of the New Renaissance", she identifies Walker's special contribution in exposing problems in male-female partnerships. Anne Z. Mickelson studied Walker's stories and *Meridian* in a cross-race context in her book *Reaching Out: Sensitivity and Order in Recent American Fiction by Women* (1979).

The second collection of Walker's short stories, You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down, was reviewed as widely as Meridian but with less enthusiasm. Some reviewers praised her use of fiction as social criticism while others disparaged her didacticism. To Barbara Christian the new stories represented black women's triumphant assertions, a positive
complement to the despair of *In Love and Trouble*. More essays on Walker's earlier works appeared in 1981 and 1982. Among them are Trudier Harris's *From Mammies to Militants: Domestics in Black American Literature* (1982), and *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, but Some of us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies*, edited by Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith (1982). Critics probed the philosophical issues in Walker's novels, the development of her characters in relationship to black folk tradition, and the remedies she saw for black women's victimization by black men.

Several waves of newspaper and magazine coverage followed the publication of *The Color Purple* in 1982. The reviewers generally agreed that Walker's greatest achievement in *The Color Purple* was creating Celie's voice - converting oral folk language into an expressive, poignant literary form that draws the reader into intimacy with Celie. Nettie's letters, written in standard English, provide parallels in colonialism and tribal tradition to the racism and sexism that oppress Celie, but many critics found Nettie's letters weak because of their less absorbing style.

Mel Watkins (1982) was one of the several reviewers who saw Walker's previous themes of the estrangement and violence in the relationship between black men and women...
consolidated in *The Color Purple*. "No writer has made the intimate hurt of racism more palpable", Dinitia Smith wrote in *The Nation* (Smith 1982, 182). In *The New York Review of Books* (1982), Robert Towers wrote that *The Color Purple* "exposes us to a way of life that for the most part existed beyond or below the reach of fiction, ... the life of poor, rural Southern blacks as it was experienced by their womenfolk" (Towers 1982, 36). To *Newsweek* reviewer Peter Prescott, *The Color Purple* was "an American novel of permanent importance" (Prescott 1982, 67).

In *Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, published as reviews of *The Color Purple* continued to appear, gave critics new ways of discussing both Walker's writings and the literary movement of African American women. Many of the essays are about Walker's childhood and her development as an artist and activist. One reviewer characterized this book as an autobiography, and another pointed to its value in providing background for understanding *The Color Purple*. Reviewed almost as broadly as *The Color Purple*, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* drew a similar mixed response, with some praising Walker's contribution to the uplifting of African American women and others criticizing her analysis of social issues as subjective and individualistic. The most influential parts of the book have been the title essay,
first published in *Ms.* in 1974, and the opening epigraph, a definition of "womanist".

Many critics quickly picked up the term "womanist," and Mary Helen Washington drew on *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* for an essay about African American women whose mothers nurtured their creativity that she published in *Mothering the Mind: Twelve Studies of Writers and their Silent Partners* (1984), edited by Ruth Perry and Martine Watson Brownley.

Walker's third book of poems, *Horses Make the Landscape Look More Beautiful*, received only slight critical notice. Meanwhile, scholarly publications about Walker and mentions of her work proliferated as the attention *The Color Purple* was receiving stimulated broad interest in her earlier fiction, and as the body of African American literary criticism rapidly grew. Trudier Harris published another book in 1984, *Exorcising Blackness: Historical and Literary Lynching and Burning Rituals*, in which she placed *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* in the context of a tradition of black literature about the emasculating effects of racial exploitation. *Meridian*'s themes were explored and connected to both feminist and African American themes: women's ambivalence about self expression, complex relationships between mothers and daughters, the conflicting demands of
radicalism and tradition, social action as a form of self-punishment, and a spirituality that transcends guilt and produces life-affirming political action.


Review of The Color Purple continued to appear in 1984 as more in-depth essays explored the book's theology, its commonalities with the traditional American theme of the self's emergence from a dehumanized environment, and its introduction of healing through female bonding into the literature of domestic violence. Gloria Steinem included her 1982 profile of Walker for Ms. in her collected essays, Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions (1984). Steinem's
An essay gives an overview of Walker's career and claims that her themes have universal significance, a level of meaning male critics deny to women and black writers alike.

Yet in 1984 a negative appraisal of *The Color Purple* came from a surprising source: Trudier Harris, one of the African American feminist critics most attentive to Walker's career. Harris found Steinem's article condescending and deplored the morality Steinem praised in Walker's novel. Harris acknowledged that, because the book's unqualified popularity led to its being taken as the representative black woman's novel and Walker as a spokeswoman for all black women, "to complain about the novel is to commit treason against black women writers" (Harris 1984, 155), but she believed that the uncritical reverence the novel received made complaint all the more necessary.


In recent years those who have written about Walker have been black and white, female and male; the works of African American woman writers are treated less and less as a special interest of African American critics and more as an important part of the diversity of contemporary culture.

Walker remains a controversial figure; but despite some critics' continuing objections to her portrayals of black man and other aspects of her writing, Walker's place as a central figure in American literature is secure. Much of the most complex and interesting criticism about her works has been written since 1987. She also has published four books then, Living by the Word (1988), The Temple of My Familiar (1989), Her Blue Body Everything We Know: Earthling Poems 1965-1990 Complete (1991) and Possessing the Secret of Joy (1992). Little other than reviews has been written about these books.

J. Charles Washington helped to put to rest the controversy over Walker's portraits of black men with an essay on positive black male images in her short stories published in Obsidian (1988). Washington recapitulates Trudier Harris's response to Gloria Steinem's essay and other objectives to Walker's work, and says that the negative critics ignore positive images of men in her fiction. "Positive" should not mean "perfect" but "capable of growth and change," Washington insists (Washington 1988, 25), and such men exist throughout
Walker's fiction. He points out that patriarchal definitions of gender roles limit both men and women in Walker's stories.

At the same time Washington's essay appeared, *Modern Fiction Studies* published a special issue on modern black fiction with essays on *Meridian* and *The Color Purple* and *Black American Literature Forum* published on *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* and *The Color Purple*. In *The Hollins Critic* (October 1988) James Robert Saunders compared Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Walker's *The Color Purple* - a comparison critics have made again and again from various points of view, always with new insights. *Callaloo* published a special Alice Walker section in its second 1989 issue, with a selected bibliography following four essays, including one by Jacqueline Bobo on the controversy over the film, and one each on *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, *Meridian*, and some of the stories.

The single most useful new book for those researching criticism on Walker is *Alice Walker*, published by Chelsea House in 1989. Edited by Harold Bloom, the selection emphasizes literary inheritance and family issues. New books on African American Women writers and black feminism are continually appearing. In *Specifying: Black Women Writing the American Experience* (1987), Susan Willis shows how several writers use black folk traditions of story telling in
their novels - for example, the brief anecdotes from which Walker's novels are built. Specifying is a form of storytelling in which the speaker confronts and criticizes someone, calling him or her names as the community witnesses. To Willis, the confrontational approach to history taken by Walker and other black women novelists is a kind of specifying.

Race, Gender, and Desire: Narrative Strategies in the Fiction of Toni Cade Bambara, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker (1989), by Elliott Butler-Evans, offers complex analysis of the ways Walker enters, displaces, and disrupts black history in order to create room for the empowerment of women in her first three novels. In Inspiring Influences: Tradition, Revision, and African American Women's Novels (1989), Michael Awkward describes "In Search of our Mothers' Gardens" as the most influential early effort to connect pieces of African American Women's expressive tradition. He emphasizes Zora Neale Hurston's importance as an "inspiring" influence providing current black women authors with a sense of legitimacy, and describes The Color Purple as Walker's repayment of a literary debt to Hurston.

Bernard W. Bell's The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition (1987) is a comprehensive history and categorization of the types of novels that African American
authors have written. Bell credits Walker with having spearheaded the reassessment of Zora Neale Hurston's literary significance and uses her term "Womanism" in describing the primary concerns of black women novelists: the influences of racism, classicism, and sexism on the development of love, power autonomy, creativity, manhood and womanhood in the black family and community.

An essay on Walker and Hurston by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. is included in his *The Signifying Monkey* (1988). Gates's close analysis of the ways Walker adopted and revised Hurston's narrative technique leads him to describe the writings of *The Color Purple* as a loving act of "Signifying" on Hurston. He sees *The Color Purple* as a breakthrough in contemporary African American fiction, in that Walker turns to black literature for a foundation of both form and content rather than putting black content into a form borrowed from while literary tradition.

Cushing Strout places a discussion of *Meridian* at the end of a book based on the reading lists he uses in teaching American literature, *Making American Tradition: Visions and Revision from Ben Franklin to Alice Walker* (1990). Throughout the American tradition, the social condition of black is a test of the principles of freedom and equality, according to Strout, and he sees *Meridian*'s ending as reflecting the
fear that those ideals will not be realized. Strout begins this essay with one of the first scholarly discussions of Living by the Word, which he uses to create a composite portrait of Walker - a portrait that might be largely unrecognizable to anyone who knew only her work up to The Color Purple and who categorized Walker strictly as a Southern rural black woman writer, though it is quite consistent with the many-sided point of view in The Temple of My Familiar. Donna Haisty Winchell's Alice Walker (1992) is a full length book devoted to the analysis of Walker's works. It is another very useful book for Walker researchers. Besides her well-known feminism-womanism, Walker's current themes are environmentalism, socialism, counter culture, vegetarianism, and New Age occultism. Her politics are sometimes hyperbolic, sometimes sentimental, Strout says, but are strengthened by humour, self-irony, a willingness to notice contradictions inherent in being politically correct, and a deep feeling for tradition. Connecting the "new" Alice Walker with the author of Meridian, Strout points out that Walker has always shown more interest in black American than in black African cultural ancestry, and that this heritage is multiracial - including Native Americans, White slave owners, and others, in addition to the African exiles.

A comprehensive picture of the entire black history emerges from the writings of Alice Walker. One can sense
along with this a complete picture of the growth and development of the black women from slavery to the present day. In fact, with Walker's definitions of 'womanist' and her personal construct of the history of black women, one can trace this wholeness in her writings. When compared to contemporary women novelists, one can say that Alice Walker is able to achieve wholeness not only in her portrayal of black women characters but also in her own personal life as a woman and as an artist.

The thesis entitled *Journey Towards Wholeness: Women in Alice Walker's Fiction* traces the growth of black women characters and the factors contributing to their growth in the short stories and novels of Alice Walker. It uses profusely ideas from Walker's two collections of essays and five volumes of poetry to trace this growth. But for analysis, only the women characters from her two collections of short stories and her five novels have been taken. It has used, as suggested by Mary Helen Washington, Walker's personal construct of the history of black women to analyze black women characters in Walker's works.

Walker spoke of this construct during an interview in 1973. Other than some short stories, poems and one novel the rest were written only after 1973. So, the present thesis identifies the variations in the three cycles of black women
by Walker and also shows the overlappings in Walker's construct.

The history of Afro-American womanist fiction gives a basic knowledge about the different women novelists, their background and the era in which they lived. Therefore, Chapter I: Introduction discusses the works of major contributors like Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, Gwendolyn Brooks, Gloria Naylor and others to the growth of Afro-American womanist fiction. A brief critical biography of Alice Walker is followed by a discussion of her achievement as a writer.

Chapter II: Walker's "Womanism" and Her Personal Construct of the History of Black Women examines the four definitions of the term 'womanist'. Walker prefers this word to 'whole' from 'wholly' or 'holy'. These definitions locate the black women first as a black feminist, then celebrate the sensuality and spirituality of her and place her as a variegated flower in the garden of humanity. The chapter examines the movement from the specific racial reference in the first definition and to the somewhat open definition of the term. This leads to an analysis of the three cycles of black women and Walker's other interpretations of them. The last section deals with the various views of Walker on
religion, sex, community, family, the art of writing, marriage, etc.

Chapter III: "Suspended" Women takes up for examination the physical and mental sufferings, the traumas of the black women belonging to different times, age groups and background. The young heroines in the first volume of short stories studied here are seen to struggle through dream or word. Women characters belonging to different generations such as Margaret, Mem, Meridian, Celie from different novels are discussed and the movement of some of them towards the next cycle is analyzed in detail. Some of the minor women characters also contribute to the growth of the protagonists. The chapter ends with an analysis of the variations among the 'suspended' women.

Chapter IV: "Assimilated" Women is devoted to a study of the black women of the 40s and 50s. Many of the short stories from the second volume You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down are discussed here. Walker introduces many current burning topics affecting women of this period who no more buckle to the pressures of society but try to act in a rebellious way. Meridian and Celie, who grow from the 'Suspended' to the 'Assimilated' stage, gain a new awareness of their surroundings and move towards self-identity. Some join the mainstream. Some reject the mainstream while others
prefer integration after gaining some power for themselves.

Chapter V: "Emergent" Women speaks about women who achieve a sort of 'wholeness'. These women have not totally become 'emergent' but are on the way to becoming one. The growth of Meridian, Celie, Fanny, Carlotta and Tashi from the novels and some other women characters from the short stories is discussed. Various factors have contributed to their physical, societal, psychological and spiritual wholeness.

Chapter VI: Summing Up, besides summarizing the findings about Walker's treatment of the black women characters in their 'journey towards wholeness' mentions other viable topics for research.